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"Copperheads" Subject of EIU Lincoln Bicentennial Lecture

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"If Civil War battlefields saw vast carnage, the Northern home-front was itself far from tranquil. Fierce political debates set communities on edge, spurred secret plots against the Union, and triggered widespread violence.

"And at the heart of this turmoil stood Northern anti-war Democrats, nicknamed 'Copperheads.'"

This is how Oxford University Press introduces "Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North" (Oxford, 2006), written by Jennifer L. Weber, assistant professor of history at the University of Kansas.

The author will continue to look at this powerful faction when she presents Eastern Illinois University's Lincoln Bicentennial Lecture, "The Civil War at Home: Abraham Lincoln and the Copperheads," at 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 20, in the Lecture Hall of the Doudna Fine Arts Center. Admission is free and open to the public. A reception will follow the talk.

This event is sponsored by the EIU History Department, with support from the Robert and Nancy Hennings Fund.

Weber will focus her talk on the problem of anti-war dissent and Lincoln's reactions to that problem.

According to the book's introduction, "The Copperheads came perilously close to defeating Lincoln and ending the war in the South's favor. Indeed, by the summer of 1864, they had grown so strong that Lincoln himself thought his defeat was 'exceedingly likely.'

"Passionate defenders of civil liberties and states' rights -- and often virulent racists -- the Copperheads deplored Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus, his liberal interpretation of the Constitution, and, most vehemently, his moves toward emancipation," the introduction reads.

"Weber reveals how the battle over these issues grew so heated, particularly in the Midwest, that Northerners feared their neighbors would destroy their livestock, burn their homes, even kill them. Indeed, some Copperheads went so far as to conspire with Confederate forces and plan armed insurrections, including an attempt to launch an uprising during the Democratic convention in Chicago.

"Finally, Weber illuminates the role of Union soldiers, who, furious at Copperhead attacks on the war effort, moved firmly behind Lincoln. The soldiers' support for the embattled president kept him alive politically in his darkest times, and their victories on the battlefield secured his re-election."

Weber began her professional life as a journalist and later worked as a political aide in the California State Legislature. A life-long interest in the Civil War eventually spurred her to pursue academics as a career at Princeton University, where she received her doctorate. Weber is currently researching a book about conscription in the North and South during the Civil War.