

Copperheads: Peace Democrats

Copperheads or Peace Democrats were people who opposed the North's attempts to reunite the nation during the American Civil War.

During the American Civil War, a majority of Ohioans supported the war effort and the Republican Party, although there was a sizable minority who opposed the conflict. Many of the opponents of the war were members of the "Peace" section of the Democratic Party. They and other opponents of the war often came to be called "Copperheads." A number of white Ohioans, especially those living along the Ohio River, had migrated to the state from slaveholding states. While opponents of the war could not legally own slaves in Ohio, many of them did have family members residing in the South who did own African American slaves. These people often sympathized with slaveholders, agreeing with many white Southerners that the federal government did not have the power to limit slavery's existence. Some Peace Democrats also feared that President Abraham Lincoln intended to free the slaves. Some Ohioans who objected to slavery's end feared that African Americans would flood the North looking for jobs if they were given their freedom. These white Ohioans did not want to compete with African Americans for employment. Additional Ohioans had economic ties to the South and feared a decline in revenue and business opportunity with the war raging. Additionally, some Ohioans objected to violations of civil liberties, including suspension of habeas corpus and denial of freedom of speech, during the conflict.

Peace Democrats preferred political compromise rather than warfare. Several Ohioans participated in a peace convention during early 1861. The convention was held in Washington, DC, and the delegates hoped to convince President Lincoln to either agree to the Confederacy's demands to get it to rejoin the Union or to simply let the Southern states leave the United States. Lincoln ignored the convention's attempt to end the conflict peacefully. Politically, most people who participated in the peace convention affiliated themselves with the Peace Democrats. Their opponents nicknamed them Copperheads, describing the opponents of the war as poisonous snakes waiting to strike a blow in favor of the South. The first reference to "Copperheads" in Ohio occurred in 1861. Accepting the Copperhead name, many opponents of the war began to use the portrait side of copper coins as badges and tokens for identification and promotion of their cause.

Clement Vallandigham was the best-known Peace Democrat in Ohio. He helped organize a rally for the Democratic Party at Mount Vernon, Ohio, on May 1, 1863. Peace Democrats Vallandigham, Samuel Cox, and George Pendleton all delivered speeches denouncing General Order No. 38. In April 1863, General Ambrose Burnside, commander of the Department of Ohio, issued General Order No. 38. Burnside placed his headquarters in Cincinnati. Located on the Ohio River, just north of the slave state of Kentucky, Cincinnati had a number of residents sympathetic to the Confederacy. Burnside hoped to intimidate Confederate sympathizers with General Order No. 38.

General Order No. 38 stated:

The habit of declaring sympathy for the enemy will not be allowed in this department. Persons committing such offenses will be at once arrested with a view of being tried. . .or sent beyond our lines into the lines of their friends. It must be understood that treason, expressed or implied, will not be tolerated in this department.

Burnside also declared that, in certain cases, violations of General Order No. 38 could result in death.

Vallandigham was so opposed to the order that he allegedly said that he "despised it, spit upon it, trampled it under his feet." He also supposedly encouraged his fellow Peace Democrats to openly resist Burnside. Vallandigham went on to chastise President Lincoln for not seeking a peaceable and immediate end to the Civil War and for allowing General Burnside to thwart citizen rights under a free government.

In attendance at the Mount Vernon rally were two army officers under Burnside's command. They reported to Burnside that Vallandigham had violated General Order No. 38. The general ordered his immediate arrest. On May 5, 1863, a company of soldiers arrested Vallandigham at his home in Dayton and brought him to Cincinnati to stand trial.

Burnside charged Vallandigham with the following crimes:

Publicly expressing, in violation of General Orders No. 38, from Head-quarters Department of Ohio, sympathy for those in arms against the Government of the United States, and declaring disloyal sentiments and opinions, with the object and purpose of weakening the power of the Government in its efforts to suppress an unlawful rebellion.

A military tribunal heard the case, and Vallandigham offered no serious defense against the charges. He contended that military courts had no jurisdiction over his case. The tribunal found Vallandigham guilty and sentenced him to remain in a United States prison for the remainder of the war.

Vallandigham's attorney, George Pugh, appealed the tribunal's decision to Humphrey Leavitt, a judge on the federal circuit court. Pugh, like his client, claimed that the military court did not have proper jurisdiction in this case and had violated Vallandigham's constitutional rights. Judge Leavitt rejected Vallandigham's argument. He agreed with General Burnside that military authority was necessary during a time of war to ensure that opponents to the United States Constitution would not succeed in overthrowing the Constitution and the rights that it guaranteed United States citizens.

As a result of Leavitt's decision, authorities were to send Vallandigham to federal prison. President Lincoln feared that Peace Democrats across the North might rise up to prevent Vallandigham's detention. The president commuted Vallandigham's sentence to exile in the Confederacy. On May 25, Burnside sent Vallandigham into Confederate lines.

Some Peace Democrats resorted to more radical means, including subversion, to protest the Civil War. Some of these men formed a secret society known as the Order of American Knights or the Sons of Liberty. In February 1864, Vallandigham was elected supreme commander of the organization. Ohio government officials estimated that between eighty thousand and 110,000 Ohioans belonged to these organizations, but most historians discount these numbers as being dramatically higher than the group's actual numbers.

Rumors circulated throughout the North during 1864 that the Confederate sympathizers intended to free Southern prisoners at several prison camps, including Johnson's Island and Camp Chase, in Ohio. These freed prisoners would form the basis of a new Confederate army that would operate in the heart of the Union. Supposedly, General John Hunt Morgan, who had raided Ohio the previous year, would return to the state and assist this new army. The plot never materialized. General William Rosecrans, assigned to oversee the Department of Missouri, discovered the planned uprising and warned Northern governors to remain cautious. John Brough, Ohio's governor, sent out spies to infiltrate the groups of sympathizers. These men succeeded and stopped the uprising before it could occur. Confederate supporters hoped to

capture the *Michigan*, a gunboat operating on Lake Erie near Sandusky. They would then use the gunboat to free Confederate prisoners at Johnson Island. Union authorities arrested the plot's ringleader, Charles Cole.

Rosecrans' and Brough's actions in 1864 helped subdue opposition to the war. Northern battlefield victories in 1864 also convinced many Ohioans that the war would end shortly in a Northern victory. As a result of these events, the influence of the Peace Democrats began to decline.

References and Suggested Reading

- Baker, Jean H. *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Goldman, Ralph Morris. *Search for Consensus: The Story of the Democratic Party*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1979.
- Morrison, Chaplain W. *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967.
- Rutland, Robert Allen. *The Democrats, from Jefferson to Clinton*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Weber, Jennifer L. *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Source: Ohio History Central (<http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=616>).