Lincoln Lore

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THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY: A RESPECTABLE MINORITY?

Although much of the drama of the Lincoln Presidency has always stemmed from descriptions of his struggles with opposition on the home front, careful studies of the nature of the opposition itself have been few indeed. Understanding the precise nature of the opposition to Lincoln is critical for understanding Lincoln himself. To realize the importance of this, one need only recall the difference in accounts of Lincoln's Presidency written in times when the Democrats were viewed principally as Copperheads and those written in times when the Democratic opposition was thought to be mostly a loyal opposition. Joel Silbey has now provided a comprehensive look at the Democratic party in the Civil War era. *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860-1868* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977) describes the history of the opposition, as it were, from the inside, not from the perspective of the Lincoln administration.

In the turmoil of the 1850s, when the Republican party was born, the Democrats lost enough voters to become a minority party. In 1861, they would also lose their greatest national leader, Stephen Douglas. Though there was no way for the leaders to know it, the party had taken the bulk of the losses it would suffer for several decades to come. The Democratic party was in 1860, on the threshold of the Civil War, a somewhat shrunken, but coherent body. It was now a minority party, but it was "a respectable minority" which could depend upon steadily turning out a substantial body of voters for any election. Such was the way the party looked from the outside.

Internally, the party's history did show some dynamics of change and fluctuation. When war broke out in 1861, the impulse of most Democrats was to rally around the flag. "I am with you in this contest," said Fernando Wood, who would become a highly partisan opponent of Republican war policies later. "I know no party now." Stephen Douglas was ready even before Sumter "to make any reasonable sacrifice of party tenets to save the country." After Sumter, Silbey writes, "he was quoted as favoring the immediate hanging of Southern sympathizers in the District of Columbia unless they repented their treason; and he pled to his party in his last speech to help rescue the country first and think about partisan differences later." Republicans were flabbergasted and delighted. Lincoln exploited the party honeymoon by appointing Democrat Edwin Stanton Secretary of War, and in various states Republicans promoted Union parties to ignore previous partisan identifications. They succeeded for a time. "In many places," says Silbey, "Democratic local and state conventions, the supreme policy-articulating and electoral-organizing units of the party, stopped meeting throughout 1861 and into early 1862, even on such sacred party days as the eighth of January, the anniversary of Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans."

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FIGURE 1. In 1864, Republicans attacked Democratic candidate George B. McClellan in two ways. First, they made him guilty by association with his Vice-Presidential running mate, George Pendleton, who was identified with the peace wing of the party (see FIGURE 3 in *Lincoln Lore* Number 1679). Second, they could undermine his personal embodiment of pro-war sentiment by making him appear a worthless general. In this caricature reproduced as a *carte-de-visite* for parlor albums, the latter strategy dictated McClellan's ridiculous appearance as a general with a paper hat on a wooden horse.

Gradually, Republican measures which squinted towards emancipation and which restricted civil liberties revived Democratic partisanship. A small body of Democrats, the so-called War Democrats, parted ways with the mass of Democrats at this point — a movement which Silbey is at a loss to explain. In March, 1862, Clement Vallandigham arranged a meeting of Democratic members of Congress which published a partisan "Address . . ., To the Democracy of the United States" in May. This call to the party colors rejected absorption of the Democrats and revived the opposition. Candidates chosen in this new spirit did rather well in the fall elections of 1862, aided in good measure by Lincoln's issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September.

As always, success bred factionalism. By 1863, the Democrats were split between groups which Silbey calls "Legitimists" and "Purists." Following distinctions made by political scientist Austin Ranney in *To Cure the Mischief of Faction: Party Reform in America,* Silbey argues that parties are usually split between a group which takes primarily a "competitive" view of the functions of the party and a

group which takes essentially an "expressive" view. The former head always for the center of the ideological spectrum in order to attract as many voters as possible to the party. The latter feel more compelled to enunciate the party's principles articulately and loudly. The Democratic Legitimists wished to make it always clear that the party was a legitimate opposition, that they did not flirt with treason, and that they were fully as patriotic as the Republicans. The Democratic Purists were nervous about abandoning cherished party traditions and beliefs in a search for "legitimacy" in the eyes of the centrist voter. They did not want to degenerate into a "me-too" war party.

In 1863, the Purists — most students of the Civil War period know them as the Peace men — were in the ascendant. Electoral gains in the previous year, continuing failure to have decisive military success, and continuing restraints on civil liberties along with emancipation and Negro soldiers put those who wished to express opposition in a position to dictate nominations in Connecticut (Thomas Seymour), in Pennsylvania (George Woodward), and in Ohio (Vallandigham). Legitimists like Samuel Sullivan "Sunset" Cox felt gloomy, and their predictions proved to be accurate: the Democrats lost all three of these gubernatorial elections.

Failure of the Purists gave the Legitimists the advantage for the 1864 Presidential nomination. George McClellan was the perfect Legitimist candidate: he was a general and a good Democrat. Purists were not as enthusiastic; they did not care for having a general head the ticket, and especially a general who had suppressed civil liberties in the border states early in the war. The party may have been near a split, but, as election day neared, both sides decided "there was too much at stake to quarrel." The Democrats struggled with the perpetual problem of American political parties: what works to get the nomination is often the opposite of what will work thereafter to win the election. Thus S.S. Cox wrote McClellan about his West Point speech, a strong endorsement of the war, warning him that it "will give you the election, but it does not help . . . the nomination." Cox advised that he should say something about "the necessity of using all rational methods at every honorable chance for peace and union." This was needed, not for his election, but "for his nomination."

It is not clear whether agreement was reached before the Chicago convention to have a war candidate and a peace platform, but many suspected such would be the case — and it was. For the first time since 1844, Silbey points out, the Democratic platform did not invoke the usual litany about economic questions such as the tariff, banks, and land distribution. It stressed the failure of the war and the precarious state of constitutional liberties.

McClellan lost, of course, in what was, in terms of the electoral vote, a landslide. But Silbey is careful to point out that the Democrats remained about as competitive as they had been since 1860. In fact, the stability of Democratic competitiveness in this era is one of the principal themes of the book and surely one of Silbey's original contributions. He compiles an index of competitiveness for each state, an index which is based on how much the runner-up needs to overcome the winner. Silbey finds the Democrats rather competitive in the belt of states from New York to Illinois which decided national elections. So competitive were they that there may have been considerable wisdom in the Republican efforts to admit solidly Republican Western states in the Union and control the returns from Border States by military intimidation. Silbey believes with most political historians that a "party's popular vote was not built from different segments of the population in successive elections but primarily from the same groups of people as in the election before." Therefore, in 1862, Republican turnout fell more than Democratic turnout; in other words, Democratic success was built on Republican stay-at-homes. The Democratic disaster of 1863 was, in fact, a one-state disaster: Vallandigham's attempt to become Governor of Ohio caused a Republican landslide in that state, but elsewhere the Democrats were only a little off their very good percentages of the previous year. In addition, they performed rather well, though still losing, with peace candidates in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Silbey relies on correlations with previous elections and on checks of reversals at the county level to see whether Democratic turnout was normal and whether the geography of partisan advantage changed radically.

In 1864, the Democrats' new-found unity (they had not run as a united national party for some time) did not bring them success. Relying again on the work of political scientists, this time Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes in *Elections and the Political Order*, Silbey argues that the Democrats were victims of "valence" issues rather than "position" issues. No particular and specific policy recommendation made the Democrats too unpopular to win. Valence issues, the linking of parties "with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate," were their downfall. Silbey's chapter title tells the whole tale: "The Smell of Treason Was on Their Garments."

Silbey makes a virtue of the Democrats' consistency. He argues that they never really pursued a minority party strategy, despite their minority status after 1860. Vote-maximization was a goal pursued only within the confines of party identity. Their unity was built of inherited prejudices and loyalties *and* of consistent ideological orientation.

At one point, Silbey explains that he "made no effort to delineate precisely the numbers in each group or the nature of the socioeconomic and/or psychological elements shaping individual commitment to one group or another. This needs to be done and should be, building through state-level studies toward a national synthesis. Again, however, what is critical for my purposes is that such divisions existed and helped shape the behavior of a minority party seeking to recover control of the political process. Therefore, though the precise components of the various internal groups which were the sources of the shaping is an important matter, in sketching in a general strategic and tactical picture such description becomes somewhat less relevant I believe." And he warns in his preface that his is "an anatomy of party history, an attempt to provide a framework for understanding by sketching the landscape over which the Democrats had to travel, the nature of the partisan network of leaders and voters, and their perceptions and ideas, and the interaction among them, probing the boundaries and nature of the complex relationships that shaped the actions and determined the route the Democrats followed on the political landscape."

Certainly in an area of study where our understanding is as primitive as is the case in the study of the Civil War Democracy, we need rough trailblazing. There is reason for a tentatively broad and comprehensive look. At times, however, Professor Silbey's statements become so blandly broad that they amount to little more than common sense reinforced by sociological jargon. He seems at times to say: the Democrats were a party and wanted to win a majority of votes but could not do so at the expense of taking over the platform of their more popular adversaries. Adding a few fancy names to an analysis of the election of 1864 does not necessarily help much either. "Position" and "valence" issues may have been the nub of the matter, but do those words change what we have thought for a long time? Though the Democrats were a loyal opposition, they went down to defeat in 1864 amidst unfair Republican charges that they were treasonous Copperheads. Does this statement of the conventional wisdom on the

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FIGURE 2. Manton Marble was the influential editor of the New York *World*, a Democratic newspaper generally aligned with the "Legitimist" wing of the party.

nature of the election say anything less than Silbey does?

Whether the broadly sweeping approach is the proper one seems to be a serious problem. Here is another example. Silbey sees as a milestone in party history Clement Vallandigham's "Address of Democratic Members of the House of Representatives of the United States, To the Democracy of the United States," published May 8, 1862. It "dramatically signalled the formal revival of partisanship by a major group of national Democratic leaders and intensified interest in building up the tactical plans necessary for party victory and the consequent preservation of cherished principles and values," says Silbey. This is his summary of the Address:

> The bulk of the Address was an arraignment, first, of administration policies which were destroying the Union and, second, of the easy assumption that the Democratic party should be disbanded in order for the war to be carried on more effectively. Democrats recognized the need to support the government "in all constitutional necessity, and proper efforts to maintain its safety, integrity and constitutional authority." But that is not what was being asked of Democrats. They were being asked "to give up your principles, your policy, and your party, and to stand by the Administration in all its acts." This they could never do, particularly for the sake of the country. The Democratic party
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> > is the only party capable of carrying on a war; it is the only party that has ever conducted a war to a successful issue, and the only party which has done it without abuse of power, without molestation to the rights of any class of citizens, and with due regard to economy . . . . If success, then, in a military point of view be required, the Democratic party alone can command it.

Looked at from a closer perspective, the Address seems different. Vallandigham's capable biographer, Frank Klement, gives the Address rather a different interpretation, and Silbey certainly invites a comparison when he says in his footnote about the Address that Klement's book discussed the Democratic meeting which produced the Address. This is Klement's summary of the meaning of the Address:

> . . . he formed an ad hoc committee to prepare a statement of Democratic faith and tried to impose his antiwar views upon the other members. Some of the self-styled War Democrats, however, fully aware that Vallandigham's reputation as an antiwar man hurt rather than helped the party, used delaying tactics to nullify his leadership. Peeved and impenitent, Vallandigham then wrote a statement in collaboration with William A. Richardson of Illinois, tacked on the names of most Midwestern Democrats, and published it under the title "Address of the Democratic Members of the Congress to the Democracy of the United States." The document urged conciliation and compromises, recommended use of the ballot box to change the direction of events in the country, and asserted that states alone had the right to touch slavery . . . . The . . . address emphasized the worthiness of states' rights doctrine, restating the views of Jefferson and Calhoun. It tied the Democratic party to the past, promising to reconstruct the Union upon prewar ideas and with prewar institutions. . . . The document tried to foist the slogan "The Constitution as it is, the Union as it was" upon the Democratic party.
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> Vallandigham's action helped to widen the schism already existing within the Democratic party. Some of those whose names had been attached to the address were incensed or embarrassed. "I think no document ought to have been sent out," wrote one who found his name listed as a sponsor, "which was not acceptable to the majority of our party." Astute Democrats like Manton Marble . . . recognized the weaknesses of the abortive document. It abounded with "uncandid aspersions" and failed to condemn the Southern rebels. Marble viewed the latter as inexcusable. He also recognized that the document was "a monstrous anachronism."

Instead of unity, Klement saw conflict within the party over Vallandigham's Address.

To look at still another source on the Address is to see that the conflict it aroused followed an interesting pattern. In the biography of Vallandigham written by his brother James, the production of the Address seems even more exciting. "He prepared an address which, after much delay and difficulty," James wrote, "was signed by twelve Democratic Representatives from the West (six of them from Ohio), and by two from Pennsylvania, and one from New Jersey; all the other Eastern members except one, and four of the Western, refusing peremptorily to sign it." Clearly, the party was split along sectional lines, and the Eastern wing wanted to have nothing to do with so extreme a spokesman as Vallandigham.

Silbey's approach is broad, too, in the sense that it does not focus on individual leaders but on the great mass of Democratic voters. One problem encountered as a result of this approach is symptomatic of a more general problem that plagues the study of political history in America today. Silbey constantly asserts — indeed, it is a major thesis of the book — that the party did not operate exclusively as a machine for vote-maximization. Rather, Purists always pulled the opportunists back to the bedrock of party beliefs. The Democrats, he says, agreed on a conservative ideology of "militant constitutionalism and a determination to remain in the organization of their fathers." Thus Silbey's Democrats were consistent in partisan impulse or habit *and* in *belief*.

> From 1862 on, the Democratic leaders developed an extensive critique of the Republican administration. Their arguments grew out of an ideology rooted in their traditions and experiences and the perceptions developed in their past about the role and power of government, about the nature of

the Constitution, and about the direction of racial and social policy within the nation. Whatever new problems the war introduced into American life, the Democrats responded in their usual ways. There was, therefore, a timelessness, a static quality to their arguments. A new Republican outrage during the war provoked additional violent rhetoric but the overall structure of the Democratic argument remained basically the same from the first day to the last.

As Republican policies began to take on the aspect of a social revolution in Democratic eyes, "The Democrats believed they were in a battle between two cultures, two nations." In sum, "Democratic traditionalism in rhetoric and in belief was the most dominant aspect of their response to the war, the Lincoln administration, and their own minority status."

Although Silbey has read editorial opinion in selected newspapers and has studied party platforms, he does not really attempt the kind of study of party rhetoric which would confirm or deny his thesis for certain. In truth, it is not fashionable to make such studies. Silbey's approach, that of studying the party *en masse,* is all the rage and discourages more traditional approaches to party history. Yet, as is often the case, the conclusions of such studies *en masse* are about ideology and expressions of belief more than they are about measurable and quantifiable behavior.

In the final analysis, Professor Silbey has a strangely sentimental view of the nature of political parties. In his preface he tells us that vote-maximization was not the whole story of party history. "The party often needed more than victory: it also needed to retain its soul." That parties have souls would be news to many a quantifier of electoral behavior. Silbey may be right, but only studies of party rhetoric and of the principles and beliefs of party leaders will prove it.

One brief excursion into such study may serve to suggest caution in accepting the view that the Democrats were a consistent, ideologically conservative party of constitutional timidity. Looking at the nearest party ideology, that of Fort Wayne, I find less consistency and less legitimacy in the Democratic party. Amidst rumors that war had actually broken out in April of 1861, the Democratic newspaper seemingly blurted out its doubts: "what right have we to seek to force our southern brethren to remain in the Union when they are resolutely determined hereafter to govern themselves?" Only a standing army and military despotism would keep a reluctant South in the Union, and the Union might as well not exist, for it would have lost its essential identity as a free country. After Stephen Douglas gave some national guidance in another direction, and after some savvy second thoughts, the local party supported the war effort. In fact, it supported it so wholeheartedly that it came to endorse the arrest of the members of the Maryland legislature by Federal authorities who suspended their privilege of the use of the writ of *habeas corpus* in order to keep them from meeting to pass a secession ordinance. "While we entertain the strongest reverence for the writ of habeas corpus, and object to its being set aside for any ordinary grounds, we admit there are conditions when the safety of the country may require it," said the paper. It also admitted the necessity of censoring the war news in the press and urged the adoption of military conscription as the only way to equalize the burdens of the war (New England, it claimed, did not fill its quotas). Months later, complaints about the suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus,* censorship, illegal arrests, and soulless conscription would become the stock-in- trade of local Democratic ideology. It would require a considerable metaphysician to locate the soul in this party newspaper.

As broad as Silbey's conclusions may be, he still produces intelligible conclusions and, on the whole, delivers what he promises: an overall scheme of Democratic party history for the Civil War era. Dozens of scholars, graduate students, and local historians will go to work now and perhaps find objections, nuances, and twists to the story of the party that Professor Silbey never expected. But without his model to begin with, they would all be lost on uncharted waters. To the first explorer goes the bulk of the glory of discovery.

One hates to end on a sour note, but book lovers everywhere should take alarm at this production. That a major publisher like W. W. Norton & Company could produce such an appallingly bad example of the bookman's art is a sad comment on the depths to which the publishing industry has fallen. The footnotes are at the bottom of the page, but, oh, what a price we pay for this one good point. The book is riddled with typographical errors. Here are a few: "They" for "The" (page xi), "princple" (page 11), "outbteak" for "outbreak" (page 45), "adolitionist" (page 83), "marital" for "martial" (page 87), and "opposd" (page 110). Nor did the publishers offer Professor Silbey much in the way of editorial assistance. On page 27, the editor allowed the author to use "if" for "whether" to introduce a noun clause. On page 28, the editor allowed the use of "destructionaries" as though it were a word. On page 29, the editor let "hopefully" mean "it was hoped" rather than what it really means, "in a hopeful state." Examples from those three consecutive pages indicate the quality of Norton's editorial standards, and this is not a matter of finicky taste. A good editor would not allow such unintelligible prose as this: "They verbalized their ideology in order to fight elections and personalized their argument to make it concrete to the individual elector" (page 79).

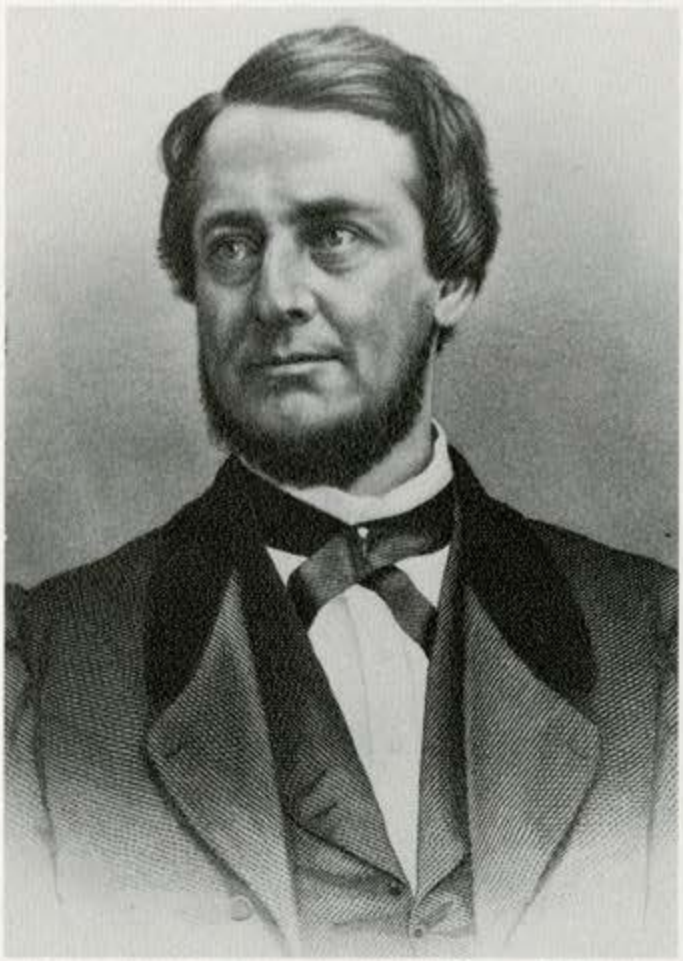

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FIGURE 3. Clement Vallandigham was the leader of the peace wing of the Democratic party. Nevertheless, at the Democratic convention which nominated McClellan for the Presidency, he moved that the nomination be made unanimous.