



# Lincoln Lore

April, 1976

Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation...Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor. Published each month by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

Number 1658

## LINCOLN AND THE WAR DEMOCRATS *A Review*

Historians tend to devour their fathers and to forget how much they have learned from them. Today's historians of the Civil War era tend to stress differences rather than similarities between the Republican and Democratic parties and cohesiveness *within* either party. Historians who study political elites stress ideological differences, the new social historians stress ethnocultural differences, but both schools study political polarization between Republicans and Democrats. Their fathers had brought the two parties together, stressing the similarities between Lincoln and Douglas or Lincoln and McClellan, in an effort to escape the G.A.R. view of the era as the Republican salvation of the Union from Democratic treason. Certainly either Douglas or McClellan would have tried to save the Union had either been the winner rather than Lincoln. The fathers were right about this, but the children are right to add this *caveat*: there were nevertheless great differences in the nature of the two parties, particularly in regard to their views of the Negro race, and American history would have been, though still a unitary history of *one* country, very different had Lincoln lost either election.

We must not forget what our fathers told us; the Democrats did help win the war. To help remind us, Christopher Dell has given us a large volume entitled *Lincoln and the War Democrats: The Grand Erosion of Conservative Tradition* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975). Whatever its faults, and I think they are many and severe, one cannot come away from the book without a renewed sense of the vigor and importance of the War Democracy.

It is refreshing to be reminded of the help Democrats gave

President Lincoln. To be sure, many historians have assured us that the Democracy was a loyal opposition, but much of the literature that proves it is negative and defensive in tone. Look, they seem to be saying, Democrats could have brought the whole war effort to a halt, but they did not. They could have refused to make up a quorum in Congress for voting supplies to the armies, but they did not. Dell's story is a good deal more positive in tone. He sees the War Democracy as the creation of Stephen A. Douglas *after* April 12, 1861 (before that date and since South Carolina's secession on December 20, however, Douglas had brooded or criticized, not taking the crisis seriously enough). The Illinois Assembly requested Douglas's return from Washington, and in a reverse-Inaugural journey, the defeated candidate set out for Illinois by train in April:

The purpose of the trip at once became known and wherever the train stopped along the way, large crowds assembled and Douglas was called upon to speak. The first such speech was delivered in Ohio just across the line from Wheeling. . . . Widely reported in the press, his remarks created a sensation. At Columbus and Indianapolis, Douglas spoke again, appealing for nonpartisan support of the war and a public demand for its vigorous prosecution. The trip reached an appropriately dramatic climax in Illinois. On April 25, 1861, Douglas told the Illinois Assembly, crowded with onlookers, that he was guilty of "leaning too far to the southern section of the Union." He warned them: "Whoever is not prepared to sacrifice party and organizations and platforms on the altar of his country, does not deserve the support or countenance of honest people." Returning to his



Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society

Stephen A. Douglas



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Joseph Holt



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Benjamin F. Butler

home in Chicago, he spoke at the Republican Wigwam, where Lincoln had been nominated. In this, his last public address, he said: "There can be no neutrals in this war. Only patriots and traitors." After this performance, many recalcitrant Democrats fell into line as supporters of the war effort. The War Democracy and even nonpartisan Union parties thus became a significant factor as early as 1861.

Other vivid incidents help recall the contribution of the War Democrats. Kentucky Democrat Joseph Holt gave what Republican Rutherford B. Hayes recalled as "the best war speeches of any man in the land. They always brace my nerves and stir my heart when I read them." The arresting officer in the Merryman case, General George C. Cadwalader of Pennsylvania, was a Democrat. His defiance of a Democratic Chief Justice (Taney) to uphold a Republican President (Lincoln) in suspending the writ of *habeas corpus* "had considerable significance in Unionist circles." General Benjamin F. Butler's theory that escaped slaves of disloyal masters were "contraband" of war was the earliest indication that supporting the war effort could eventuate in supporting the abolition of slavery, as long as the assault on the peculiar institution was approached by a strategy of military indirection. The wisdom of Lincoln's approach to abolition by military justification is amply demonstrated by the willingness of War Democrats to accept moves against slavery that were for reasons of punishment of disloyalty rather than for reasons of moral concern for the downtrodden.

Though Republicans customarily get the blame for being tough on civil liberties during the Civil War, General Cadwalader's case is generally instructive. War Democrats could be just as tough. War Democrats Andrew Johnson of Tennessee and Joseph A. Wright of Indiana appeared together to speak in Columbus, Ohio, in February of 1863. They laid particular stress on the evils of Samuel Medary's newspaper, *The Crisis*, for its anti-administration editorial policies. When the speeches were over, a mob of soldiers left to attack the offices of the newspaper. That night, a mob attacked still another Democratic paper.

Once sucked into the Republican vortex, the logic of events swept Democrats along the way to conclusions that we tend to think of as exclusively Republican. Missouri's John Brooks Henderson was a slave owner and a states-rights Democrat until Fort Sumter. As a Senator during the Civil War, however, he wound up introducing the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, because he felt that it needed Border State sponsorship in order not to seem a piece of Yankee Republican abolitionism. In Reconstruction, he would advocate Negro suffrage and write legislation resembling the Fifteenth Amendment. Maryland's John A. J. Creswell, who voted for Stephen Douglas in 1860, gave a rousing speech in behalf of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Creswell argued

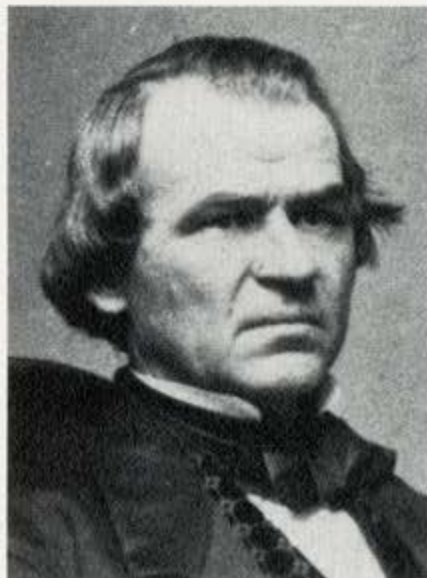
that the war had disproved slaveholders' fears of insurrection and slanders that Negroes were cowards. The Negro had proved his manhood. The final report of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, issued on May 15, 1864, recommended full civil and political rights for Negro freedmen "in order that he might stand on his own feet without being a burden to the government." The Commission was chaired by War Democrat Robert Dale Owen of Indiana.

"Aside from the 'March to the Sea' by Republican General William T. Sherman," Dell says, "the major Union military operations of 1864 were all in the hands of Democratic Generals." General Ulysses S. Grant, who had supported Douglas, assumed command of all the armies. General George H. Thomas won at Chickamauga and Nashville. The Crater at Petersburg was bungled by Generals Ambrose E. Burnside, Orlando B. Wilcox, and Edward Ferrero. Benjamin Butler failed at Bermuda Hundred. General John A. McClernand began the Red River expedition, and General Lew Wallace stalled the Confederate troops at Monocacy River. War Democrats were appointed to commands in vital areas behind the lines where they would have to fight expected disloyalty: William S. Rosecrans in the Department of the Missouri, Lew Wallace in the Middle Department (Baltimore), and Irvin McDowell in the Department of the Pacific.

The previous paragraph is representative of the method which Dell uses to prove his point. In a loose and allusive way, he mentions the names of so many War Democrats that eventually one is impressed by their importance to the war effort. To call this a method would be almost to dignify making a list as a methodology, but Dell does have an historical method. He tries to study political developments throughout the North, state by state. To handle the scope, of course, he must rely principally on secondary sources, printed primary sources (especially speeches), and newspapers. The last named he seems not to have sampled in any particularly systematic or exhaustive way. I cannot find a single reference to a manuscript source.

The conception of the project, though it defies modern infatuation with the importance of manuscript sources, is not altogether without merit. A state-by-state synthesis of the Democratic party's development in the Civil War would be a welcome addition to modern scholarship. Moreover, Dell's conclusions are interesting and deserve consideration:

In this, the crowning year of the wartime Union party [1864], it is worth considering some notable facts about the true nature of the party hierarchy and the accusation of Conservatives that the Union party was merely "the Republican party under a different name." Andrew Johnson, the Union candidate for Vice President, was a War Democrat. In the States of Maine, Ohio, and Iowa, War Democrats



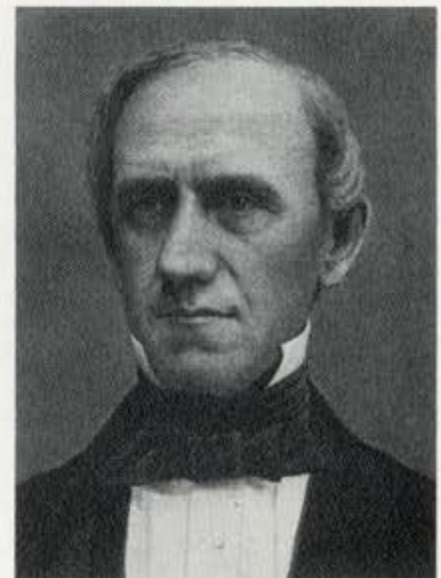
From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Andrew Johnson



Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society Library

Robert Dale Owen



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Joseph A. Wright

received the Union nomination for the highest state executive position under consideration by the voters. In New York, Vermont, Ohio, and Connecticut, War Democrats received the Union nomination for the second-highest state executive position. In Indiana, four Union nominations for major state executive office were accorded War Democrats; in Ohio and Connecticut the number was three. In congressional races, the Union party nominated seventeen War Democrats. In California, a majority of the Union nominees for Congress were War Democrats. In Ohio, Indiana, Oregon and New Jersey the Union State party chairmen were War Democrats. On the Union State Central Committee of Connecticut, ten of 23 members were War Democrats. And so on, *ad infinitum* . . . [sic] It must be asked of the Conservative historians: If this kind of non-partisan display was *not enough* to establish the Union party as a truly nonpartisan body, what then was required? In fact, it would appear that the Union party was all it claimed to be; and much of the credit belongs to Abraham Lincoln, whose gentle hammering proved devastating to the Conservative principles of the Democratic party.

Dell concludes that Lincoln was more radical than conservative and argues that he repeatedly blunted criticism by using War Democrats as lightning rods. When Lincoln repudiated David Hunter's enlisting of black troops in South Carolina in the summer of 1862, he blamed the policy on the greatest War Democrat of them all, Stanton, but did not remove Stanton or Hunter. Lincoln ignored the conservative results of the Republican state conventions of 1862 in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio and went ahead with the drafting and announcement of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Dell properly points out that "the Gettysburg Address, . . . utilized again the inflammatory [sic] Jeffersonian contention that 'all men are created equal.'"

The problem with the book is its execution of the worthwhile project. The myriad of names mentioned in the text have no biographical flesh on them. The discussions of political developments from state to state make chaotic and dismal reading and superficial history. Dell's literary style compounds the errors, as can be seen in this example:

Some outstanding features of the New York campaign [of 1862] included the sale and transfer of the *New York World* from the Union camp to the Democratic camp. War Democrat Manton Marble was managing editor of the *World*. He was a member of Mozart Hall, a close friend of Fernando Wood, and a strong supporter of Seymour. Wood, who had campaigned for Major as a War Democrat in 1861, campaigned for Congress in 1862 as a Conditional. James Gordon [sic] Bennett of the *Herald*, who had supported the Union ticket of 1861, declared for Seymour. A major feature of the Upstate canvass was a running debate between War

Democrat Daniel S. Dickinson and Conditional War Democrat John Van Buren, stirring recollections of the Free Soil campaign of 1848. On that occasion, [sic] Van Buren had been for freedom, Dickinson for slavery. This time it was the other way around. Without Conservative support, the Republican-Union ticket had no chance of victory in New York and Seymour's majority exceeded ten thousand. On the New York congressional delegation a 23-9 Republican majority was replaced by an 18-12 Democratic majority. In the state legislature the Republican-Union coalition retained an overall majority, but the Regular Democracy acquired equal standing in the Assembly.

Woe be unto the graduate student who writes such an obvious stitching-together of note cards with no especially obvious logical connection between them. Why a university press publishes what a graduate seminar would reject is an important problem.

Far more important than the lack of readability evident in the passage is the lack of understanding betrayed by it. Everywhere in the book, one is greeted by transitions from party to party and from platform to platform, willy-nilly, without even a modest attempt at explaining *why*—*why*, in this case, Van Buren and Dickinson flip-flopped. The lack of understanding here is fundamental and ironic.

Mr. Dell's historical world is highly politicized. He has studied the political affiliations of scores of Civil War generals in an effort to show how many were Democrats. This may reflect more of his own feelings than theirs, for Generals, though some became Presidential candidates, generally did not vote in the nineteenth century. It is easy to exaggerate their partisan awareness. Even though he tends to see everything as political in nature, Mr. Dell does not really understand the nature of politics. He cannot explain the wild meanderings of politicians from ideological position to ideological position, because he does not study what often made them change, factional politics. Compare the flat and almost meaningless description of New York politics above with these passages from a historian who *does* understand, Michael Les Benedict (in *A Compromise of Principle: Congressional Republicans and Reconstruction, 1863-1869* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1974]):

One of the greatest obstacles to understanding Republican radicalism and conservatism during the Civil War period has been the tendency of historians to confuse political and legislative radicalism. . . . [Contemporaries] were equally perplexed by the ideological somersaults of Salmon P. Chase, Horace Greeley, George Julian, and a host of lesser lights. To understand how a Chase could be the radical candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1864 and then aspire to the Democratic nomination four years later, one must perceive the factional nature of Ameri-



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

John A. J. Creswell



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Edwin M. Stanton



Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society,  
St. Louis

John B. Henderson

can politics.

Traditionally, the United States has been a two-party democracy; in many states there has been only one viable political party. Yet, for nearly every position in American national and state government there have been more than one or two aspirants. These rivals have had to fight their battles within one or another of the parties. Often ideological similarities, personal friendships, or pure self-interest have spurred groups of aspirants to office to ally themselves with their rivals.

Benedict then gives a suitably complex and yet also satisfyingly explained example, the Seward-Weed *vs.* Greeley rivalry in New York's Republican party:

The feud broke into bitter warfare that year [1860], when Seward and Weed blamed Greeley for Seward's failure to win the Republican presidential nomination—Seward had been the radical candidate at the Chicago Convention. Greeley had favored the archconservative Missouri Whig, Edward Bates.

Weed repaid Greeley . . . in 1861, defeating Greeley's drive for the Republican nomination to the United States Senate. During the secession winter, as Weed advocated concessions to slavery to preserve the Union, Greeley opposed compromises, preferring to allow the South to secede peacefully. Strife continued as both factions tried to win Lincoln's favor and control the national patronage. Lincoln gave control of the customs house in New York City to former Democrats, who generally disliked Seward and allied loosely with Greeley, but the Seward-Weed forces generally received the choicer appointments in the rest of the state.

In 1862, anti-Weed forces, made up of Greeley's friends and the allies of independent-minded former Democrats . . . , controlled the Republican nominations. Weed, advocating a strong appeal to Union Democrats, left the state convention disgruntled and did little to elect the ticket. When the Republicans lost the canvass, Greeley and his allies charged him with sabotage. But with the only patronage now available to Republicans in the state emanating from the national government, Weed slowly regained control of the state organization.

By 1864 Weed, who first worked for Lincoln's renomination and then threatened to sit out the campaign unless Lincoln acceded to his ever-growing patronage demands, had won control of every important national appointment in the state. Lincoln had replaced the former Democrat Chase as secretary of the treasury and soon thereafter turned out Chase's formerly Democratic friends in the New York customs house, substituting for them allies of Weed. At the same time he named a Seward-Weed partisan city postmaster. Given this political situation, it is little wonder that

Greeley opposed Lincoln's renomination and that many leading former Democrats . . . actively promoted the Fremont third-party movement.

And so it goes for three more pages, with Greeley and Weed alternately skulking and acting as Republican stalwarts. Benedict gives us an explanation, and we do not lurch along confusedly from baffling factional identification to seemingly inexplicable ideological about-face. Benedict has an understanding of politics that Dell does not.

Moreover, Dell's bibliography is practically twenty years out of date. Few works written after 1956 are cited. We get father Philip, but not son Eric, Foner, Oberholtzer on Philadelphia but not Dusinger; the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* but not the *Journal of American History*; etc. I can find no references to *Civil War History*, though all scholars would now acknowledge that it is the leading journal in that field of study. The modern students of Democratic behavior, like Leonard Curry, are not mentioned.

This is the first book I have seen from Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, and I do not look forward to another. As my liberal use of "sic" in the quotations from the book suggests, the editorial standards are simply appalling. Proofreaders should have caught some of these mistakes: "Consservative" (page 19); "nothern" (31); Horace "Heffren" and Horace "Heffern" in the same paragraph (59); "ad nauseum" for "ad nauseam" (106); "sizeable" (119) and "sizable" (233); "Widescale" (200) is not a word; "Implicitely" for "Implicitly" (205); "perscution" (240); "picure" (245); "beastial" for "bestial" (247); Charles R. Buckalew becomes "William A." (268); "Irwin" McDowell (276) is "Irvin" in the index; "proffered" is "proferred" (277); Mr. "Coffroth" is also Mr. "Coffrath" in the same paragraph (319); "Relected" (341); and the last sentence of Chapter 14 has no concluding punctuation. The capitalization is absolutely bizarre, and a page looks almost like an eighteenth-century text with capital letters sprinkled everywhere. Grammatical errors are permitted, as on page 91: "the man whom he believed had lost Tennessee." The "whom" should be "who," as it is the subject of the noun clause ("who . . . had lost Tennessee") and not the object of the verb "believed."

There is a great book yet to be written on the Democratic party after Douglas. We need to know more about it in almost every northern state, and we certainly need a synthesis which coordinates our knowledge of each state into a usable interpretation. Christopher Dell whets our appetites for more, but we do not have complete confidence in what he does tell us. Creswell, for example, was a Whig forced into the Douglas Democracy in 1860, because the Republican party was too weak in Maryland to count. Is it right to call him a War Democrat? If not, what about the others?



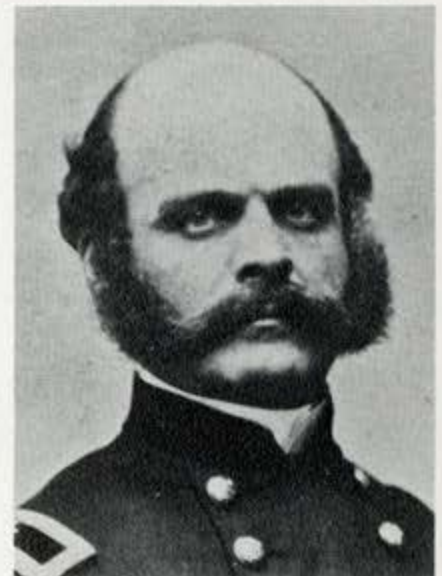
From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Lew Wallace



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Ulysses S. Grant



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Ambrose E. Burnside