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AMERICAN PACIFISTS: THE PECULIAR BREED

by

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Following President Carter's State of the Union address of 23 January 1980, there was a noticeable resurgence of popular morale. The "post-Vietnam" malaise appeared to be ending, and drawing that "line in the dust" of southwestern Asia in front of the Russian tank-treads drew widespread approval. However, a call for draft registration in the same speech summoned quite a different emotion, one which, in the past, was never far from the surface. If the hawks among us found a new lease on life, our doves resumed a fluttering seldom heard since the Vietnam War faded into history.

To the student of war, it all seemed familiar. During anti-war demonstrations of the 1960's there had been at first a tendency in American public life to regard this phenomenon as something new in the national experience. Red-blooded American youths employed legal subterfuges (graduate study, for example) to evade the draft. And when such dodges no longer worked, "moral" objections to serving in the rice paddies suddenly began to come to the surface—then it was off for Sweden or Canada. Highly visible Americans began finding nice things to say about our enemies but vilified our allies as undemocratic or immoral. Here and there a clergyman, impressed by the moral urges welling up in our draft-age young, purveyed pacifistic sounding oratory in the hope of becoming "relevant."

As the years went by, the dominant hostility to "peaceniks" softened, but even

among the more forgiving there persisted a residual feeling that this behavior had been somehow un-American, signaling a deterioration of our national fiber and heralding the age of a round-rumped, effete America. And evidence abounds that the enemies of the United States have since grown bolder while friends have lost heart and striven to improve their credit with more long-standing opponents of "Yankee Imperialists."

True enough, aiding and giving comfort to the enemy in wartime is a heinous offense against conventional value systems in this age of nationalism, but it is nothing short of cavalier to brand draft resistance or anti-war activism as un-American. For those with a developed sense of history, the American experience simply gives the lie to those who paint wartime dissidence as something our people "just don't do." Our national independence itself we owe to a zealous minority unintimidated by either the British military establishment or a complaisant and often hostile majority, and it is too easy to forget that Pennsylvania farmers made big money by happily victualing the English occupation forces while in their midst our hallowed heroes starved at Valley Forge. It is easy to overlook the self-serving hostility of New England to the war effort of 1812, her threats of secession or nullification, and the Hartford Convention's characterization of Massachusetts and her sisters as "confederate entities."¹

Our national epic, the Civil War, revealed many of our salient traits in bold

and occasionally unflattering relief. True to their impatient nature, men of the North and South looked to one climactic encounter to settle it all and return everyone to the business of living. Bull Run came and went not once but twice, and still the combat dragged on interminably. That dismaying development in its turn produced the fruits of frustration: disillusionment, weariness of spirit, disaffection, half-meant protestations of objectively "treasonable" sentiments, and "skedaddle rangers" taking off for Canada to avoid conscription or social pressure to enlist. Every such feeling—and its reaction—came to maturity in the national elections of 1864.

As the electoral process began, it appeared that Abraham Lincoln had become virtually friendless. The war effort was seemingly at a dead end. Copperheads, Confederates, and "Peace Democrats" were lusting to see Old Abe whipped out, and his "War Democrat" allies were disinclined to grieve overmuch at his impending departure. Even within his own party, grown unwilling to use the name Republican indiscriminately, there was developing serious hostility to a second term for the Great Emancipator. Led by the likes of Missouri's Senator B. Gratz Brown and the magnificent orator Wendell Phillips, the bitter-end Radical wing of the Administration's party held its own convention in May at Cleveland, Ohio to nominate one of its own, John C. Frémont.²

The main body of the Republicans, discreetly billing itself the Union Party, assembled at Baltimore early in June and summoned Americans to rally around the Grand Old Flag. The delegates renominated Lincoln, but to cultivate the War Democrats they chose as his running mate Governor Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, a grim War Democrat foe of the "slavocracy." The platform was, considering the clientele for which it was devised, well calculated to avoid offense, while still providing for the realization of emancipation, restoration of the Union, and liberal benefits for soldiers and their dependents.³

The Democrats were in no hurry to rush things, being unwilling to face too quickly

their internal problems. As diagnosed by the President, "They must nominate a war candidate on a peace platform, or a peace candidate on a war platform, and I don't much care which they do." Be that as it may, Lincoln had to face a crisis in his own ranks on the heels of his Baltimore triumph. Senator Ben Wade of Ohio and Congressman Henry Winter Davis of Maryland pushed through Congress a stringent Reconstruction program for the postwar South, a plan they knew perfectly well would rub the more tolerant President the wrong way. However, instead of openly bearding the radical allies, whose ferocity he deplored though holding their motives to be pure, Lincoln quietly killed their measure with a pocket veto. This did not prevent his critics from setting up a chant about "rats leaving the sinking ship" when Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase resigned, nor did the President's low profile prevent a "Dump Lincoln" movement from gaining strength in Republican ranks as the summer progressed.⁴

Politics makes strange bedfellows, and no collection was ever stranger than the coalition of pacifists and militants joining hands to "denominate" Lincoln that summer. Neither the Radical Senator Wade nor the alternately hawkish and dovish editor of *The New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, could stand Lincoln's method of war-making. "I firmly believe," Greeley whined

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to the President, "that, were the election to take place tomorrow, the Democratic majority in this state and Pennsylvania would amount to 100,000, and that we should lose Connecticut also. Now if the Rebellion can be crushed before November, it will do to go on; if not, we are rushing on certain ruin." The peace movement gained ground so rapidly that even Lincoln was swept up in the prevailing mood, penning a despairing memorandum of 23 August expressing his fear of inevitable defeat, after which "it will be my duty so to co-operate with the President-elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards."⁵

Scores of editors representing a broad spectrum of Copperhead and Peace Democrat elements in the North built up a drum-fire of calumny and insinuation, protesting that only the sadistic and blood-crazed Lincoln stood between a heartsick and war-weary people and the "benisons of blessed peace." The *New York Daily News* declared in August, "The Black Republican thirst for blood appears to have brutalized all the better feelings of the people." In September, condemning the presidential call for 500,000 volunteers, the same paper decried Lincoln's "cravings" for "five hundred thousand more to be torn from their peaceful homes, from the arms of their wives and children, who will be left without protectors, to beg or starve, or search for daily bread in the abodes of vice." Few Copperhead journalists could match the maudlin hatefulness of the LaCrosse, Wisconsin *Democrat's* Marcus M. "Brick" Pomeroy: "There are more orphans in the land than negroes in the South, but war must go on according to the abolition plan, till ruin, bankruptcy, and starvation welcome us all with emaciated fingers to pauper graves."⁶

For what were the peace marchers asking? "Negotiations." Negotiations for what? For a convention or conference of the states to agree on a plan for peaceful reconstruction of the Union more or less "as it was." But William G. Carleton has sagely asked what these people were prepared to do

if their demands proved unrealistic: "What if the Confederacy spurned such negotiations? What if a national convention . . . failed to reach an agreement? Most Peace Democrats refused to face these questions. But some faced them squarely, and these . . . talked of a Northwestern or Western Confederacy that would establish friendly relations with the Southern Confederacy and reach accords that would keep open the Mississippi River." The obvious answer to secession, apparently, was simply more secession.⁷

True to their timeless nature, the pacifists of 1864 clutched eagerly at anything faintly resembling a chance for negotiations, and in their frenzy they continually nagged the President to help them in chasing each will-o'-the-wisp beckoning on the horizon. In early July a friend of Greeley's, encountering one G. N. Sanders of Kentucky in Ontario, wrote Greeley in immodest haste that the Confederates must be ready for peace—and for heaven's sake, tell Mr. Lincoln. That Greeley did, venturing to remind him that "our bleeding, bankrupt, and almost dying country also longs for peace, shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, of further wholesale devastations, and of new rivers of blood. And a widespread conviction that the government and its . . . supporters are not anxious for peace . . . is doing great harm."

Abe played his hand coolly, promising to meet authorized agents of Jefferson Davis anywhere, anytime. Also, he promptly appointed Greeley as his special emissary to go to Ontario and ascertain the authenticity of this latest alleged peace feeler. Greeley, although he coyly obscured this impression in his own account, was flabbergasted. He had just wanted to complain from the sidelines, not get into the action and bear any responsibility. However, he recovered his composure and took off for Canada, only to learn what the Emancipator already suspected. Nobody up there was speaking for Davis. Two more attempts to smoke out a Confederate willingness to parley bore no better fruit than Greeley's mission. But this hardly dismayed the peace-marchers; they merely backed off and started peace "negotiations" with themselves, at Peoria

and Springfield in Illinois, Cincinnati, and elsewhere.⁸

When the Democrats held their convention in Chicago at the end of August, they grasped the horns of the dilemma Lincoln had foreseen. With platform preparation dominated by the Copperhead Clement Vallandigham, they wrote a peace plan calling for "an ultimate convention of the States, or other practicable means to the end that peace may be restored on the basis of the federal Union of the States." And then they nominated Major General George B. McClellan, a War Democrat of sorts, who was unable to endorse the peace plank or disavow it either. Still, with the war effort a "demonstrable failure," the party seemed to have an advantage as it headed into the fall campaigning.

Almost at once McClellan's political offensive began to flounder, as had so generally been the case with his military campaigns. First there came the news of Admiral David G. Farragut's bravado at Mobile, and his success in locking up that Gulf port for the duration. Then came the ultimate bombshell, Sherman's capture of Atlanta. Suddenly the complexion of events changed, and in a matter of weeks the "Dump Lincoln" movement developed vertigo, keeled over, and tumbled into the dust bin of history. Even Fremont threw in the towel before voting started. The bitter end for the pacifists of 1864 came on 8 November, with the electoral landslide that partially obscured the narrow margin of popular votes by which the Administration was sustained.⁹

If Lincoln's victory took the heart out of his domestic enemies, it had the same effect on Confederate stalwarts. The Lieutenant General of the Union armies, speaking at his headquarters in City Point, Virginia on 13 September, revealed that Confederate deserters were reporting widening defeatism behind their lines, and U. S. Grant went further to suggest that the prospect of peace talks "after the elections" was propping up what remained of the Southern war spirit. A maximum Union effort now, he concluded, would forestall "the shedding of blood to an

immense degree." And testimonials are ample that the Confederate desertion rate skyrocketed as the news of the election's outcome penetrated the Southland.¹⁰

Twentieth-century enemies of the United States, whatever the occasion of their rancor, would ill-serve themselves by investing heavily in the stock of our native "pacifist" rhetoric, however. Certain it is that, after a fashion, we are a nation of pacifists, but of a peculiar variety that might better be called "anti-war populists." True, there are in America strains of pacifism that have developed out of philosophical or religious roots, but little in these can be considered peculiarly American. Historically, however, a vast amount of what has passed for pacifist thought generated here has been strongly circumstantial, produced by emotional strains of war-weariness, disillusionment with old friends and allies, fond hopes, hankerings for "economy in government," or an enervating urge to avoid personal peril or inconvenience. Not long ago John P. Roche painted a memorable picture of "firehouse pacifists" of 1939 who wanted no part of "pulling England's chestnuts out of the fire," but who were soon hell-bent on shouldering arms when the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. As it had been with Horace Greeley, so it was later with Woodrow Wilson and many another high-minded American. The "rugged idealist" by his pacific mien courted affronts, only to be converted by those affronts into a raging militant lusting for vengeance. Indeed, one peace advocate of 1864 went so far as to oppose gun-control editorially, snarling at Federal authorities that it was "none of their business why law-abiding citizens were keeping firearms." When the warrior and the pacifist inhabit the same body, as is so predominantly the case in America, the prudent enemy will handle that body circumspectly.¹¹

At a White House serenade two days after his reelection, Lincoln predicted, "In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak, and as

strong; as silly and as wise; as bad and good. Let us, therefore, study the incidents of this as philosophy to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be avenged.”¹²

Father Abraham, so soon to belong to the ages, spoke prophetically to his children unto the latest generations.

NOTES

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2. Noah Brooks, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: G. P. Putnam's and Sons, 1925), pp. 397-98.
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4. Brooks, p. 396; William E. Parrish, *Turbulent Partnership* (Columbia, Missouri: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1963), p. 166.
5. James G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*

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6. Klement, pp. 235ff.
7. Kirkland, p. 76; Randall, p. 616; Irwin Unger, ed., *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 269.
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9. Carl R. Fish, *The American Civil War* (New York: Longman's, Green, 1937), pp. 346-55.
10. Wood Gray, *The Hidden Civil War: The Story of the Copperheads* (New York: Viking, 1942), pp. 170-88, 193-94; National Historical Society, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: GPO, 1880-1901), Series I, XLIII, Part II, pp. 1143, 1258; Part III, p. 1213.
11. Gray, p. 198; *TV Guide*, 5 July 1975, A-32; Edward S. Johnston, *The Infantry Journal* (May-June 1937), pp. 281-82.
12. Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VIII, ed. Roy B. Basler (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1953), 100-01.

