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Lincoln and the Copperheads: The War for the North

ANTHONY KELLAR*

This work focuses on the role that Peace Democrats, also known as “Copperheads,” played in Northern dissent during the Civil War. This is done by analyzing public newspapers and journals from the time period that reveal the strategies used by the Copperheads to undermine the war effort in the North. It also compares the works of other notable historians, in particular Jennifer Weber and Mark Neely, to help determine how effective the Copperheads were in threatening Lincoln’s efforts to hold the Union together.

The Civil War is most commonly remembered as the time in American history when fellow countrymen took up arms against each other. “Brother against brother” is typically the way I hear it most often described. Abraham Lincoln was greeted with the task of reunifying a broken country, a task that no one would envy. Those remembered as the greatest opponents that stood in the way of him accomplishing this task are typically notorious Confederates: Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and so on. However, Lincoln had another great opponent that threatened his goal of winning the war and restoring the Union, but this opponent hailed from the North. The Peace Democrats, also known as “Copperheads,” proved to be one of Lincoln’s greatest threats during the war and undoubtedly his greatest threat in the Union. These Copperheads have aptly been described by Lincoln as the “fire in the rear” that undermined his war effort.¹ The Copperheads used antiwar, anti-Lincoln, and nearly treasonous rhetoric to create social unrest and distrust of the government in certain regions of the Union. Also, their peace platform had gained a considerable amount of steam in 1864 and gave the Democratic Party significant momentum heading into the presidential election.

The conversation surrounding the very complicated topic of Northern dissent generally produces two different schools of thought. Historians opposed to my assertion that Copperheads were a viable threat to the Union would argue that the peace wing of the Democratic Party was little more than a loud minority. Mark E. Neely Jr. argues that the actual power of the Copperheads was greatly exaggerated through “Republican fear-mongering and partly through Democratic missteps and misjudgments.”² Others, such as Richard O. Curry, believe that the term “Copperhead” was used as a political strategy by Lincoln’s followers to “cast doubt upon the loyalty of Democrats who opposed the war policies of the Lincoln Administration” and views the term as a “blanket indictment” of all Northern Democrats.³ Essentially what these scholars are arguing is that the Democratic Party should be viewed as Lincoln’s loyal opposition, not a subversive entity that threatened the state of the Union. While I do not disagree that most Democrats were loyal, the party certainly gave strength to the Peace Democrats. I also believe

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¹Rick Beard, “The Fire in the Rear,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2013.

²Mark E. Neely Jr., *Lincoln and the Democrats: The Politics of Opposition in the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2.

³Richard O. Curry, “Copperheadism and Continuity: The Anatomy of a Stereotype,” *Journal of Negro History* 57, no. 1 (January 1972): 29-36.

that their peace platform had enough support and momentum at one point in 1864 that Lincoln's reelection seemed in jeopardy. This, combined with their willingness to encourage disorder and obstruction by the American public, is enough to consider the Copperheads a viable threat during the Civil War.

Before I can discuss their strategies and impact on the Union during the war, it is important to define what it actually meant to be a Copperhead. The term "Copperhead" was used to describe those affiliated with or in support of the peace wing of the Democratic Party. These Peace Democrats ardently opposed the war and demanded that the Union reach a peace settlement with the Confederacy, regardless of whether the Confederates rejoined the Union. The historical representation of the Copperheads is often steeped in white supremacy and conspiracies about secret societies that sought to overthrow the federal government. These aspects, while certainly interesting, are not relevant to evaluating the threat the Copperheads posed to Lincoln. What is relevant about these Copperheads is the impact they had on the public image of the war and Lincoln's administration, as well as the strides they made politically in 1864. They were undoubtedly Lincoln's harshest critics in the press, and they were easily the most outspoken faction of their party. When it came to Lincoln and the war effort, Copperhead rhetoric consistently toed the line of treason.

The first thing to consider when discussing the Copperheads is the rhetoric with which they described Lincoln, the federal government, and the war in general. The most popular Copperhead talking point was to accuse Lincoln of being a tyrant who abused and expanded the power of the federal government. More specifically, they believed that Lincoln betrayed the principles set forth in the Constitution by suspending habeas corpus in the northern states and using the military to intrude on the sovereignty of state governments. The following excerpt from *The Old Guard* is a great example of the Copperheads' attitude toward Lincoln:

There is not a single northern State in which Mr. Lincoln may not be arrested and tried for treason; for having overthrown the Constitution and laws of the State by military power. His whole system of provost marshals and military commissions, backed by armed force in these otherwise peaceful States, is an overthrow of the *government* of these States. It is an accomplished war upon the sovereignty of those States; just as much so as if the same crime were committed by Great Britain or France.⁴

Another important position held by the Copperheads was that the war was being fought for the advancement of African Americans and not the reunification of the states. They placed the blame for the war squarely on the shoulders of abolitionists. This is indicated in the *Age*, a popular Copperhead newspaper in Philadelphia: "[The United States] had lived in peace and prosperity, aye, such prosperity as the world had never seen, until the spoiler of Abolitionism entered our Eden and drove us from it."⁵ Besides accusing Lincoln's administration of being tyrannical and corrupt, publications that were either sympathetic to or controlled by Copperheads never shied away from attacking what they believed to be Lincoln's true motivations for the war. Newspapers such as the *Metropolitan Record*, which was the official Catholic newspaper in New York City during the time period, not only insinuated that Lincoln was determined to slowly strip the American public of its constitutional rights, but they also accused Lincoln of wanting to establish

⁴"Difference Between Government and Administration," in *The Old Guard: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Principles of 1776 and 1787*, vol. 3, by Thomas Dunn English and Chauncey Burr (New York: Van Evrie, Horton Co., 1865).

⁵*Age* (Philadelphia), August 5, 1864.

a dictatorial regime that elevated and valued former slaves above working-class whites. This is evident in an excerpt from an article titled “What the War is Carried on For”:

For the furtherance of Abolition designs...For the overthrow of the State sovereignty, and the consolidation and conversion of the Republic into a military empire...For the criminal purpose of emancipating over three millions of slaves and placing them in a social condition...For the impoverishment of the laboring classes, and the final overthrow of universal suffrage by military force.⁶

The reason this type of rhetoric is significant is because it led to many Northerners to distrust their government and the Republican Party in general. What’s more, it caused them to question the very motives behind the war. However, the most dangerous effect Copperhead publications had on the state of the American public was the incitement of violence. To find evidence of this, one need only look to the New York City Draft Riots of 1863 and the Toledo Riot of 1862.

When evaluating the severity of the threat the Copperheads posed to the Union’s war effort, one of the most significant aspects to consider was their ability to incite civil unrest among American citizens. The New York City Draft Riots that occurred in the summer of 1863 are a clear example of how the Copperheads encouraged violence against the government. Many historians would argue that pre-existing factors such as the socio-economic status of draftees as poor white laborers and their aggressively racist attitude toward blacks were the most significant causes of the violent response to the draft. It is perfectly valid to acknowledge that poor whites would be very resentful of a government that would force them into service to fight for those that they not only believed to be inferior, but also feared having to compete against for work should they be freed. However, while it is reasonable to believe that these factors were the wood to the fire in New York City, there is no denying that Copperhead rhetoric acted as an accelerant. New Jersey congressman Chauncey Burr, a proud Peace Democrat, made a speech just days prior to the draft where he stated the following:

The act is very simple - it is merely a highwayman’s call on every American citizen for \$300. . . . Leave no means to avoid compliance. . . . They say we live by the clemency of the Government. Why, it is by your clemency that Abe Lincoln and all his satraps were not upon the gallows eighteen months ago.⁷

Not only is Burr attempting to paint the government as an oppressive force, but he is suggesting that Lincoln and his administration are at the mercy of the American people’s inaction. What’s more, referencing Lincoln and the gallows is a serious implication of violence toward the government.

What is significant about these riots is that they not only led to Lincoln having to divert troops from the war effort, but they also indicated that the Copperheads knew just how to take the racial tension and frustration of the lower classes and target it at the Republicans. Jennifer Weber supports this assertion in her book, *Copperheads*. Weber states:

The peace wing’s opposition to the administration damaged the army’s ability to prosecute the conflict efficiently. Dissidents’ resistance to conscription and their encouragement of less ideologically minded Americans to dodge the draft or to desert the army forced the military to divide its attention and at times to send troops home to keep order there.⁸

⁶“What the War is Carried on For,” *Metropolitan Record*, May 2, 1868.

⁷Barnet Schecter, *The Devil’s Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York: Walker Company, 2005).

⁸Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln’s Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

The riots that took place in New York City resulted in roughly 120 deaths, and military forces would have to intervene to quell them. Unfortunately, the events that took place in New York City during the summer of 1863 were not an isolated incident. Just a year prior, a riot on a much smaller scale took place in Toledo, Ohio. Just like in New York, the Copperheads were able to take advantage of racial tensions of the lower classes and manipulate them into taking extreme measures.

Much like in New York, it can be argued that the most significant factors for the Toledo Riot were racial tensions and labor strikes. While these factors certainly contributed to the violence that eventually broke out, it is also true that Democratic newspapers enflamed tensions with exaggerated claims of blacks taking jobs from white laborers in droves. What's more, a local Copperhead newspaper, the *West Union Democrat*, reacted to these labor disputes by blaming the Republicans' agenda of abolition: "Better far for the negro that he had remained a slave, and better far for the whites of the unhappy North that every Abolitionist had been hung years ago. Truly, the signs of the times are of ominous evil."⁹ Two days after this was published, a race riot between black and white laborers broke out in Toledo. Once again, there is a reference of hanging abolitionists being used in Copperhead rhetoric. However, I believe the last statement, where the editor states there is an "ominous evil," is the more significant example of how the Copperheads manipulated people into taking extreme measures. The "ominous evil" refers to the current state of the Union under Lincoln. By depicting Lincoln and the Republicans as a force of evil, this type of rhetoric was attempting to get Democratic citizens to view abolitionists as enemies of the state, rather than just those with a different political ideology. With this in mind, I believe it is reasonable to conclude that these Copperhead talking points contributed to racial hostilities, political obstructionism, and violent outbursts, such as the riots that occurred in both New York and Toledo.

While their rhetoric could be dangerous in its encouragement of obstruction by the American people, attempts to silence the Copperheads would inadvertently strengthen their cause. In 1863, General Ambrose Burnside issued General Order 38, which made it illegal to criticize the war within the Department of the Ohio. The order stated:

Hereafter all persons found within our lines who commit acts for the benefit of the enemies of our country, will be tried as spies or traitors, and, if convicted, will suffer death. . . . Persons committing such offences will be at once arrested, with a view to being tried as above stated, or sent beyond our lines into the lines of their friends.¹⁰

Clement Vallandigham, perhaps the most notorious Copperhead of the Civil War, would be arrested as a result of this order. In a speech he made at Mount Vernon, Ohio, Vallandigham publicly accused the federal government of fighting for "the liberation of the blacks and the enslavement of the whites."¹¹ The next morning, Vallandigham was arrested by a company of soldiers and taken to Cincinnati where he was put on trial. Unknowingly, Ambrose Burnside was creating a martyr in Vallandigham.

Vallandigham's arrest raised serious questions about the constitutionality of Lincoln's wartime policies, and it ultimately vindicated the Copperheads in their accusations against his administration. Conservative voters, even if they did not identify with the politics of the Peace Democrats, were alarmed at the government's refusal to recognize Vallandigham's right to free speech. Because of this, the Copperheads were able to champion the cause of individual rights

⁹*West Union Democrat*, June 6, 1862.

¹⁰George Henry Porter, *Ohio Politics During the Civil War Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), 159.

¹¹Porter, *Ohio Politics*, 161.

and civil liberties. This is significant because it not only damaged the public's view of Lincoln's administration, but it enhanced the status of Vallandigham within the Democratic Party. Mark E. Neely Jr. points out that Vallandigham's main reason for being nominated for governor of Ohio in 1863 was because of what he represented as a victim of government oppression: "He had peace credentials. . . but that is not why he was nominated for governor. He gained the nomination because Democrats across the whole nation saw him as a martyr to liberty."¹² His nomination for governor meant that the Copperheads were becoming more significant within their own party. However, it was only the beginning of their political momentum. In 1864, the peace platform of the Copperheads started to pick up steam.

The times when the Copperheads were the greatest threat to Lincoln most often followed military failures. The popularity of the Peace Democrats hinged on the direction of the war. When Sherman had made his March to the Sea and burned straight through the South in 1864, the Copperhead movement had been crippled. However, in the years prior, significant military defeats caused the public's support for Lincoln and the Republicans to wane. Many who had enthusiastically supported the war began to question the worthiness of its cause. Because of this, Copperhead claims of radical abolitionism being the primary motivation behind the war began to carry more weight. What's more, their "peace at any cost" stance on the war became much more widely accepted. Weber explains this effectively in *Copperheads*:

Confronted by Union armies that seemed to have stalled on all fronts and by casualties that stagger the imagination—sixty thousand in six weeks from Grant's army alone—thousands of Northerners were clamoring for peace. The Copperheads, with their antiwar stance and harsh criticisms of the president, offered an appealing alternative to Lincoln's stubborn determination to stay the course.¹³

While the strength of the Copperheads was tied directly to the failures of the war, the same can be said of Lincoln's popularity in relation to the war's successes. This was evident to Lincoln, who was quoted as saying, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."¹⁴ The reason this is significant is because it shows that Lincoln realized the American public was distressed by the lack of progress in the war. Because of this, it is reasonable to conclude that Lincoln recognized that the peace platform of the Democrats represented a legitimate threat to his reelection in 1864. Something else that is important to remember is that the morale of the public can contribute to the actual war effort itself. If support for the war is low, then it is likely that morale will drop among soldiers. What's more, an army is largely dependent on the public for mobilization in terms of supplying food, weapons, ammunition, and other necessities that ensure the functionality of the army. So the Copperheads not only threatened Lincoln's chances for reelection due to their peace platform, but they also threatened the very war effort itself by damaging citizen morale through their degradation of the abolitionist motivations that contributed to the war.

The idea that abolitionism was the greatest motivation behind the war rather than restoring the Union became a legitimate issue among the public. As conflicts costing the lives of thousands of Union soldiers at a time began to pile up, there was a growing restlessness to end the war. Although many were still hopeful that the Union could be restored, the pursuit of the abolition of slavery was not something that was a priority for many pro-war voters. After a bloody battle

¹²Neely, *Lincoln and the Democrats*, 148.

¹³Weber, *Copperheads*, 8.

¹⁴Roy P. Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 7 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 281-282.

fought at Spotsylvania saw a death toll of roughly 6,800 for the Army of the Potomac in May of 1864, the *Chicago Times* urged the Union to seek peace on the terms of the Crittenden Compromise. The Crittenden Plan was a proposal from Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden that sought to establish slavery as a constitutional amendment and to make it unconstitutional for future Congresses to abolish slavery. This plan was proposed as a possible resolution to the secession crisis in 1861, but the compromise ultimately failed. The *Chicago Times* calling for peace on these terms raised the issue of Unionists versus abolitionists. The newspaper declared that any Northerners unwilling to take this proposal seriously were not true Unionists. Rather, it referred to them as being “Garrison and Whiting Unionists,” who were known abolitionists. The editor then concluded that these “Garrison and Whiting Unionists” were not most concerned with restoring the Union and that their “‘loyalty’ [was] not to the Union but to the theories of these men.”¹⁵

Although the majority of Northerners had opposed the South’s secession from the Union and was in favor of fighting to restore it, there were clearly varying stances on the issue of abolition. Even those who were not ardently opposed to the idea of abolition began to worry that Lincoln and the Republicans were blinded in their pursuit of it. This was especially true during periods when the Union armies were suffering humiliating defeats or lacked in making progress to end the war. For the Copperheads, their accusations against Lincoln that his greatest motivation behind the war was abolition seemed to be proven true in the eyes of many Democrats. This quote from Sabin Hough reflects a view on the war that was being more widely accepted in the party: “This war is murder, and nothing else. Every man who gives a dollar or moves his finger to aid is an aider and abettor of murder.”¹⁶

While it might be expected that an opposition party would question Lincoln’s motivations behind the war and his ability to restore the Union, there is some historical evidence that suggests there were Republicans who had lost faith in Lincoln’s administration. One Republican leader that had his doubts about Lincoln’s leadership was Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln’s Secretary of the Treasury. Chase once expressed his concerns in a letter he wrote to his son-in-law: “I think a man of different qualities from those the President has will be needed for the next four years.”¹⁷ Ironically, there would be rumblings within the party to urge Chase’s nomination for president. Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, wrote, “There are indications that Chase intends to press his pretensions as a candidate and much of the Treasury machinery and special agencies have that end in view.”¹⁸

Although a nomination for Chase never materialized, this was not the only example of Republicans pushing for a different presidential candidate. In May of 1864, a group of Radical Republicans had organized in Cleveland to nominate General John C. Fremont for president. Although Fremont would drop out of the presidential race in September, he did represent a growing split within the Republican Party. As he announced his withdrawal, Fremont stated, “In respect to Mr. Lincoln I continue to hold exactly the sentiments contained in my letter of acceptance. I consider that his Administration has been politically, militarily, and financially a failure, and that its necessary continuance is a cause of regret for the country.”¹⁹ For there to be Republicans, especially those working within his own cabinet, who were doubting Lincoln’s

¹⁵*Chicago Times*, May 17, 1864, quoted in Weber, *Copperheads*.

¹⁶Sabin Hough to Thomas H. Seymour, May 15, 1864, Thomas H. Seymour Papers, box 7, folder 5, quoted in Weber, *Copperheads*.

¹⁷J. W. Shuckers, *Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 494.

¹⁸Harold M. Dudley, “The Election of 1864,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (March 1932): 502.

¹⁹Dudley, “Election of 1864,” 504.

leadership is very significant when you consider the growing popularity of the Peace Democrats heading into the election. Some were defecting from the party due to the enormous loss of life in the war and simply sought an end by any means necessary. The Radical Republicans that nominated Fremont likely wanted to continue the war in pursuit of the abolishment of slavery, but they just no longer felt that Lincoln would be able to lead the Union to victory. This division that was slowly developing within the Republican Party only made the position of the Democrats that much stronger heading into the election.

When you consider the issues that were working against Lincoln leading up to the election, many of them worked to the advantage of the Copperheads in terms of backing up their rhetoric about Lincoln's administration. Up to this point, there had been riots in response to the draft, questions about the constitutionality of suspending habeas corpus, and growing discontent for the military failures and the lack of progress being made in the war. This was now being compounded by division within the Republican Party. While I believe all the evidence I've provided so far demonstrates that Lincoln's presidency was in jeopardy, it is still unclear as to whether or not the Copperheads were major players in the Democratic Party—that is until you consider the nomination of George Pendleton for vice president of the United States at the Democratic Convention in August of 1864.

While providing evidence of when Copperhead publications and politicians encouraged and incited violence demonstrates that the Copperheads' rhetoric resonated with many American citizens, the nomination of George Pendleton for vice president at the Democratic National Convention in 1864 shows just how relevant they were politically. This is where I believe the argument that the Copperheads were just a loud minority within the Democratic Party falls short. It is reasonable to say that, at the beginning of the war, Peace Democrats did not have significant representation within the party. Also, the Democratic nominee for president, George McClellan, was far from a Copperhead. However, as the Union armies seemed to be lacking in making progress to end the war and the death tolls reached staggering levels, the platform of the Peace Democrats was growing in strength. So, considering Pendleton's nomination at the convention in 1864, it is reasonable to conclude that the Democrats saw the Copperheads as an important voting bloc. Some historians may argue that this was a misjudgment by the party and that Democratic leaders overestimated the relevance of Copperheads heading into the election. However, whether or not they made a misjudgment is irrelevant to evaluating whether or not the Copperheads had significant influence within the party. The fact is that they did nominate a known Peace Democrat for vice president, and this undoubtedly made their wing very relevant within the Democratic Party. According to Weber, "Their input was more than just a sop that mainstream Democrats threw them; it was a necessary political concession to the conservatives' broad appeal within the party. They were so strong now that they posed a real challenge to the war wing of the Democratic Party."²⁰

Although Pendleton's nomination does signify that the Copperheads were major players in the Democratic Party, the accusation that Republicans exaggerated the presence of the Peace Democrats within the party does have some validity. Throughout the war, Republicans consistently painted the entire Democratic Party as being made up of disloyal Copperheads. This led them to mischaracterize several Democratic candidates in an attempt to win elections. A prime example of this is George W. Woodward, who ran as the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania in 1863. Woodward had spent his entire political career as a judge and had no public record of being a Peace Democrat, but Republicans insisted he was running on a peace platform. The *New York Herald* recognized this by stating, "The Republicans, for political purposes, have insisted

²⁰Weber, *Copperheads*, 172.

that Judge Woodward is a Copperhead; but such is not the fact.”²¹ In a letter, Woodward expressed the disdain he had for the manner in which Republicans had portrayed him. The accusations of disloyalty had left him dumbfounded as he stated, “If I have not paid my taxes, contributed money and sons to fight our battles, and in general performed the duties of a humble but loyal citizen then testify against me.”²²

While it is clear that Republicans exaggerated the number of Peace Democrats within the party, it does not mean that the Copperheads did not have significant political influence. The Republicans were not wrong in acknowledging that there was a legitimate peace platform in the Democratic Party, but they failed to acknowledge the presence of War Democrats whatsoever. This was undoubtedly intentional, and it was a part of a Republican strategy to cement themselves as the pro-Union party and the Democrats as the party of traitors and Confederate sympathizers. According to Mark E. Neely Jr., “They ran against all Democrats—including General McClellan, in 1864—as though they were Clement L. Vallandigham.”²³ To find the Republicans guilty of exaggeration and fearmongering is not an entirely baseless claim, but to suggest that it means that the Peace Democrats were not a powerful wing of the party is not historically accurate. Not only because of George Pendleton’s nomination for vice president, but also because of the political momentum the peace movement had gained in 1864.

The summer of 1864 was when the Copperheads posed their greatest threat to Lincoln politically. There were even some Confederate leaders who recognized the importance of the Peace Democrats and how they could impact the war. Robert E. Lee once wrote to Jefferson Davis that one of the most effective ways of weakening the Union was, “to give all the encouragement we can, consistently with the truth, to the rising peace party of the North.”²⁴ While their accusations of tyranny and corruption against Lincoln may have swayed some in their favor, their peace platform was easily their greatest strength due to the uncertainty of the war. When you consider the fact that the presidential election was merely a month or two away, there was legitimate concern over Lincoln’s reelection. However, a surge of Union success in late August and early September devastated the Copperheads’ position. General William Tecumseh Sherman led his army into Atlanta and captured the city on September 2, which served as a massive boost to morale within the Union. It can be argued that this was the pivotal moment that ensured Lincoln’s reelection. Then, in a series of victories over the course of September and October, General Philip Sheridan effectively wiped out General Jubal Early’s army in Virginia.²⁵ At this point, the Peace Democrats who remained steadfast in declaring the war a failure came across as unreasonable men and possible Confederate sympathizers. Something else that hurt the Democrats’ chances of winning in November was that McClellan and Pendleton made for a strange combination.

The biggest problem with having McClellan and Pendleton on the same ticket together was that they represented two different types of Democrats. McClellan, having been commander of the Army of the Potomac just two years prior, was representative of the War Democrats. Pendleton, a Peace Democrat, was not a satisfactory choice for vice president in the eyes of the War Democrats. Weber states, “War Democrats disapproved of Pendleton’s presence on the ticket and resented the fact that the platform denounced neither the rebellion nor the rebels. Given their moderate

²¹*New York Herald*, October 9, 1863, quoted in Neely, *Lincoln and the Democrats*.

²²“A Pennsylvania Judge Views the Rebellion: The Civil War Letters of George Washington Woodward,” in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, quoted in Neely, *Lincoln and the Democrats*.

²³Neely, *Lincoln and the Democrats*, 155.

²⁴Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 507-9, quoted in Weber, *Copperheads*.

²⁵“American Civil War Timeline 1864,” HistoryOfWar.org, http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/timeline_acw_1864.html.

tendencies, though, the disgruntled War Democrats refused to do anything that might undercut the party.”²⁶ Hard-line Peace Democrats were equally displeased with McClellan’s nomination for president.

In an attempt to satisfy both wings of the Democratic Party by including a War and a Peace Democrat on the same ticket, the Democrats appeared to be unsure and unwilling to commit to a direction. Not only might this have caused some confusion for voters, it caused some disunity within the party. Alexander Long and William M. Corry, two Copperheads who were dissatisfied with McClellan’s nomination, believed McClellan’s policies would be similar to Lincoln’s. In a convention for Peace Democrats organized by Long and Corry in Cincinnati, they exclaimed, “We have before us two candidates, but no choice.”²⁷ If the party thought the Peace Democrats were significant enough that it felt the need to include one on its presidential ticket, then it may have been better off committing to them fully and making the presidential nominee a Peace Democrat as well. While this may have alienated War Democrats, it is not unreasonable to assume that they would have supported a Peace Democrat for president. The War Democrats were much more moderate than the outspoken Copperheads of their party, and they likely would have acted in the interest of party unity. Conversely, had the Peace Democrats been excluded from the ticket altogether, it is likely they would have split the party in half and siphoned the strength of whatever candidate was running.

The Copperheads were essentially buried after Lincoln’s victory in the 1864 election. The popularity of their peace platform had diminished greatly by late in the year, and the idea that cessation of all hostilities was the best course of action seemed laughable after Sherman completed his March to the Sea. However, many Copperheads that remained in office would continue to obstruct where and whenever possible. Their stance that Lincoln usurped his constitutional authority was something they never relinquished, and their accusations that Lincoln was beholden to the ideas of the most radical abolitionists never ceased. This was evident in their role in attempting to prevent the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, with Peace Democrats such as Fernando Wood and George Pendleton leading the way for the Democratic Party.

True to their nature, Wood and Pendleton accused Republicans of trying to elevate former slaves above whites. They attempted to sway centrist Democrats and conservative Republicans into believing that Lincoln had avoided concluding peace with the Confederacy in order to give him time to pass the amendment. However, it had become nearly impossible for these Copperheads to shake anyone’s faith in Lincoln. Lincoln’s popularity was at an all-time high given the direction of the war. In the end, the Copperheads were not wrong about the Union’s goal to abolish slavery. However, by 1865, their extreme views and rhetoric about the war made them a greater concern to the public than any radical abolitionist.

In what would end up being their final major battle with Lincoln on a political stage, the Copperheads were unsuccessful in their attempts to block passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. This final struggle was indicative of how far they had come in their own party, but it also showed just how powerless the Democrats had become in the House and Senate. The fact that men like Fernando Wood and George Pendleton were the leading voices of the Democratic opposition to the amendment shows that the Copperheads had a very significant role within the party. However, in the waning months of the war, the Democratic Party had shrunk considerably in its representation. In 1865, Republicans had increased their total seats within the House of Representatives by about forty seats, while the Democrats lost just under forty. The Republicans had enjoyed a majority

²⁶Weber, *Copperheads*, 174.

²⁷*Cincinnati Convention, October 18, 1864, for the Organization of a Peace Party* (1864: Cincinnati, Ohio), 16, quoted in Weber, *Copperheads*.

in the House and Senate throughout the war, but it had become completely lopsided by the end of the war. Part of this is because of the increased role of the Peace Democrats, and part of it is because the Republicans swayed the public into believing all Democrats supported a peace platform. The Copperheads had been heavily disgraced by Lincoln's victory in 1864, and the surge of military success in that same year had severely damaged much of their credibility. All of the sudden, the Republicans' painting of the Democrats as a party of traitors began to be a more accepted view. Since the Democrats had given such a large platform to the Copperheads, it was easy for Republicans to dismiss the entire party in 1865.

The legacy of the Copperheads has very much become the legacy of the Democratic Party during the Civil War. There is a legitimate question as to whether or not this is the correct way to view the Civil War Democrats. There are historians who believe the image of the party during this era has been tainted by the Copperheads, and that War Democrats have been unfairly associated with what they believe was a fringe group. I do agree that the presence of the War Democrats has been overlooked, and I also do not think it is accurate to view the party as being disloyal to the Union. However, too many historians try to defend Democrats by downplaying the significance of the Copperheads. They played a huge role in the party's advocacy for the defense of civil liberties, as evidenced by Clement Vallandigham, and their peace platform was recognized as being significant enough to include George Pendleton on the Democratic ticket for the presidential election in 1864.

Although the Copperheads were unable to defeat Lincoln in 1864, there is no denying that they came very close to having one of their own in the White House as the second most powerful man in the country. To speculate as to what course McClellan and Pendleton would have chosen had they been elected would be an exercise in futility, but it is fair to say that the conclusion of the war, the abolition of slavery, and the restoration of Union would have been very much in question. It is also fair to say that the Copperhead rhetoric that circulated in the public discourse had influence in the Northeast and Midwest, which is evidenced by the New York City and Toledo riots. When all of this is considered, it is hard to come to any conclusion that does not recognize the Copperheads as a reasonable threat to Lincoln and the Union. While I do not believe their intent was to jeopardize the Union or to side with the Confederacy, their actions were unquestionably damaging to Lincoln's cause. The best summarization of the Copperheads and their legacy comes from Weber: "They were sincere in their belief that the Lincoln administration and the Republican Congress were overstepping their constitutional bounds. They did not want the Confederacy to win or the Union to split. They just wanted the nation to return to the *status quo ante bellum*."²⁸

²⁸Weber, *Copperheads*, 6.

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