

# "The Conservative": A Civil War Soldier's Musical Condemnation of Illinois Copperheads

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Of all the arts, music was the most important to Civil War-era Americans. Nearly all of their songs sentimentally celebrated home as the repository of values and virtue. One of the few exceptions, however, was "The Conservative," written by Aden E. Cherington, a soldier from Christian County, Illinois. His was an angry lyric that targeted the element of Northern society that opposed the war, the Democratic Copperheads. Cherington wrote his lines in the early months of 1863, the high point of midwestern copperheadism. After the debacle at Fredericksburg in December of 1862, a Northern victory appeared increasingly unlikely and defeatism swept much of the North. The Lincoln administration's policies—especially regarding civil liberties, conscription, and emancipation—alienated many conservatives and added fuel to what the President called the "fire in the rear." The problem became particularly acute in Illinois, where a House of Representatives dominated by Democrats called for an ar-

mistice, demanded peace negotiations, and generally obstructed Republican policies in Springfield and Washington.<sup>1</sup>

Defeatism and dwindling morale inevitably spilled over into midwestern army units. Peace Democrats took special pains to feed the fire of dissatisfaction at the front. Newspapers and letters from home branded the war as little more than an abolitionist plot. As a result, many officers resigned their commissions, and some enlisted men slipped away from their posts. Desertion occurred for a myriad reasons, but reports of disaffection at home were one major cause.<sup>2</sup> James M. Holmes of the 107th Illinois Infantry, for example, wrote from Kentucky in February of 1863, "Many *very many* are deserting from this cause—particularly the Kentuckians, and if there is not an effective blow struck very [soon] Ill. boys will follow their example—some are already doing it in our regiment."<sup>3</sup>

Most Northern soldiers, however, reserved a special, bitter hatred for the peace advo-

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<sup>1</sup>Charles P. Roland, *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), pp. 209–10, 226–27; Wood Gray, *The Hidden Civil War: The Story of the Copperheads* (New York: Viking, 1942); Frank L. Klement, *The Copperheads in the Middle*

*West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Charles H. Coleman, "The Use of the Term 'Copperhead' During the Civil War," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 25 (1938), 263–64; J. C. McBride, *Past and Present of Christian County, Illinois* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1904), pp. 109–10. For Lincoln's quotation, see Charles Sumner to Francis Lieber, in Edward L. Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner* (London: Sampson, Low, Marsten, and Co., 1893), IV, 114. Apparently one of the enrolling officers misspelled the name as Cherington, and many of the military records use that spelling.

<sup>2</sup>Klement, pp. 51–52, 75; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 595; Bob Sterling, "Discouragement, Weariness, and War Politics," *Illinois Historical Journal*, 82 (1989), 239–62.

<sup>3</sup>Holmes to Lodge, Feb. 6, 1863, William E. Lodge Collection, Illinois Historical Survey, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. All Lodge letters cited are in the Lodge Collection.

cates back home, sometimes regarding them as more of a threat to the Union than the Rebels. At the very least, they considered the Copperheads cowards eager to avoid combat. At worst, they were traitors actively working to aid the rebellion. Cherington's strident words in "The Conservative" illustrated that mind-set.<sup>4</sup>

Cherington enlisted at Bloomington in Company D of the Sixty-third Illinois Infantry. That unit organized in December of 1861 at Camp Dubois near Anna, Illinois, and mustered into service on April 10, 1862. Ordered first to Cairo, the regiment advanced by November to La Grange, Tennessee. In January, 1863, the unit joined the First Division of the Seventeenth Army Corps, composing part of General Ulysses S. Grant's force in central Mississippi. From January to May, Company D remained in La Grange except for a brief raid across the Mississippi River to burn Hopefield, Arkansas, in retaliation for a guerrilla attack on a Federal boat.<sup>5</sup>

During that tedious encampment at La Grange, Cherington composed "The Conservative." Although it is uncertain, the particular catalyst for the corporal's exercise was most likely William E. Lodge, an attorney and prominent Democrat in Monticello, Illinois.

Born in Ohio like Cherington, Lodge—the son of a storekeeper—grew up in Paris, Illinois. He read law with a local law firm before settling in Monticello in 1859, where he entered into a partnership with attorney Hamilton C. McComas. When the war began, McComas joined the army and left the practice to his young partner. Lodge spent the duration of the war safely in Piatt County.<sup>6</sup>

Legal matters apparently left Lodge enough free time to quench other ambitions. One was journalism. Early in 1862, he and James M. Holmes acquired the *Piatt County Democrat*, which they renamed the *Piatt County Conservative*. In August, when Holmes enlisted in the 107th Illinois, Lodge began to exercise sole control over the newspaper.<sup>7</sup>

Like many other newspapers, the *Piatt County Conservative* found its way to the local boys at the front. There, opinions of the *Conservative* varied. William Lodge's older brother George, a lieutenant in the Fifty-third Illinois Infantry, was not pleased with the new enterprise. Noting that his brigade commander had praised William as "a lawyer of fine promise," George Lodge counseled, "If I were you I would not spend my time editing a one horse paper, for by doing so you *must* neglect your profession; and

<sup>4</sup>Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 218–23; David Wallace Adams, "Illinois Soldiers and the Emancipation Proclamation," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 67 (1974), 407–21.

<sup>5</sup>For Aden E. Cherington's military record, see Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers, Illinois Sixty-third Volunteer Infantry, Co. D., Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917, Record Group 94, National Archives; *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois* (Springfield: Phillips Bros., 1901), IV, 297–98, 313; Vicksburg Military Park Commission, *Illinois at Vicksburg* (Chicago: Blakely, 1907), p. 228; Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines, Iowa: Dyer, 1908), pp. 518, 1074–75; E. B. Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861–1865* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971),

p. 321.

<sup>6</sup>For biographical information about Lodge, see Francis M. Shonkwiler, *History of Piatt County*, in Newton Bateman and Paul Selby, eds., *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois* (Chicago: Munsell, 1917), II, 767; Charles McIntosh, ed., *Past and Present of Piatt County, Illinois* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1903), pp. 128–33; and Emma C. Piatt, *History of Piatt County* (Chicago: Shepard & Johnson, 1883), p. 300. For McComas and Lodge, see McComas to Lodge, Nov. 29, 1862. Lodge considered raising a company in 1862 but never followed through (Samuel A. Lodge to Lodge, July 23, 1862).

<sup>7</sup>Holmes to Lodge, Feb. 6, 1862; *Illinois Adjutant General's Report* (1900 ed.), VI, 35. Franklin William Scott, *Newspapers and Periodicals of Illinois, 1815–1879* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1910), p. 246 does not list Holmes as an owner.

your future as a Lawyer's of vastly more consequence than any thing you can gain by conducting such a paper." William, however, ignored his brother's advice. In the issue of December 2, 1863, William Lodge's name alone appeared as editor and proprietor, but advertisements for his law firm continued to appeal for "all kinds of Soldier's Claims, Bounty Money, Arrears of Pay, Pensions &c."<sup>8</sup>

Other soldiers, however, appreciated the newspaper more than did George Lodge. Many sent letters for publication.<sup>9</sup> John A. Anderson of the Fifty-third Illinois wrote from La Grange, "I shall be very glad to get your paper so as to hear what the people are doing in old Piatt."<sup>10</sup> Lieutenant Jonas Jones and Private Allen Heath of Company D, Seventy-third Illinois Infantry, commented:

By some means unknown to us your valued paper of issue August 12th found its way to our Camp, and you may imagine that it was a welcome visitor. by reading it carefully we formed an opinion of what was going on in and around *Old Monticello*. In order that we may keep posted, we will inclose one Dollar for which you please send us your good paper weekly.<sup>11</sup>

Jones and Heath evidently did not find the paper's Democratic political orientation disloyal to the war effort, for the new subscribers of the "good paper" were virulently anti-Copperhead. Heath asked Lodge in a postscript to tell friends back home that Jones and he "are death on Copperheads wherever [we] find them and are in favor of the administration and the enforcing [of] the laws."<sup>12</sup>

Other readers saw the *Piatt County Conservative* in quite a different light. In November, 1862, Congressman John R. Eden—a prominent antiadministration Democrat from Moultrie County—had opposed Lincoln's emancipation policies in a speech that Lodge favorably reported. Late in 1863 Eden wrote Lodge from Washington thanking him for issues of the newspaper and noting that he always read the *Conservative* "with interest." Niceties concluded, Eden

proceeded to lambast the "fanatics" responsible for "the miserable policy" of the administration, "which I fear will end in the total ruin of the country."<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, only eleven issues of the Lodge-edited newspaper survive, making it difficult for historians to put the *Conservative* in its proper place on the spectrum of politics. The issues that remain, however, demonstrate that Lodge was no Copperhead. Echoing Lincoln, the masthead of his newspaper proclaimed: "Independent in All Things, Neutral in Nothing!—United We Stand, Divided We Fall." Throughout 1862 and 1863, the paper encouraged recruiting, condemned Peace Democrats as "traitors," ran editorial battles with Copperhead publications, and vowed to support Lincoln as long as he remained true to the conservative sentiments expressed before his election. The *Conservative* cheered Union successes in the field, and even endorsed emancipation and the enlistment of black soldiers as a way to win the war.<sup>14</sup>

Lodge, however, supported the Emancipation Proclamation only as a war measure and clearly was not comfortable with its larger ramifications. That was the breaking

<sup>8</sup>George R. Lodge to Lodge, Nov. 14, 1862. In July, 1863, George Lodge was captured by Confederates near Jackson, Mississippi. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner, primarily in the infamous Libby Prison at Richmond, Virginia. For excerpts from his diary, see Roger Tusken, "In the Bastile of the Rebels," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 56 (1963), 316-39. For the advertisement, see the *Conservative*, April 13, 1864.

<sup>9</sup>J. M. Coleman to Lodge, June 30, 1863.

<sup>10</sup>Anderson to Lodge, Nov. 14, 1862.

<sup>11</sup>Jones and Heath to Lodge, Aug. 26, 1863.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Eden to Lodge, Dec. 24, 1863; *Piatt County Conservative*, Oct. 29, 1862, p. 2, cols. 3-4; Arthur Charles Cole, *The Era of the Civil War, 1848-1870*, Centennial History of Illinois, Vol. 3 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1922), pp. 299, 307, 411.

<sup>14</sup>The summary is based on the eleven surviving wartime issues of the newspaper, dated May 14, June 25, Aug. 6, Oct. 8, Oct. 29, 1862, and Feb. 4, March 4, April 15, Dec. 2, 1863, and April 13, 20, 1864, microfilm in Illinois State Historical Library, a division of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Springfield.

point between the editor and those more radical. Freely admitting that he was "no friend" of abolitionists, Lodge judged the general effect of the proclamation "unfortunate." He condemned its radical supporters in Washington as "reckless," and went on to pronounce the Thirty-seventh Congress one of the worst in American history. He also began to worry that the radicals were winning Lincoln over to their views. Not surprisingly, Lodge warmly praised Democratic presidential hopeful George McClellan.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, only with reservations did Lodge support the administration and the war effort. Clearly, his lukewarm endorsement was not good enough for soldiers such as Aden Cherington. To him, anything less than blanket support of the administration reeked of cowardice and copperheadism. Evidently, Cherington was moved enough to write "The Conservative." Because Lodge's newspaper circulated among units camped with Cherington's Sixty-third, he would have had access to it. That in itself does not necessarily prove that the author aimed his barbs at Lodge. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even if Cherington was not responding to Lodge, one of the corporal's friends, Private Charles Smith of the Sixty-third, quickly made the connection and submitted the

<sup>15</sup>See especially the *Piatt County Conservative*, June 25 (p. 1, col. 5, p. 2, cols. 1-3), Oct. 8 (p. 2, col. 1), 1862, and Feb. 4 (p. 2, col. 1), March 4 (p. 2, cols. 2-3), 1863.

<sup>16</sup>Smith to Lodge, April 8, 1863. The alternative interpretation, of course, is that Smith submitted Cherington's verse without any intended jab at Lodge. Common sense suggests, however, that one would not submit a composition attacking and threatening "conservatives" to a newspaper called the *Conservative* without a good dose of irony.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Clement L. Vallandigham, a former Democratic representative from Ohio, was the best known of the Peace Democrats. Arrested in May, 1863, for disloyalty, Vallandigham was sentenced to prison by a military commission. An embarrassed Lincoln commuted the sentence to banishment and sent him south. Vallandigham soon made his way to Canada, where he waged a campaign for the Ohio governor's chair. The standard life of Vallandigham is Frank L. Klement, *The Limits of Dissent: Clement L. Vallandigham and the Civil War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970).

verse to Lodge. Along with the verse, Smith sent a note that can be read as a thinly veiled dare:

MR EDITOR

I take the present opportunity to send you a song composed by a corporal belonging to our company. And as it is hard on northern traitors I thought perhaps you would print it. and as i volunteered in the good old county of Piatt & I also understand that there are copperheads through out the county I would send you a hymn that would let traitors no what the soldiers Intend to do When the rebels are cleaned out.<sup>16</sup>

What Lodge then read was Aden E. Cherington's "The Conservative," set to a traditional tune:<sup>17</sup>

### The Conservative

Come citizens and soldiers and hear a little song  
If you will give attention I'll not detain you long  
Tis of Blackhearted traitors who in the north do  
live  
They say they love their country, but are  
"conservative"  
They say they hate the rebels but there we know  
they lie  
Ask them to help us fight them they will begin to  
cry  
You want to free the negroes and with us let  
them live  
I always was a democrat I am "conservative"  
Our good old flag of liberty they say they love it  
well  
But oh. those abolitionists they wish they were in  
H—ll  
They love the constitution under which they live  
Ask them to help maintain it they are "conserva-  
tive"  
Old abe a proclamation as president did write  
Which made these old conservatives begin to  
feel like fight  
Why should we take from rebels the means by  
which they live  
They swear they cannot stand it the're "conserva-  
tive"  
Tis of Vallaninghamers<sup>18</sup> and Brightights<sup>19</sup> I well  
know  
Conservatives are made up who for these traitors  
go  
For tell them of good democrats who in the  
army are  
They never were conservative these KGC's<sup>20</sup>  
swear

Now to these northern traitors I have a word to  
 say  
 When through with southern rebels we're  
 coming home to stay  
 We'll not forget past favors when to the polls we  
 go  
 This party called conservative we soon will  
 overthrow  
 We'll shove you out of office you know it will be  
 right  
 We'll put men in your places who for our flag  
 did fight  
 Then in our good old union in peace we'll try to  
 live  
 We ne'er will poll a vote for one who cried  
 "conservative"

'Twas at the town of Springfield all in our good  
 old state  
 The copperheads assembled to try to legislate  
 They spent their time in drinking and trying to  
 sustain  
 The cause of southern rebels but all their work  
 was vain  
 They asked old abram to stop hostilities a while  
 But to them he did answer as usual with a smile  
 Your friends are going under I see it very plain  
 I think I know my duty so give your selves no  
 pain<sup>21</sup>

They tried hard to discourage the soldiers in the  
 field  
 They surely had forgotten we neer to traitors  
 yield  
 We soon will settle Davis and his Rebellious crew  
 And then we will come home and see what we  
 can do for you

You copperheads and butternuts<sup>22</sup> take warning  
 now in time  
 Just gather up your traps and leave for some far  
 distant clime  
 For if when we return back home we find you in  
 our good old state  
 To swing upon a hempen rope will surely be  
 your fate

Unfortunately, there is no evidence that Lodge printed the composition in his newspaper. He did keep it, however, still folded in the original envelope. In the years that followed, Lodge did not "swing upon a hempen rope." Rather, he married into the prominent Piatt family and became one of the county's leading citizens. Until his death

in 1903, Lodge remained active as an attorney, real estate dealer, lender, and Democratic party orator. He died a wealthy man.<sup>23</sup>

Aden Cherington, meanwhile, reenlisted at Huntsville, Alabama, in January of 1864, but the war ended before that term expired, and on July 4, 1865, he was commissioned a second lieutenant. He was not mustered under that rank, however. Cherington left the army on July 13, giving a small town in Minnesota as his forwarding address.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Senator Jesse D. Bright, a New York-born Democrat, was the most powerful politician in Indiana in the 1850s. Bright was known as a strong supporter of the South. He owned land and slaves in neighboring Kentucky and was a close friend of Jefferson Davis. It is not surprising that Northerners questioned his loyalty after the war began. In Feb., 1862, Bright was expelled from the Senate, ostensibly for spending so much time in Kentucky that he no longer qualified as an Indiana resident. See Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau and Indiana Historical Society, 1965), pp. 9, 42, 56, 115.

<sup>20</sup>The Knights of the Golden Circle, founded in the 1850s by Virginian George W. L. Bickley, aimed to spread slavery into Mexico, the West Indies, and Central America, with the goal of establishing new slave states. In fact, the organization was little more than a fantasy, but its perceived existence during the war years exerted a strong force in Northern politics. At the height of the Copperhead movement, a Red Scare-like hysteria swept the North. Many Northerners anticipated an uprising of thousands of KGC members and responded with mass arrests of suspected conspirators. See Frank L. Klement, *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup>Meeting from Jan. 5 to Feb. 14, 1863, the Illinois House passed resolutions denouncing Federal war policies and urging an armistice, and also sent anti-Lincoln Democrat William A. Richardson to the United States Senate. The legislature adjourned until June, and when it reconvened, Governor Richard Yates prorogued it before bills could be passed (Cole, pp. 298-99, and Klement, *Copperheads*, pp. 58-65).

<sup>22</sup>"Butternuts" in this context refers to those citizens of midwestern states with southern origins. Southern ways and attitudes persisted among residents of southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Strongly Democratic, butternuts were linked to shadowy conspiratorial groups like the KGC. See McPherson, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup>Shonkwiler, p. 767; McIntosh, pp. 128-33; Piatt, p. 300.

<sup>24</sup>Administrative Files on Civil War Companies and Regiments, Record Group 301.18, and Muster and Description Rolls, Record Group 301.20, both in Illinois State Archives, Springfield.