

Copperheads, Then and Now

The Democratic legacy of undermining war efforts

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By Mackubin Thomas Owens

While recovering from surgery recently, I had the good fortune to read a fine new book about political dissent in the North during the Civil War. The book, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*, by journalist-turned-academic-historian Jennifer Weber, shines the spotlight on the "Peace Democrats," who did everything they could to obstruct the Union war effort during the Rebellion. In so doing, she corrects a number of claims that have become part of the conventional wisdom. The historical record aside, what struck me the most were the similarities between the rhetoric and actions of the Copperheads a century and a half ago and Democratic opponents of the Iraq war today.

In contradistinction to the claims of many earlier historians, Weber argues persuasively that the Northern anti-war movement was far from a peripheral phenomenon. Disaffection with the war in the North was widespread and the influence of the Peace Democrats on the Democratic party was substantial. During the election of 1864, the Copperheads wrote the platform of the Democratic party, and one of their own, Rep. George H. Pendleton of Ohio, was the party's candidate for vice president. Until Farragut's victory at Mobile Bay, Sherman's capture of Atlanta, and Sheridan's success in driving the Confederates from the Shenandoah Valley in the late summer and fall of 1864, hostility toward the war was so profound in the North that Lincoln believed he would lose the election.

Weber demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that the actions of the Copperheads materially damaged the ability of the Lincoln administration to prosecute the war. Weber persuasively refutes the view of earlier historians such as the late Frank Klement, who argued that what Lincoln called the Copperhead "fire in the rear" was mostly "a fairy tale," a "figment of Republican imagination," made up of "lies, conjecture and political malignancy." The fact is that Peace Democrats actively interfered with recruiting and encouraged desertion. Indeed, they generated so much opposition to conscription that the Army was forced to divert resources from the battlefield to the hotbeds of Copperhead activity in order to maintain order. Many Copperheads actively supported the Confederate cause, materially as well as rhetorically.

In the long run, the Democratic party was badly hurt by the Copperheads. Their actions radically politicized Union soldiers, turning into stalwart Republicans many who had strongly supported the Democratic party's opposition to emancipation as a goal of the war. As the Democrats were reminded for many years after the war, the Copperheads had made a powerful enemy of the Union veterans.

The fact is that many Union soldiers came to despise the Copperheads more than they disdained the Rebels. In the words of an assistant surgeon of an Iowa regiment, "it is a common saying here that if we are whipped, it will be by Northern votes, not by Southern bullets. The army regard the result of the late [fall 1862] elections as at least prolonging the war."

Weber quotes the response of a group of Indiana soldiers to letters from Copperhead "friends" back home:

Your letter shows you to be a cowardly traitor. No traitor can be my friend; if you cannot renounce your allegiance to the Copperhead scoundrels and own your allegiance to the Government which has always protected you, you are my enemy, and I wish you were in the ranks of my open, avowed, and manly enemies, that I might put a ball through your black heart, and send your soul to the Arch Rebel himself.

It is certain that the Union soldiers tired of hearing from the Copperheads that the Rebels could not be defeated. They surely tired of being described by the Copperheads as instruments of a tyrannical administration trampling the legitimate rights of the Southern states. The soldiers seemed to understand fairly quickly that the Copperheads preferred Lincoln's failure to the country's success. They also recognized that the Copperheads offered no viable alternative to Lincoln's policy except to stop the war. Does any of this sound familiar?

Today, Democratic opponents of the Iraq war echo the rhetoric of the Copperheads. As Lincoln was a bloodthirsty tyrant, trampling the rights of Southerners and Northerners alike, President Bush is the world's worst terrorist, comparable to Hitler.

These words of the La Crosse Democrat responding to Lincoln's re-nomination could just as easily have been written about Bush: "May God Almighty forbid that we are to have two terms of the rottenest, most stinking, ruin working smallpox ever conceived by fiends or mortals..." The recent lament of left-wing bloggers that Vice President Dick Cheney was not killed in a suicide bombing attempt in Pakistan echoes the incendiary language of Copperhead editorialist Brick Pomeroy who hoped that if Lincoln were re-elected, "some bold hand will pierce his heart with dagger point for the public good."

Antiwar Democrats make a big deal of "supporting the troops." But such expressions ring hollow in light of Democratic efforts to hamstring the ability of the United States to achieve its objectives in Iraq. And all too often, the mask of the antiwar politician or activist slips, revealing what opponents of the war really think about the American soldier.

For instance, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts and Rep. Charles Rangel have suggested that soldiers fighting in Iraq are there because they are not smart enough to do anything else. Sen. Richard Durbin of Illinois has suggested a similarity between the conduct of U.S. troops in Iraq and that of Nazi soldiers in World War II. His Illinois colleagues, Sen. Barack Obama, claimed that the lives of soldiers lost in Iraq were "wasted." And recently William Arkin, a military analyst writing online for the Washington Post, said of American soldiers that they are "mercenaries" who had little business taking critics of the war to task.

The Copperheads often abandoned all decency in their pursuit of American defeat in the Civil War. One Connecticut Copperhead told his neighbors that he hoped that all the men who went to fight for the Union cause would "leave their Bones to Bleach on the soil" of the South. The heirs of the Copperheads in today's Democratic party are animated by the same perverted spirit with regard to the war in Iraq. Nothing captures the essence of today's depraved Copperhead perspective better than the following e-mail, which unfortunately is only one example of the sort of communication I have received all too often in response to articles of mine over the past few months.

Dear Mr. Owens

You write, "It is hard to conduct military operations when a chorus of eunuchs is describing every action we take as a violation of everything that America stands for, a quagmire in which we are doomed to failure, and a waste of American lives."

But Mr. Owens, I believe that those three beliefs are true. On what grounds can I be barred from speaking them in public? Because speaking them will undermine American goals in Iraq? Bless you, sir, that's what I want to do in the first place. I am confident that U.S. forces will be driven from Iraq, and for that reason I am rather enjoying the war.

But doesn't hoping that American forces are driven from Iraq necessarily mean hoping that Americans soldiers will be killed there? Yes it does. Your soldiers are just a bunch of poor, dumb suckers that have been swindled out of their right to choose between good and evil. Quite a few of them are or will be swindled out of their eyes, legs, arms and lives. I didn't swindle them. President Bush did. If you're going to blame me for cheering their misery, what must you do to President Bush, whose policies are the cause of that misery?

Union soldiers voted overwhelmingly for Lincoln in 1864, abandoning the once-beloved George McClellan because of the perception that he had become a tool of the Copperheads. After Vietnam, veterans left the Democratic party in droves. I was one of them. The Democratic party seems poised to repeat its experience in both the Civil War and Vietnam.

The Democrats seem to believe that they are tapping into growing anti-Iraq War sentiment in the military. They might cite evidence of military antipathy towards the war reflected in, for example, the recent CBS Sixty Minutes segment entitled "Dissension in the Ranks." But the Democrats are whistling past the graveyard. The Sixty Minutes segment was predicated on an unscientific Army Times poll, orchestrated by activists who now oppose the war. The fact remains that most active duty and National Guard personnel still support American objectives in Iraq. They may be frustrated by the perceived incompetence of higher-ups and disturbed by a lack of progress in the war, but it has always been thus among soldiers. The word "snafu" began as a World War II vintage acronym: "situation normal, all f****d up."

Union soldiers could support the goals of the war and criticize the incompetence of their leaders in the same breath. But today's soldiers, like their Union counterparts a century and a half ago, are tired of hearing that everything is the fault of their own government from people who invoke Gitmo and Abu Ghraib but rarely censure the enemy, and who certainly offer no constructive alternative to the current course of action.

The late nineteenth century Democratic party paid a high price for the influence of the Copperheads during the Civil War, permitting Republicans to "wave the bloody shirt" of rebellion and to vilify the party with the charge of disunion and treason. If its leaders are not careful, today's Democratic party may well pay the same sort of price for the actions of its antiwar base, which is doing its best to continue the Copperhead legacy.

— Mackubin Thomas Owens is an associate dean of academics and a professor of national-security affairs at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. He is writing a history of U.S. civil-military relations.