

VOTERS IN BLUE: THE CITIZEN SOLDIERS OF THE CIVIL WAR

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In 1861 the sectional controversy which had rent the nation ended and bloody civil war began. For over a decade the people of the northern states had debated the issue which symbolized the differences between the sections — the issue of slavery. Northern public opinion was divided in its attitude toward the peculiar institution. There was the leave-it-alone attitude of many Democrats, the get-rid-of-it-gradually proposal of conservative Republicans, and the abolish-it-immediately demand of radical Republicans and abolitionists. The great mass of individuals in the North subscribed, in varying quantitative degrees, to these three differing viewpoints when hostilities started.

All of these conflicting attitudes were carried over into the armies that the government of the Union created. Then, shortly after the war started, the slavery issue flared up anew. Now the controversy was as to whether the destruction of slavery should be made one of the war aims. The radical Republicans demanded emancipation, masking their real designs behind the front of military necessity. Lincoln, the conservative Republicans, and the War Democrats replied that the restoration of the Union must be the sole objective of the war. The Peace Democrats cried for a truce and the reconstruction of the nation with southern rights guaranteed. The whole country debated the question. Arguments and counterarguments resounded in Congress, in the press, on the stump, and in crossroads stores. And in the camps of the armies the voices of controversy arose as loudly as on the home front, as the men in blue fought verbally with each other over the great issue of the day. The Federal armies were composed overwhelmingly, officers and privates, of citizen soldiers, of men drawn temporarily from civilian life to fight a war. These men were politicians and voters in civilian life, and they did not shed their political ideas or ambitions when they donned a uniform. They continued to think and talk in terms of their

prewar existence; they remained politicians and voters. This was a natural development, but it invested the northern armies with certain characteristics that probably no other military aggregation ever manifested: continual campfire debate about the war aims of the government, bitter factionalism among officers, and violent hostility between generals and common soldiers engendered by differences of political opinions. Undoubtedly the sturdy American spirit of democracy produced these characteristics. Democratic such qualities might be, but they interfered seriously with military efficiency by destroying unity and co-operation. Worse than that, there seemed at times a possibility that the citizen army would become so entangled in partisanship and so impressed with the correctness of its political notions that it would seek to impose its will upon the country by force or threat of force, thus subverting democratic government.

The spirit of politics made its first appearance in the personnel of the officers of the army. From the beginning days of the war, politicians of all parties watched the military patronage as greedily as they did civil jobs and with the same partisan motives. In July of 1861 Representative William A. Richardson of Illinois, a Douglas Democrat, complained in the House that the government had commissioned as generals four men who were affiliated with the Breckinridge wing of the party while not a single appointment had gone to a Douglas man. He warned the administration to abandon this misguided policy. The volunteers who were flocking to the colors in the West were Douglas Democrats and they wanted to be commanded by Douglas officers. If they were not, they would not support the war.¹ On the other side of the political fence, an alert correspondent for the New York *Tribune* sent in a dispatch to his paper about the deplorable Democratic composition of the officers of the Ohio troops: "Governor Dennison has appointed for the three-year's service twenty-three colonels of infantry regiments, twelve of whom were Democrats, nine Republicans, one American and one whose political affiliation is unknown."²

¹ *Congressional Globe*, 37 Cong., 1 Sess., 245; *National Intelligencer* (Washington), July 24, 1861.

² *New York Tribune*, September 1, 1861.

In the first year of the war the great majority of the general officers were Democrats. Disgruntled Republicans estimated that eighty of the 110 brigadier generals and four-fifths of all the brigadier and major generals belonged to the opposition party.³ The three most important commands were held by Democratic generals: George B. McClellan, Henry W. Halleck, and Don Carlos Buell. The large number of Democrats in the higher ranks was the result of historical accident. Most of the general officers were West Point graduates and most of the West Pointers happened to be Democrats. But the situation angered and alarmed Republican leaders. They had disturbing visions of the Democratic masters of the army marching their hosts on Washington to overthrow the administration; they suspected many of the Democratic generals of nourishing a secret sympathy with the South and of hatching treasonable plans to prevent a Union victory.⁴ After 1862 the Republicans breathed a little easier. McClellan and Buell were removed from command and many other lesser Democratic officers met the same fate or were relegated to unimportant positions. The radical Republicans brought about the downfall of a number of Democrats by creating the powerful Congressional agency, the Committee on the Conduct of the War, which labored unceasingly to poison Lincoln's mind against all officers of Democratic faith.⁵ Nevertheless a large proportion of Democrats remained among the generals, and until the end of the war these men were denounced bitterly by Republican newspapers and defended ardently by Democratic ones.

The press war over the generals assumes a startling significance when one remembers that the newspapers circulated freely in the army and were read not only by the officers concerned and

³ Senator Henry Wilson, *Congressional Globe*, 37 Cong., 2 Sess., 164; Representative Martin F. Conway, *ibid.*, 83; Representative George W. Julian, *Speeches on Political Questions: 1850-1868* (New York, 1872), 202-204; Representative Justin S. Morrill, quoted in *New York Tribune*, May 21, 1862.

⁴ Joseph Medill to Edwin M. Stanton, January 21, 1862, *Edwin M. Stanton Papers*, Library of Congress; Carl Schurz to Abraham Lincoln, November 8, 20, 1862, Frederick Bancroft (ed.), *Speeches, Correspondence, and Political Papers of Carl Schurz* (6 vols., New York, 1913), I, 209-210, 216-17; J. Purdy to John Sherman, January 10, 1863, *John Sherman Papers*, Library of Congress.

⁵ T. Harry Williams, "The Committee on the Conduct of the War," *The Journal of the American Military Institute* (Washington, D. C.), III, 1939, pp. 139-56.

their friends, but also by the common soldiers who served under them. Radical Republican editors constantly hurled the ugly charge that Democratic generals sympathized with the South and did not want to defeat the Confederacy. "They want to save the union in such manner as not to hurt its deadly assailants, its implacable foes," explained Horace Greeley. "Hence they strike irresolutely, dubiously, ineffectively. They wait to be assured that their blow will not reach too far, until the time for striking has passed."⁶ The radical journals demanded the disgrace and removal of every officer who opposed emancipation as an aim of the war. Until this was done Democratic treason would hold back the armies and the day of victory.⁷ Some Democrats, the radicals advised, should be court-martialed and executed. "The shooting of half a dozen imbeciles and semi-traitors, whose shoulders glisten with silver stars, would save streams of precious plebian blood," wrote the New York *Tribune's* Washington correspondent.⁸ The Democratic papers replied to the radical charges with counteraccusations that the Republicans wanted to hound from the army all the capable West Pointers and put in their places incompetent Republican political generals.⁹ What must have been the reactions of the enlisted men who read that their commanders were traitors or fools! The effect on morale and discipline can be imagined.

The slavery issue divided Republican and Democratic officers into bitterly hostile factions. One Republican colonel wrote indignantly to his wife: "Yesterday I had quite a Spat with Jeff. C. Davis — our Divission [*sic*] Commander — he is a proslavery General, and he is down on the Abolitionists. I had some plain talk with him, and told him what I thought of proslavery Generals — I have no good feeling for him, and I have made up my

⁶ New York *Independent*, April 9, 1863.

⁷ New York *Tribune*, January 13, 1862, editorial; *ibid.*, July 23, 1862, p. 3, Boston correspondence; *ibid.*, August 7, 1862, p. 1, army correspondence; *ibid.*, September 29, 1862, editorial; *ibid.*, January 22, 1863, editorial; *ibid.*, February 27, 1863; Boston *Traveler*, quoted in Detroit *Free Press*, January 31, 1863; New York *Independent*, May 26, 1864; *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* (New York), October 3, 31, December 12, 1863, and March 26, April 2, 1864.

⁸ New York *Tribune*, December 11, 1862, p. 2.

⁹ New York *World*, January 19, 1863; Detroit *Free Press*, January 24, 1863; New York *Journal of Commerce*, quoted in *ibid.*, January 29, 1863.

mind that I will not go into another Battle under his command.’¹⁰

Republican officers constantly wrote letters to their Congressmen denouncing Democrats under whom they served for their opposition to emancipation and demanding that Congress force the removal of such officers and secure the appointment of good Republicans in their places.¹¹ Officers who wanted promotion or who felt that their merits had been slighted hastened to assure influential Republican politicians that they were right on the slavery issue.¹² A general whose sentiments had been questioned wrote to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton: “My maxim has always been, ‘no peace with slavery,’ and my opinion is that peace on any other terms is now impossible.”¹³ Sometimes friends of an aspiring officer would write to Republican Congressmen to vouch for the officer’s Republicanism. A New York banker urging a promotion for General John M. Schofield told Senator William P. Fessenden, after praising Schofield’s military abilities, “I can answer for him on the slavery question, too, he is an abolitionist and emancipationist.”¹⁴

In the first part of the war, Republican officers felt bitterly that their merits were ignored and their promotions held back. They blamed this on Lincoln’s practice of handing out important commands to Democrats in order to attract members of that party to the support of the war and on the McClellan-Buell control of the army.¹⁵ Wrote one disgruntled Republican general to

¹⁰ Hans C. Heg to Mrs. Heg, January 21, 1863, Theodore C. Blegen (ed.), *The Civil War Letters of Colonel Hans Christian Heg* (Northfield, Minnesota, 1936), 178.

¹¹ Letters to Senator Lyman Trumbull in the *Trumbull Papers*, Library of Congress, from Major J. W. Schaffer, December 24, 1861, F. Hamilton, June 17, 1862, Colonel George T. Allen, November 12 and December 16, 1862, Colonel John Tillson, November 23, 1862, Colonel S. Noble, January 6, 1863, Colonel Thomas Allen, February 20, 1863; letters to Senator John Sherman in the *Sherman Papers* from Colonel F. R. Stanley, November 24, 1862, Colonel W. F. Herrick, February 5, 1863.

¹² W. H. Stokes to ——— Coventry, December 13, 1861, *Trumbull Papers*; Colonel W. B. Hazen to John Sherman, December 10, 1862, *Sherman Papers*.

¹³ General Robert Allen to Stanton, September 25, 1864, *Stanton Papers*.

¹⁴ J. E. Williams to Fessenden, April 22, 1864, *Fessenden Papers*, Library of Congress. See also James A. Garfield to Salmon P. Chase, February 15, 1863, Theodore C. Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield* (2 vols., New Haven, 1925), I, 276, recommending General William S. Rosecrans.

¹⁵ Garfield to Mrs. Garfield, November 5, 1862, *ibid.*, I, 253-4; Robert B. Warden, *An Account of the Private Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase*

Secretary of War Stanton: "My policy was from the first to strike heavy blows against the rebels and to treat them just as we would treat any other enemy. That made McClellan and most of his staff my opponents as matters of course. My name was habitually suppressed in all relations of meritorious actions in which I had part. . . . I have felt all their weight because I have had only the dubious approval which 'conservatives' dealt out to men of my policy."¹⁶ The political rivalry between Republican and Democratic officers continued after McClellan and Buell were removed, being particularly malignant in the Army of the Potomac. Military fortunes rose and fell according to what general commanded that ill-fated army. Democrats gnashed their teeth when Republican Joseph Hooker reigned; Republicans cursed when Democrat George Meade was in the saddle. In each case suspicion and intrigue ran rampant, military cooperation was nullified, and the morale of the whole army suffered. Hooker always believed that the Democratic officers had wanted him to fail when he commanded in 1863. He excoriated their political motives in a statement to the Committee on the Conduct of the War:

At that time perhaps a majority of the officers, especially those high in rank, were hostile to the policy of the government in the conduct of the war. The emancipation proclamation had been published a short time before, and a large element of the army had taken sides antagonistic to it, declaring that they never would have embarked in the war had they anticipated this action of the government. When rest came to the army, the disaffected, from whatever cause, began to show themselves, and make their influence felt in and out of the camps.¹⁷

During Meade's tenure of command, the Republicans charged that he was elevating his Democratic friends to positions of power and keeping Republicans down. Several Republican officers appeared before the Committee to denounce Meade. Said General Albion P. Howe, referring to the corps commands of the army: "[W]e say there is too much copperheadism in it. This is so for different reasons: with some there is a desire to raise up (Cincinnati, 1874), 498-9, quotation from Chase's diary, October 6, 1862; MS. diary of General Samuel Heintzelman, Library of Congress, entry of May 16, 1862.

¹⁶ E. D. Keyes to Stanton, May 13, 1863, *Stanton Papers*.

¹⁷ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Washington, 1865), I, 112.

General McClellan; with others there is a dislike to some of the measures of the government; they do not like the way the negro question is handled. And, again, the impression is made upon my mind that there are some who have no faith in this war, who have no heart in it. . . .”¹⁸ General Abner Doubleday declared: “No man who is an anti-slavery man or an anti-McClellan man can expect decent treatment in that army. . . . I think there have been pro-slavery cliques controlling that army, composed of men who . . . would not have been unwilling to make a compromise in favor of slavery. . . .”¹⁹

Secretary of War Stanton, an ardent radical, started a campaign in 1863, aided by the Committee, to remove Democratic officers, particularly those who had voiced opposition to the emancipation proclamation.²⁰ This drew from Democrats angry accusations that their freedom of speech was being abridged because they did not agree with Republican dogmas.²¹ The Democrats might protest but undoubtedly they were awed by Stanton’s stern course. One colonel complained in the presidential campaign of 1864 that Republicans could talk all they wanted to about politics but Democrats had to keep their mouths shut if they wanted to retain their positions: “. . . a soldier who don’t agree with the Administration must be got rid of. . . . You would scarcely credit the number of such cases as this, cases of petty spite. . . .”²²

Just as bitterly as the generals, the common soldiers and the minor officers differed and fought over the political aspects of the war. The enlisted man of the Union armies was a sturdy individualist, a real democrat, conscious of his democratic rights, and resentful of military interference with his freedom as an American citizen. Accustomed in civil life to criticizing the acts of government officials orally or in letters to the newspapers, he saw no good reason why he should not indulge in the same luxury

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 327-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 311.

²⁰ Edwin M. Stanton to Major L. C. Turner, judge-advocate, September 19, 1863, Stanton MS. Letterbooks, Library of Congress, III, part 1; New York *Independent*, May 7, 1863.

²¹ Colonel Theodore Lyman, of Meade’s staff, to Mrs. Lyman, March 5, 1864, George R. Agassiz (ed.), *Meade’s Headquarters, 1863-1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman From The Wilderness to Appomattox* (Boston, 1922), 78-9.

²² *Id. to id.*, *ibid.*, 248.

concerning his military superiors. This trait attracted attention early in the war and caused some observers to speculate about the result on military discipline. "The somewhat crude and mostly illogical ideas of independence which have possession of the American mind," exclaimed one newspaper, "interfere with the wholesome discipline of the camps, if not of the field, and excite an antagonistic feeling between privates and officers."²³ Generals who had come up from West Point through the regular army could not stomach the independence of the citizen soldier. William T. Sherman exploded in a letter to his politician brother: "With us you insist the boys, the soldiers, govern. They must have this or that or they will cry down the leaders in the newspapers, so no general can achieve much."²⁴ When it was reported that troops of the Pennsylvania cavalry had mutinied before the battle of Murfreesboro because they doubted the capacities of their officers to lead them to victory, the *New York Times* snorted disgustedly: "Let us have a military mass meeting before every engagement, in order to give the downtrodden privates and corporals an opportunity of telling the General how they feel about his strategy and his tactics, and of discussing what they had better do under the circumstances."²⁵

There was good reason for thoughtful observers to view with alarm the democratic individualism of the citizen soldiers. Campfire criticism of generals and mess-time debates about strategy were incessant in all the armies for the duration of the war. This resulted, in some cases, in a bitter estrangement between the commanding general and the troops and in a mass demoralization of the army. Such a situation developed in the Army of the Potomac. The common soldiers idolized McClellan, who assumed the command in the summer of 1861 and held it until his removal in the summer of 1862.²⁶ Then John Pope took

²³ *New York Tribune*, September 4, 1861.

²⁴ W. T. Sherman to John Sherman, September 22, 1862, Rachel S. Thorndike (ed.), *The Sherman Letters: Correspondence between General and Senator Sherman from 1837 to 1891* (New York, 1894), 162. See also W. T. Sherman to Mrs. Sherman, August 3, 1861, M. A. DeWolfe Howe (ed.), *Home Letters of General Sherman* (New York, 1909), 211.

²⁵ *New York Times*, January 9, 1863.

²⁶ A sample opinion of the high regard of the army for McClellan may be had in a letter from Captain W. T. Lusk to his family, September 28, 1862, in *War Letters of William Thompson Lusk* (New York, 1911), 214. A rare example of criticism of

over and suffered a disastrous defeat at second Manassas. One of the factors that caused the speedy dismissal of Pope and the restoration of McClellan was the attitude of the soldiers, who streamed back from the Manassas debacle cursing Pope and one of his corps generals, Irvin McDowell, a known enemy of McClellan's, and crying for "Little Mac" to lead them.²⁷ McClellan's second tenure of command was short. After the battle of Antietam he was again and finally removed. This raised a storm of criticism from all ranks in the army and there was wild talk of a mutiny. Many soldiers were convinced that the administration had destroyed McClellan because he was a Democrat.²⁸ The army naturally looked with disfavor upon Ambrose Burnside, who succeeded to the command, and when he was defeated with bloody losses at Fredericksburg the dissatisfaction of the soldiers mounted to dangerous heights. The Army of the Potomac at this point was a beaten, cowed organization, more demoralized than any other army in the war with the exception of Buell's army in the West. Morale was at a low ebb, desertions were rife, and the camps flamed with criticism of Burnside's generalship.²⁹ Some of the officers and privates expressed their angry feelings about their leaders in letters to the newspapers.³⁰ It was rum-

McClellan is in Josiah M. Favill, *Diary of a Young Officer* (Chicago, 1909), 79, 135, 156-8.

²⁷ New York *Tribune*, September 5, 1862, army correspondence; William E. Doster, *Lincoln and Episodes of the Civil War* (New York, 1915), 155-6.

²⁸ Letter of a soldier in Rochester *Union*, quoted in New York *Tribune*, November 22, 1862; Philadelphia *Inquirer*, November 24, quoted in *ibid.*, December 1, 1862; John R. Adams, a chaplain, to Mrs. Adams, January 1, 1863, *Memorial and Letters of Reverend John R. Adams* (Cambridge, 1890), 189; Detroit *Free Press*, January 22, 1863.

²⁹ Testimony of General Daniel E. Sickles before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee*, I, 3, and testimony of General Daniel Butterfield, *ibid.*, I, 73; W. T. Lusk, *War Letters*, 254-7; J. R. Adams, *Memorial and Letters*, 89-90; *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (Washington), January 17, 1863, Washington correspondence; Francis Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps* (New York, 1886), 198; General John Cochrane, *The War for the Union* (New York, 1875), 46-7; E. G. Taylor, *Gouverneur Kemble Warren: The Life and Letters of An American Soldier, 1830-1882* (Boston, 1932), 97; New York *Tribune*, January 19, 1863, army correspondence; Henry W. Raymond (ed.), "Excerpts from the Journal of Henry J. Raymond," *Scribner's Monthly* (New York), XIX, January, 1880, p. 420; letter of L. W. Coe, an agent of the Connecticut legislature sent to the camp at Falmouth to look after the dead and wounded in the state's regiments, in *Waterbury American*, quoted in Detroit *Free Press*, January 1, 1863; New York *Times*, January 16, 1863, army correspondence, a long and descriptive account.

³⁰ Letters from Buffalo *Courier*, quoted in Detroit *Free Press*, January 16, 1863;

ored that the government was so frightened by the seething discontent of the men that the army would be broken up into small units and scattered throughout other and safer armies.³¹ The New York *Tribune's* army correspondent, in analyzing the roots of the trouble, wrote:

This army needs a great deal of reorganization, elimination, and stern discipline — a discipline which shall teach both officers and men to do more acting and less thinking. The great predilection of this army has been to pass judgment upon matters and men about which it has no right to speak — to individually question the feasibility and policy of every act of their superiors.³²

Eventually the morale of the army improved. A reorganization and shake-up in the winter of 1863 resulted in the removal or transfer of some of the McClellan officers. By spring much of the demoralization had vanished, although there were some mutterings in the ranks against the new commander, Joseph Hooker, a Republican, and there was a good deal of campfire criticism of his tactics after the defeat at Chancellorsville.³³ In the last year and a half of the war, with Meade and then Grant at the helm, dissension and dissatisfaction seem to have been at a minimum.

The soldiers in the western armies matched their brothers of the East in criticizing generals. One journalist, after touring Ulysses S. Grant's army, wrote of the feeling of the men toward their commander: "No respect is felt for him, and no confidence is felt in him, and his conduct was one topic of discussion around campfires during my stay."³⁴ Popular dissatisfaction with a commanding general reached its highest point in the West in the army under General Buell in the latter part of 1862 when Buell failed to smash the Confederates under Braxton Bragg in the

from Providence *Post*, *ibid.*, January 22; from Concord *Patriot* and Hartford *Times*, *ibid.*, January 29. See also Washington *Republican*, quoted in *ibid.*, January 15; Indianapolis *Journal*, *ibid.*, January 31; New York *Herald*, January 10; New York *Tribune*, January 8.

³¹ New York *Times*, January 16, 1863, army correspondence.

³² New York *Tribune*, February 5, 1863, Army of Potomac correspondence. This reporter said he had often heard officers denounce the plans of their superiors in front of privates.

³³ Detroit *Free Press*, February 13, 1863; Doster, *Lincoln and Episodes of the Civil War*, 199-201.

³⁴ Columbus *Ohio State Journal*, quoted in New York *Tribune*, May 5, 1862. See also Boston *Traveler*, army correspondence, in New York *Tribune*, May 31, p. 1.

Kentucky campaign. Denunciations of Buell's alleged dilatory tactics rang through the camps, voiced by officers and privates. Officers condemned Buell freely in the presence of the men.³⁵ The demoralization rivalled that in Burnside's army. There was talk among the officers of arresting Buell, and some of them demanded his removal in a petition sent to Lincoln.³⁶ "I have heard a great deal of murmuring among officers and men," said one general in describing the situation. "The impression became general . . . that General Buell did not want to fight Bragg; that he was unwilling to risk an engagement, while the men, the officers, and troops generally were anxious to fight, conscious of our ability to whip Bragg's army. . . . Some ascribed it to timidity, some to prudence. . . . [S]ome went so far as to impugn the loyalty of General Buell."³⁷ Buell had lost control of his army, and this was a major factor in his removal from command.

When the citizen soldiers were not fighting or criticizing the conduct of their generals, they were debating the issue of emancipation. They still considered themselves to be citizens as well as warriors, and they insisted on exercising all their political prerogatives. The spectacle of an army wrangling about the war aims its government should pursue excited pride rather than alarm with most Americans. One editor exclaimed:

A volunteer army, accustomed to vote at home, on going into camp become soldiers yet remain citizens. We do not like the common phrase which speaks of citizens and soldiers as if the two were distinct. . . . In France or Prussia, soldiers may be mere machines, but not so in this country. Here they are intelligent citizens, wearing for a while a dress of war which they will gladly at any day throw off to reclothe themselves with the garments of peace — never for a moment ceasing their interest in the civil affairs of the country.³⁸

³⁵ Blegen, *Heg Letters*, 142; Henry Villard, *Memoirs of Henry Villard: Journalist and Financier, 1835-1900* (2 vols., Boston, 1904), I, 301-302; C. Bullitt to Joseph Holt, September 29, 1862, *Joseph Holt Papers*, Library of Congress; testimony of Colonel A. D. Streight before the court of inquiry investigating Buell's tenure of command, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1891-1901), Series 1, Volume XVI, pt. 1, pp. 148-9 [hereafter cited as *O. R.*]; testimony of General S. S. Fry, *ibid.*, 231; letter of a private in Cincinnati *Commercial*, quoted in *New York Tribune*, October 6, 1862; *Pittsburgh Gazette* quoted in *ibid.*, October 6, 1862.

³⁶ *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. XVI, pt. 1, pp. 134-8, 546.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 133-4.

³⁸ *New York Independent*, October 15, 1863.

Politicians and journalists delighted in this democratic individualism of the common soldier, and never wearied of praising his intelligence and knowledge about political affairs.³⁹ Intelligent he was, and he kept posted on politics by reading the newspapers and discussing with his fellows the views of the editors. "Our army is one that reads and thinks," wrote a reporter who knew the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac.⁴⁰ "They will talk and they will write, and read the papers," observed an officer.⁴¹ An army correspondent of the New York *Tribune* described how he had seen soldiers reading that journal and added: "The consequence is that the great questions of the age — confiscation, with the employment of blacks in the government service, and Emancipation — have been thoroughly discussed."⁴² Sometimes the men published their own newspapers, and these camp organs were boldly partisan in their content.⁴³ General Buell suppressed one of them, the *Huntsville Reveille*, supposedly because it followed the Republican line.⁴⁴ Regular army officers like Buell, who were shocked by the political ardor of their troops and who tried to check the campfire debates, were criticized for interfering with the democratic right of free speech. "I have seen no other army . . . in which there was so little liberality of sentiment or freedom of discussion," wrote one resentful correspondent.⁴⁵

Frequently whole units, companies, brigades, or regiments, would be composed of Republicans, while their officers were Democrats, or vice versa. This always caused irritation and sometimes open dissension.⁴⁶ In Buell's army an Indiana major made a speech to his applauding men in which he questioned the loyalty of the commander, who was known as an avowed foe of

³⁹ Senator Benjamin F. Wade, *Congressional Globe*, 38 Cong., 1 Sess., 3197; Senator James Lane, *ibid.*, 37 Cong., 2 Sess., 111; report of Secretary of War Simon Cameron, *Senate Executive Documents*, 37 Cong., 1 Sess., I, no. 1, pp. 23-4.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, January 16, 1863, army correspondence.

⁴¹ W. G. Smith, *Life and Letters of Thomas Kilby Smith* (New York, 1898), 269. See also letter of a soldier in *New York Tribune*, November 1, 1861; *New York Independent*, May 21, 1863.

⁴² *New York Tribune*, August 7, 1862, p. 1.

⁴³ *New York Independent*, May 21, 1863.

⁴⁴ *New York Tribune*, August 1, 1863, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, January 21, 1863, army correspondence.

⁴⁶ Blegen, *Heg Letters*, 94-5.

emancipation.⁴⁷ Republican troops often manifested their disapproval of slavery in defiance of their officer's orders. "You have no idea how deeply the abolition sentiment is rooted in the Ohio troops," wrote one general. "I can not send out a detachment without their carrying off a slave, horse or something else and styling it rebel property. . . ."⁴⁸ When General Halleck issued an order barring fugitive slaves from his lines, many officers and privates refused to obey it.⁴⁹ Soldiers who were imbued with antislavery sentiments resented their superiors compelling them to guard the property of "rebels" in occupied areas or to aid in returning fugitive slaves. Massachusetts men ordered to perform such work wrote indignant letters to their Senator, Charles Sumner, beseeching him to get them released.⁵⁰ Western soldiers stationed in Arkansas were reported to be on the verge of mutiny because they had to arrest runaway blacks: "There will be a breeze here on this subject, for some of our Northern regiments, from Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, and Iowa, will make an issue with the present military authority."⁵¹ The Republican soldiers in Buell's army were wild with anger at what they considered his misguided leniency in dealing with southern sympathizers. Aroused by the condemnations of Buell that they read in their newspapers, they could not be restrained by officers from seizing suspected "rebel" property.⁵² One bitter Republican warrior wrote in a newspaper letter:

This cannot last always. An American soldier is still an American citizen. If we have taken our lives in our hands, and come forth from our homes, our wives, and our children, to guard the property and hold sacred the persons of open and avowed traitors, the thing had better be hid from us.⁵³

Such widespread protests prompted Iowa's Senator James W. Grimes solemnly to warn the West Point generals that they

⁴⁷ *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. XVI, pt. 1, pp. 641-2.

⁴⁸ Albin Schoepf to Joseph Holt, December 30, 1861, *Holt Papers*.

⁴⁹ *New York Tribune*, July 28, 1862, St. Louis correspondence.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, August 2, 1862, Washington correspondence.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, September 26, 1862, army correspondence.

⁵² *O. R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. XVI, pt. 1, 107, 541, 639-40; A. H. Stokes to Joseph Holt, November 17, 1862, *Holt Papers*.

⁵³ Letter in *Cincinnati Gazette*, quoted in *New York Tribune*, August 8, 1862. See also the *New York Tribune*, June 14, 1862, p. 1, November 4, 1862, p. 8, for similar complaints about General McDowell.

could not treat citizen soldiers as mere automatons, that “the performance of no unsoldierly duty should be required of them that would be calculated to impair their self-respect, diminish their regard for their officers, incite them to rebel against discipline, or taint their reputations at home.”⁵⁴

Republican and Democratic soldiers expressed their political views on slavery and related issues in campfire discussions, letters to the press, and formal resolutions adopted by regiments and brigades. Republican newspapers carried frequent accounts by army correspondents of soldiers demanding that the government adopt an emancipation policy and frequent letters from soldiers advocating abolition.⁵⁵ Indiana troops in the West passed resolutions denouncing the activities of the Peace Democrats in the legislature of that state.⁵⁶ Democratic soldiers disseminated their political convictions by the same media as Republicans. In the Democratic journals there appeared reports by correspondents describing the opposition of soldiers to emancipation and Negro equality and soldier letters condemning abolition. The greatest outburst of Democratic soldier opinion came after the passage of the Second Confiscation Act in July, 1862, which authorized the employment of Negro troops, and the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Many Democrats, officers and privates, declared they had taken up arms to save the Union and they would not fight to elevate Negroes. Among the officers there was a great deal of talk about resigning their commissions.⁵⁷ A flood of protesting letters appeared in the press.⁵⁸ Some Iowa regiments stationed in Mississippi adopted a resolution denouncing emancipation as a war aim. According to a press account, when their leaders read the

⁵⁴ William Salter, *The Life of James W. Grimes: Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; A Senator of the United States, 1859-1869* (New York, 1876), 185.

⁵⁵ Samples of such accounts are in *New York Tribune*, May 6, 1862, letter of an army correspondent; *ibid.*, May 22, p. 8, army correspondence from Fredericksburg; *ibid.*, June 4, p. 5, letter of a soldier; *ibid.*, September 1, p. 2, correspondence from Buell's army.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, January 24, 1863, correspondence from Rosecrans' army.

⁵⁷ J. R. Adams, *Memorial and Letters*, 93; Taylor, *Gouverneur Kemble Warren*, 90-91; B. F. Stevenson, *Letters from the Army* (Cincinnati, 1884), 190; *Indianapolis Journal*, quoted in *Detroit Free Press*, January 31, 1863.

⁵⁸ Letters from *Providence Post*, in *ibid.*, January 22, 1863; letters from *Concord Patriot* and *Hartford Times*, *ibid.*, January 29, 1863.

resolution to the men, "they pulled off their hats, and gave it three cheers. Not a dissenting voice was heard. Some of the officers looked pretty black, but they dared say nothing."⁵⁹ Soldiers from southern Illinois, a strong Democratic section, were reported to have mutinied when they heard about the Emancipation Proclamation and to have deserted in large numbers.⁶⁰ Henry J. Raymond, editor of the *New York Times*, found an interesting example of Democratic soldier opinion in Burnside's army. Certain New Jersey regiments stated that they did not want to fight any more because their state had just elected a Peace Democrat to the United States Senate; this showed New Jersey was opposed to the Republican war aims and hence her troops should not participate in a Republican war.⁶¹

The Republican and Democratic party organizations labored vigorously to spread their political doctrines among the soldiers. This was done partly to garner soldier votes in elections, but more because the politicians wanted to have the allegiance of the armies. With it they could command respect from their opponents with veiled threats of what their soldiers would do in the event a certain measure or program was or was not enacted; without it they felt frightened and wondered if the opposition would use the army against them. The parties distributed their propaganda to the armies mainly through the media of newspapers and Congressional documents. Republicans bitterly charged that the West Point Democratic generals tried to prevent the circulation of Republican papers in the camps, while encouraging the men to read Democratic journals.⁶² The demoralization in the armies of Burnside and Buell was ascribed by Republicans to the influence of Democratic papers sent to the soldiers.⁶³ The situation in the Army of the Potomac was so

⁵⁹ *Chicago Times*, March 24, 1863.

⁶⁰ *Cincinnati Commercial* and *Louisville Journal*, quoted in *New York Tribune*, January 21, 1863.

⁶¹ "Excerpts from the Journal of Henry Raymond," *Scribner's Monthly*, XIX, 421.

⁶² *New York Tribune*, September 29, 1862; diary of Congressman William P. Cutler, January 21, 1863, quoted in Julia Perkins Cutler, *Life and Times of Ephraim Cutler with Biographical Sketches of Jervis Cutler and William Parker Cutler* (Cincinnati, 1890), 298 [hereafter cited as *Cutler Life*].

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 298; *New York Tribune*, January 19, 1863, Army of Potomac correspondence; J. L. Miner to John Sherman, February 7, 1863, *Sherman Papers*; Lucius

desperate that the Republicans resolved to inaugurate a counter-propaganda offensive. The Congressional leaders met in Washington and canvassed ways of getting more Republican papers into the hands of the men and of stopping the circulation of Democratic ones. This was followed by a government order prohibiting the sending of "disloyal" journals to the soldiers.⁶⁴ Congressional documents, mostly pamphlet reproductions of speeches, were sent to the armies in large numbers throughout the war. A zealous Republican worker suggested to Senator Lyman Trumbull in 1862 a plan to distribute such propaganda: "I have in my office a list of all the regiments in the state [Illinois] and in fact of the whole army of the West. I will be happy to give you any aid in my power to circulate Congressional matter among our soldiers."⁶⁵ Another laborer reported in 1864: "The Cong. Com. got me to chase the army down with campaign documents. . . . I went into it, and have distributed nearly a million of documents, nearly all to the army from Maine to Louisiana."⁶⁶ Not a little propaganda was disseminated by officers in speeches and letters to the press. Sometimes officers sought promotion on the grounds that they could preach the creed of their party more effectively with a higher rank. "I have learned by experience, much, very much, for good or evil, depends upon the character, example and teachings of our generals," wrote a Republican colonel who aspired to be a brigadier.⁶⁷ "Everybody can depend upon my preaching and practicing abolition wherever I go," exclaimed another eager Republican volunteer officer.⁶⁸

The Republicans worried more about the political complexion of the armies than did the Democrats. The Republicans were the

Fairchild to Mrs. Fairchild, January 13, 1863, *Fairchild Papers*, Library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

⁶⁴ *Cutler Life*, 303; *Detroit Free Press*, February 16, 1863, Washington correspondence; *New York World*, February 16, 1863.

⁶⁵ D. S. Leinegan to Trumbull, December 3, 1862, *Trumbull Papers*.

⁶⁶ George T. Brown to *id.*, November 5, 1864, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Thomas G. Allen to *id.*, December 15, 1862, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Colonel Samuel Merrill to Mrs. Merrill, August 24, 1862, A. T. Volwiler (ed.), "Letters from a Civil War Officer," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Detroit), XIV, 1928, p. 509. See letter from General David Hunter advocating emancipation, in *New York Tribune*, August 14, 1862, p. 5, and a political speech by General Lew Wallace urging the use of Negro soldiers, *ibid.*, p. 2.

dominant party, but they were not certain that they represented a safe and stable majority of the northern people. They feared a revolutionary movement to overthrow their power, particularly one headed by the army. Several times in the war they became genuinely alarmed by the apparent danger of such a movement developing. In September, 1862, Senator Trumbull wrote to Senator Grimes to ask if McClellan would try to raise the standard of Democratic revolt and to rally the armies behind him. Grimes replied that McClellan lacked the courage to attempt this, but suggested a scheme to counteract him if he did. This was to get a Republican general placed at the head of the western army and to strengthen the size of that army. If the eastern army essayed a *coup*, hurl the western troops against it.⁶⁹ General John M. Palmer, a radical Republican leader in Illinois before the war, advanced a similar plan to Trumbull: "Let our present army be made efficient, consolidate the radical regiments and be careful in doing so to retain only loyal incorruptible officers. . . ." ⁷⁰ The picture of two great armies, one Republican and the other Democratic, meeting in bloody conflict to decide the political mastery of the country is one to frighten a lover of democracy. Certainly the result would have been the destruction of American democratic government.

The threat of a military uprising to overthrow the civil government gnawed at the minds of some of the politicians, but the threat never materialized. Possibly this was because no bold, imaginative general, who had the makings of a dictator, appeared, or because the generals who talked about the need for a military dictatorship failed to win battles and hence could not command a following. The best explanation is that the citizen armies, dangerously infected with politics as they were, would not have permitted a military *coup d'état*. The astute student of public opinion in the White House was not worried by the political activities of his soldiers. Early in 1863, after Fredericksburg, there were rumors that the army would depose Lincoln and set up a military dictator, with Joseph Hooker or Benjamin F. Butler in the role of strong man. At this point Lincoln named Hooker to the command of the Army of the Potomac. To the new

⁶⁹ James W. Grimes to Lyman Trumbull, October 6, 1862, *Trumbull Papers*.

⁷⁰ Palmer to *id.*, December 19, 1862, *ibid.*

commander, Lincoln wrote: "I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the government needed a dictator. . . . Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."⁷¹

⁷¹ Abraham Lincoln to Joseph Hooker, January 26, 1863, John G. Nicolay and John Hay (eds.), *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (12 vols., New York, 1905), VIII, 207.