

Lincoln's Divided Legion:

Emancipation and the Political Culture of the Army of the Potomac, 1861-1865

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Introduction

The idea of refusing any citizen the right to vote seems contemptible today, doubly so if those refused the vote are soldiers, the men and women entrusted with defending the very rights of their fellow citizens. But from 1861 to 1864, at the height of the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of Union soldiers were ineligible to vote in the eyes of numerous state legislatures – ineligible, it was claimed, on the technicality of not *residing* in the state because they were off fighting against secession and slavery on southern battlefields. The politicians who pushed this view were Democrats, who in the 1860s were the conservative opponents to President Abraham Lincoln and his Republican Party’s more radical policy of waging hard war on the slaveholding Confederacy. Some of these politicians, and even some conservative generals, suspected that the army would support the president if allowed to vote, and they hoped that refusing soldiers the vote would subdue partisan activity in the army. As this project makes clear, however, soldiers did not need to vote to express their ideologies.¹

Purpose of the Study

For a generation of historians in the mid-twentieth century, the prevailing interpretation was that Union soldiers were relatively apolitical. That understanding started to crumble in the 1980s and 1990s as historians sifted soldiers’ private letters and diaries and discovered mature opinions on the crucial matters of policy that characterized the conflict – especially emancipation and the draft, which both went into effect in early 1863. My project builds on this new

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¹ On soldier voting during the Civil War, see Josiah H. Benton, *Voting in the Field: A Forgotten Chapter of the Civil War* (Boston: Privately Published, 1915), and Jonathan White, *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

understanding. My purpose is to examine the partisan divide among northern soldiers by using as a microcosm the Union's largest field army of the war, the Army of the Potomac, which squared off against Robert E. Lee in most of the famous battles of the war's Eastern Theater. To understand the role of partisanship in the army, I interpret the effects of political behavior among generals, junior officers, and enlisted men in the Army of the Potomac, as well as articulate the effects their activity had on the national stage.²

In the broadest sense, my dissertation argues that the war was a political education for the citizen-soldiers who donned blue uniforms in a war that saved the Union and freed four million slaves. Through political activism, they transcended their early disenfranchisement and pushed the national dialogue by supporting Lincoln and emancipation, and by defining loyalty in a time of war. In the army, soldiers debated politics around campfires, railed against each other at headquarters, wrote letters to the editors of newspapers across the nation, and organized political protests to show support or contempt for leading politicians of the day. By 1864, most state legislatures had relented on the soldier vote and allowed absentee canvassing, but only because a popular general named George B. McClellan, who had previously led the Army of the Potomac, agreed to run for president on the Democratic ticket.³

² Typifying the apolitical narrative was Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952). Subsequent reevaluations of soldier ideology include Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Soldiers in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (New York: New York University Press, 1985); James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); and White, *Emancipation, The Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln*. McPherson and Manning in particular observe Union soldiers who came to embrace emancipation as a moral good on par with the restoration of the Union, while Gallagher and White caution historians not to overstate radicalism in the Union Army.

³ Other valuable discussions of this phenomenon include Timothy Orr, "'A Viler Enemy in Our Rear': Pennsylvania Soldiers Confront the North's Antiwar Movement," in Aaron Sheehan-Dean, ed., *The View from the Ground: The Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 171-198; and John J. Hennessy, "Evangelizing for Union: The Army of the Potomac, Its Enemies at Home, and a New Solidarity," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, vol. 4, no. 4 (December 2014), 533-558.

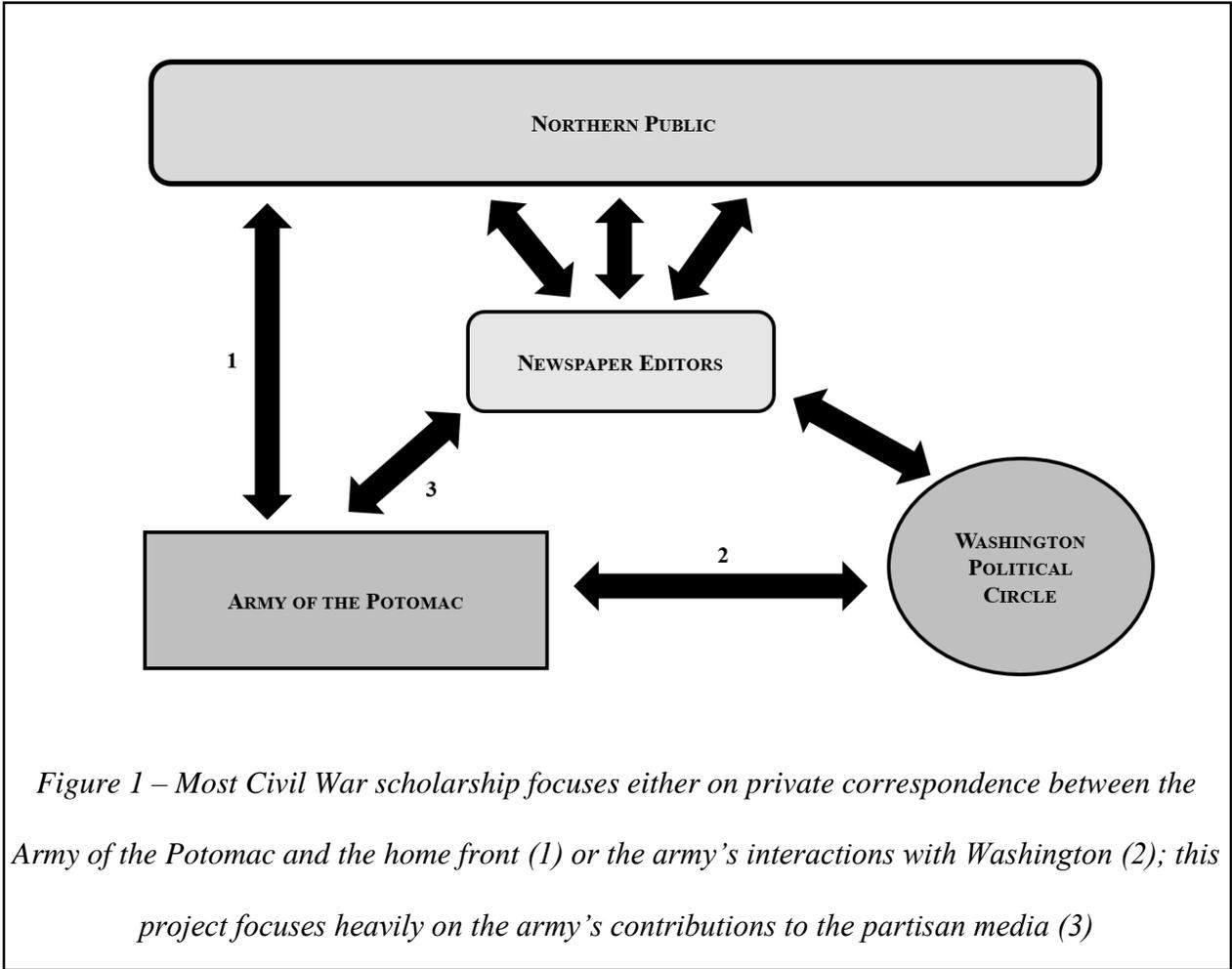
Research Method

A characteristic of the Army of the Potomac soon apparent after embarking on this project was that certain units tended to coalesce around distinctive political ideologies, whether those be conservative, moderate, or radical. In identifying these qualities, *conservative* can be defined as those opposed to emancipation who tended to assert devotion to the Constitution as the highest moral end. These men supported Democrats almost without exception. *Moderates* were those pragmatists who believed restoring the Union was paramount and emancipation was simply a means to this end. *Radicals* were men who believed ending the scourge of slavery was most important, and they identified opposition to Lincoln's policies with an affront to slave humanity. Several indicators of unit ideology exploited in the research method have helped to obtain a clear snapshot of the army's political composition along these lines.⁴

The first indicator is one that historians have undervalued. In the 1860s, practically all newspapers had clear partisan commitments. Citizen-soldiers in the Union Army recognized this fact and saturated these newspapers with commentary on the war – conservative, moderate, and radical. They wrote opinion pieces that called on citizens to support the war, even in its most unpopular moments, and beseeched countrymen to resist the siren call of peace negotiations.

⁴ I arrived at these definitions after seeing such language repeatedly in soldiers' letters and accounts. My understanding of Civil War partisan politics is informed especially by Joel H. Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860-1868* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977); Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jennifer Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Mark Neely, *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

These editorials publicized the soldiers' divisive attitudes. One young infantryman castigating his Democratic father sent a copy of his letter to the small newspaper in his Pennsylvania hometown. "If I again hear of [your politics]," he seethed, "I shall openly disown you, and not recognize you as a father or a relation."⁵



In engaging with the mass media in this fashion, soldiers influenced what sociologists call the “public sphere,” a phrase popularized by Jürgen Habermas to mean the arena of opinion-forming discourse that influences politics. For soldiers, writing to newspapers was a *substitute* for voting. Whereas most Civil War scholars have dealt with the question of the Union Army

⁵ “Don’t You Wish the Soldiers Could Vote, O Ye Copperheads? Is This Thunder?,” *Wellsboro Agitator*, September 30, 1863.

and its politics by poring over soldiers' private correspondence to the home front or analyzing direct military interactions with leading figures in Washington, this project pays special attention to the print media as an avenue of ideological expression for average soldiers.⁶

Another new resource offers a second indicator of unit and soldier ideology. By the middle of the war, the president and radicals in Congress had authorized new regiments for the Union Army composed of free African Americans and escaped slaves, units known as the United States Colored Troops. To lead these new regiments, white soldiers from the Union Army applied for officer positions. In downtown Philadelphia, Republican Party elites operated an "officer candidate school" to teach white enlisted men how to train and lead African Americans. While researching on a grant from the Mershon Center, I discovered the roster of that school, including a listing of over a thousand white soldiers, their original white regiments in the Army of the Potomac, and their educational and occupational backgrounds. As a result, this project's analysis of political culture utilizes a tabulation of those regiments that contributed the most soldiers to lead the USCT project. These men held an importance in the army's political story far beyond their small number because they put political rhetoric into action, and they were therefore a lightning rod for praise and criticism among the white soldiers they left behind.⁷

⁶ On the application of Habermas' theories to early American politics, see John L. Brooke, "Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historians," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Summer 1998), 47. Some historians have dismissed newspapers sources from the mid-nineteenth century as unhelpful in elucidating the political culture of everyday Americans because the papers were so virulently partisan. My project aims to resuscitate the reputation of these sources by showing the dramatic extent to which soldiers used them in pushing the national dialogue, and this effort follows a reevaluation of newspapers' utility for historians found in Mark Neely, *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

⁷ Abraham Barker Collection on the Philadelphia Free Military School, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. On the general subject of white officers in the United States Colored Troops, see Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

The final indicator of unit ideology comes from army voting patterns, which historians again have yet to utilize as substantially as they might. Although many states forbade soldiers at the front from voting until 1864, others, such as Wisconsin, still allowed it. Important congressional and gubernatorial elections in 1862 and 1863 left behind a substantial paper trail of soldier voting activity among such regiments. Other outfits, forbidden from actually casting ballots, nonetheless held “straw polls” and published the results. Finally, by 1864, all soldiers could vote in the presidential election and had to choose between Abraham Lincoln and their former commander George McClellan. Regiments usually reported their voting tabulations to army headquarters, transcriptions of which survive in official report volumes. In addition, many units proudly sent their results home to local and statewide newspapers for readers on the Northern home front to see.

Findings

The findings have been fruitful for elucidating political culture. The research method makes it relatively straightforward to identify the units where radical, moderate, and conservative voices tended to cluster. So, for instance, the 69th Pennsylvania regiment was practically unanimous in its rejection of the radical view for the war, while the 7th Ohio embraced full-throated abolitionist rhetoric during its year with the Army of the Potomac. An obvious question, then, is, why did certain units espouse one ideology or another? Before anything else, an analysis of political culture must of course take into account the backgrounds of the men involved. To use the previous example, then, the 69th Pennsylvania was a predominantly Irish Catholic and working class regiment from Philadelphia, a background which predisposed its ranks to a hearty suspicion of emancipation. In contrast, the 7th Ohio was college-educated,

overwhelmingly Protestant, and primed for reforming attitudes because its soldiers came from households in the heavily Republican Western Reserve.

Background and upbringing provided a means to filter wartime experiences but could still only account for part of the story in understanding political culture. The sight of slavery firsthand in war-torn Virginia influenced many who had never considered themselves radical. An officer in the 121st New York observed this phenomenon in his ranks by mid-1863: “Since we returned to Virginia after the Battle of Gettysburg, the soldiers have all got to be abolitionists – those who used to blow about black Republicans are the most radical abolitionists.” And a revulsion to Democratic lawmakers who pushed for the disenfranchisement of soldiers animated many of those remaining who may have harbored suspicions toward emancipation and radical policies. As a member of the 12th New Jersey observed in 1864, his regiment had come from Democratic backgrounds but soon embraced the Republicans, “the men having been changed by their experiences in the field, and especially by the refusal of the Democratic Party in this state to allow them to vote.”⁸

Most soldiers did not enter the army as ideologues, and many who did reach mature political views during the war did not do so entirely on their own. This dissertation helps break new ground by highlighting how deftly officers channeled their soldiers’ experiences into a cohesive pro-Republican ideology. In short, they indoctrinated their men, swiftly and successfully. So the most protracted conflict within the army was a struggle for the upper hand in this process of indoctrination, between general officers at the top of the command chain who

⁸ Joseph Kidder, quoted in Salvatore G. Cilella, Jr., *Upton’s Regulars: The 121st New York Infantry in the Civil War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 217; “Sentiments of the Twelfth Regiment,” *Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, New Jersey), October 18, 1864.

supported their beloved commander George McClellan and his Democratic views, and young Republican junior officers below who wished to push the tenets of radicalism.

This struggle tipped in favor of the radicals after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in early 1863, when on the northern home front a peace faction of the Democrat Party emerged to criticize the war effort in its entirety. These Democrats, "Copperheads" as they were called, assailed emancipation and the new national draft then taking hold across the north. The soldiers seethed, and Republican officers jumped at the chance to mobilize support in their ranks for the administration. To demonstrate their new devotion to the Republicans, hundreds of these officers gathered to draft official resolutions denouncing the Democrats. The commanders then assembled their regiments on parade and read the political manifestos, calling on all those in favor to shout or step forward in affirmation. Some soldiers resisted vehemently (an important story on its own), but the vast majority cheered the resolutions and endorsed them publicly. These soldiers, allies of the Republican Party, believed the army was the new conscience of the nation, and they flooded newspapers with rhetoric that portrayed anti-Republican protesters as disloyal and even Satanic. This project has tracked down fifty of these documents published in state and national papers from the camps of the Army of the Potomac, and each must have seemed to readers more violent than the last. As the soldiers of the 3rd Pennsylvania Reserves put it, "the only right we grant to traitors [like the Democrats] is the right to die."

Conservative generals at army headquarters refused to let their Republican counterparts in the ranks paint all Democrats with the Copperhead brush. In the autumn of 1863, after several hard months of campaigning in the wake of the army's spring anti-Copperhead crusade, a circle of Democrats at army headquarters attempted to resuscitate reverence for the old commander McClellan, long since shelved by President Lincoln. They recommended that every soldier in

the army contribute a certain amount toward the purchase of a grand trophy sword for McClellan to be engraved with the esteem of those whom he used to command. Republicans in the ranks quickly informed influential party figures in Washington as well as the radical press, and a civil-military scandal erupted. Two regiments in particular, the 60th New York and 119th Pennsylvania, lodged public complaints against the “McClellan Testimonial” project and accused the army’s Democrats of flirting with treason. Such attacks gained fuel when McClellan publicly endorsed the opponent of popular Republican Governor Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania. The episode demonstrated a dramatic departure from the previous hero worship that characterized the army’s reverence for its once-proud chief.⁹

This Republican resurgence within the army during the tumultuous middle year of the conflict propelled troops to accept emancipation and ultimately support Lincoln over their old general in the 1864 election. So the result of this research is a dissertation which tracks the process by which citizen soldiers embraced the most radical political measures in American history while simultaneously rejecting a general they had once adored.¹⁰

Implications

This project promises to help turn the history of the Civil War in a new direction, one that emphasizes the power of soldier ideology by looking beyond traditional barometers of political behavior. Significant works in the field have yet to mine through these many documents to track down the extent of the passionate partisanship which bled into the very fabric of the Union

⁹ “The Testimonial to General McClellan,” *Cleveland Morning Leader*, October 5, 1863; “The McClellan Testimonial,” *Philadelphia Press*, September 30, 1863.

¹⁰ “The Patriotism of the Soldiers,” *Philadelphia Press*, April 18, 1863.

citizen-army as deeply as battle wounds did. Spurred on by their officers and armed with firsthand sights of the slaveholding Confederacy, these soldiers debated with passion and frequently assailed their political opponents in the public eye. Their story speaks not just to the pressing matters of civil-military relations, such as the political role of a citizen-army in a republic or the duties of an officer entrusted with authority. It also speaks to the power of ideology and partisan conflict within an organization. And perhaps most of all, the blistering attacks by Union soldiers in northern newspapers exemplify how vitriolic the national political culture even within the North had become by the height of the Civil War.

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