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The Copperheads in Illinois

by DONALD F. TINGLEY

During the Civil War, there were constant rumors of a vast plot to subvert portions of the North to the cause of the Confederacy. These rumors were particularly prevalent in the states along the Ohio River, and Illinois was no exception. The consensus of opinion was that Rebel agents were circulating through these states for the purpose of detaching portions of them from the Union cause.

Northern Democrats who were presumed to be Southern sympathizers were popularly called Copperheads. It was often said that the name originated from the similarity of the group's treachery to the reptile of the same name. It may also have come from the fact that many of those who were of this group made an identifying badge for themselves by cutting the liberty head out of the large penny then in circulation and soldering a pin to the back of it—thus, the copper head.

President Abraham Lincoln had something less than wholehearted political support from his home state. Looking at the history of the state prior to 1860, however, it seems inevitable that he should have had some very bitter opposition. Many immigrants to Illinois came from southern states up the great rivers into Illinois, retaining many of their traditions and ideas. Politically, they tended to be Democrats. Illinois was always a Democratic state until 1856, when William H. Bissell was elected governor. While many Democrats switched to the new Republican Party, their loyalty to it was still somewhat shaky. A Republican governor was elected in 1860, but in the congressional elections of 1862, the situation changed rapidly to produce an overwhelming Democratic victory. This election demonstrated the connection between the Democratic trend and the recently removed southerners. People of southern extraction lived in the southern part of Illinois, and in northern Illinois, the people were largely of eastern origin. In the election of 1862, the Republicans carried only three counties south of Decatur and only nine south of Kankakee.

Democrats in Illinois, as well as in the whole nation, tended to split rather logically into three groups. The majority of the party paid their greatly increased taxes, served in the army, bought bonds, acted in a completely loyal fashion as far as the war was concerned, and carried on normal political opposition to Lincoln and his party. They nominated candidates, voted, and were critical of Lincoln when his conduct of the war or his aims did not please them. This group, in English terminology, might be called the loyal opposition. The War Democrats, however, tended to give such passionate support to
to the extent of sometimes advocating peace without terms.

The Copperheads came largely out of this last group. How many Copperheads were there? This is difficult to answer. According to Democratic newspapers, they did not exist at all. The name Copperhead never appeared in a Democratic paper except in a facetious way. On the other hand, the Republican papers tended to imply that all Democrats were Copperheads. It would seem that they were actually few in number. They were, however, like many radical minorities, very vocal. The danger from this group lay not so much in the possibility that they might lead a northern state into secession, but in the possibility that their noisy leadership might gain control of the Democratic Party, or a segment of it, in one state and in this fashion render political damage to Lincoln's cause. Doubtless their numbers fluctuated with the military success or failure of the Union armies. It also varied with what seemed to be the purpose of the war.

During the first eighteen months of the Civil War, President Lincoln insisted that the sole purpose of the fighting was to restore the Union, to bring back the Southern states to their old relationship with the rest of the nation. He still insisted this only days before the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln was shrewd enough to realize that this was necessary to keep the loyalty of the border states, as well as parts of the Northern states including his own Illinois. When Lincoln, under pressure, made public the Emancipation Proclamation in September, 1862, the complexion of events changed and made his government vulnerable to the charge that it was promoting an abolitionist war. Most Illinoisans were willing to fight to save the Union, but many, having Southern sympathies, would not exert themselves to free the slaves.

President Lincoln was, from the first, determined that nothing should threaten the war effort. He, therefore, took drastic steps to prevent any kind of subversion. He suspended the privilege of the writ of Habeas Corpus; he used arbitrary arrest; prisoners were held indefinitely without charge; and special military courts were established to try persons suspected of disloyalty. Newspapers in opposition to the Republican cause were suspended. In 1866, after Lincoln's death and the end of the war, the United States Supreme Court decided that Lincoln's use of military courts had been a violation of the constitution. The decision in this case, Ex Parte Milligan, was written by Justice David Davis of Illinois, who had been appointed to the court by Lincoln. Aside from the abolition question, most of the Copperheads' criticism of Lincoln was aimed at the question of arbitrary arrest and other violations of personal rights. They also put forth a strong states' rights argument. In the context of these problems and against the background of the time, the propaganda of the Copperheads becomes much less sinister than it seems on the surface. It has too often been viewed in relation to the ideas and problems of the twentieth century rather than those of the mid-nineteenth century.

The 1862 Illinois legislature illustrates much of the problem. On the heels of the preliminary
a convention to be held in Springfield. This group contained all shades of opinion and degrees of opposition to Lincoln's policies. Senator Richardson presided, and Democratic congressmen, several ex-congressmen, and at least one ex-governor were in attendance. They adopted several resolutions declaring themselves in favor of the Constitution of the United States in time of war as well as in peace, criticizing the administration for violating the bill of rights in arbitrary arrests, opposing the suppression of the Chicago Times, favoring freedom of elections and state sovereignty, opposing martial law, and condemning the proroguing of the legislature. Republicans found the twenty-third resolution particularly offensive. It reads:

Resolved, that the further offensive prosecution of this war tends to subvert the constitution and the government, and entail upon this Nation all the disastrous consequences of misrule and anarchy. That we are in favor of peace upon the bases of a restoration of the Union, and for the accomplishment of which we propose a national convention to set up terms of peace, which shall have in view the restoration of the Union as it was, and the securing, by constitutional amendments, such rights to the several states and the people thereof as honor and justice demand.

As evidence of their desire to support the soldiers, they collected $47,400 for aid of the sick and wounded. Republican journalists denounced the convention as a Copperhead meeting. Although it was doubtless a thorn in the sides of the state and national administrations, the convention did not suggest any aid for the Confederates, only a settlement of the war by peaceful means. Republicans made as much political capital as possible out of meetings of this sort. Congressmen James C. Robinson and John R. Eden were branded as Copperheads. It was unlikely that there was any basis for disloyalty charges against either. The election of both men for two more terms after the war was over indicates that their neighbors did not regard them as being subversive characters. Politically, 1862-1863 was the high point of the Copperhead (or Democratic) opposition to the administration.

On another level, however, there continued to be problems around the state. During 1863 and 1864, several unfortunate and violent situations caused Illinois a great deal of fear, anger, and embarrassment. These seem to have been largely local affairs, not very closely connected with the Democratic leadership. It was widely claimed by the Republican press that these incidents were part of a larger plot, sometimes called the Northwest Conspiracy. In any case they made good grist for the journalistic mills of newspapers like the Chicago Tribune. Governor Yates' papers contain many letters from all parts of the state concerning possible trouble. Fortunately, Governor Yates was not prone to hysterics. Nearly every Illinois community has a legend about Copperhead activities, some of them thrilling stories of violence and intrigue.

Attempts to investigate these stories often end with little more than a third-generation remembrance which can be neither proved nor disproved. A large share of the violence came during the year 1864. On March 28, the Charleston Riot involved a clash between local citizens and soldiers on leave. Since the area around Charleston was largely Democratic, there were rumors of a Copperhead organization, including secret drilling and arming of the citizenry.

As the presidential election drew near, politics grew hotter, and there was talk of resisting the draft and the government. Particularly irritating to Democrats was the behavior of soldiers home on leave, who drank and flaunted their patriotism a little too much. They frequently publicly embarrassed reputed Copperheads, often prominent citizens, by making them kneel down and swear allegiance to the United States. In nearby Paris and Mattoon, Democrats were killed by soldiers.

The trouble began when the 54th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment was home on a re-enlistment furlough and was due to reassemble for duty at Mattoon on March 28. Unfortunately, this was the same day for the Fourth Judicial Circuit Court to be in session, and there was to be a Democratic rally with Congressman Eden as the principal speaker. Since both citizens and soldiers were drinking heavily and the situation was becoming obviously tense, Eden cancelled his speech and the rally, and left town. Sheriff John O'Hair and ex-Congressman Olando B. Ficklin, both Democrats, tried without results to get fellow party members to go home or to remain inside the courthouse.

Eventually, shooting started and nine persons were killed, six soldiers, one Republican, and

Coles County Courthouse, scene of the Charleston Riot
Orlando B. Ficklin

two Copperheads; twelve were wounded. More than fifty Democrats were arrested, but after examination by Lieutenant Colonel James Oakes, assistant provost marshal general of Illinois, only fifteen were held and these were transported to Delaware where they were held for more than seven months, before being released on the personal order of President Lincoln. Two of them were tried on charges of murder after a change of venue to Effingham County. They were acquitted.

There were other incidents, such as the Clingman Raid, in Montgomery and Fayette counties during the summer of 1864. An armed gang of men, encamped in a wooded area, engaged in extensive thievery of horses, guns, and money. Several persons were indicted on charges of disloyalty to the United States, but none was ever brought to trial.

According to rumors, the Clingman gang was part of a great conspiracy aimed at Camp Douglas in Chicago. Supposedly there was a massive plot to free the Confederate prisoners held there, and take over Illinois for the Confederacy. There are indications that the Camp Douglas Conspiracy was a hoax, largely perpetrated by the Chicago Tribune, and other men, including I. Winslow Ayer, who subsequently wrote two accounts on which most of the stories of the conspiracy are based.

The era of the Civil War was a period when people took their politics seriously. Politicians, as well as ordinary citizens, were intemperate in their charges against the opposition. It is easy to look back and read into these speeches ideas that seem to be treasonable; a hundred years ago it was standard political fare. That was a violent age. Records of justice of the peace courts in the period show that most of their business stemmed from assault charges. A large portion of the population still carried guns regularly in an area where the frontier had just passed by.

That there was a great deal of anti-Lincoln, and anti-Republican, anti-abolitionist feeling in Illinois cannot be denied. That this represented a basic disloyalty to the United States can be questioned. One careful scholar of the period has remarked that if the Copperheads “had been summoned by their leaders to join a Confederate force, they would not have responded. With the war at their doors, they would have rushed to the defense of the Union.” This seems a fair statement of the situation.

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