

## COPPERHEADS

UCGA – Vol XX – No. 3 – Fall 1995

Copperheads, a name applied during the Civil War to members of the Democratic Party in the Northern states who violently opposed the prosecution of the war. They were also known as Peace Democrats. They were not necessarily in sympathy with the South, but held that the Confederacy could never be conquered, and that the attempt to coerce the seceding states was hopeless and illegal. The name was generally indicative to treacherous character and is thought to have been derived from the copperhead snake which habitually strikes without warning. Another explanation of the name is that it came from the head of the goddess of liberty cut out of a copper cent and worn as a button by the opponents of the war. The Copperhead's greatest strength was in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. The most prominent of them was Clement L. Vallandigham.

The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

### Copperheads

In the American Civil War, a reproachful term for those Northerners sympathetic to the South, mostly Democrats outspoken in their opposition to the Lincoln administration. They were especially strong in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, where Clement L. Vallandigham was their leader. The Knights of the Golden Circle was a Copperhead secret society. The term was often applied indiscriminately to all Democrats who opposed the administration. It afforded an opportunity for impugning the loyalty of those who opposed Lincoln's policies, either military or civil (e.g., the suspension of habeas corpus), and it was not until years after the Civil War that the Democratic party succeeded in living down the association.

See W. Gray, *The Hidden Civil War* (1942); F. L. Klement, *The Copperheads in the Middle West* (1960).

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### Vallandigham, Clement Laird

(vln'dghm'', -gm'') (KEY) , 1820–71, American political leader, leader of the Copperheads in the Civil War, b. New Lisbon (now Lisbon), Ohio. He became (1842) a lawyer, was elected to the Ohio legislature (1845, 1846), and was editor (1847–49) of the *Dayton Empire*, a Democratic weekly. A strong upholder of states' rights, Vallandigham was a U.S. Representative from 1858 to 1863, being defeated for reelection in 1862. On May 1, 1863, in a political speech at Mt. Vernon, Ohio, he declared, among other things, that the Civil War was being fought not to save the Union but to free the blacks and enslave the whites. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, then commanding the Dept. of the Ohio, accused him of violating "General Order No. 38," which threatened punishment for those

declaring sympathy for the enemy, and Vallandigham was arrested, court-martialed, and sentenced to imprisonment for the rest of the war. President Lincoln commuted the sentence to banishment behind Confederate lines. The Peace Democrats of Ohio nevertheless nominated (July, 1863) Vallandigham for governor, but he was defeated by John Brough. He made his way from the Confederacy to Canada, and from there he returned to the United States and was allowed to go unmolested. In the presidential campaign of 1864, the Democratic platform, representing his views, demanded immediate cessation of hostilities. Made commander of the Sons of Liberty (see Knights of the Golden Circle), he was the most prominent of the Copperheads. After the war he was an unsuccessful aspirant to Congress.

See biography by his brother, J. L. Vallandigham (1872, repr. 1972); study by F. L. Klement (1970).

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### Knights of the Golden Circle

Secret order of Southern sympathizers in the North during the Civil War. Its members were known as Copperheads. Dr. George W. L. Bickley, a Virginian who had moved to Ohio, organized the first "castle," or local branch, in Cincinnati in 1854 and soon took the order to the South, where it was enthusiastically received. Its principal object was to provide a force to colonize the northern part of Mexico and thus extend proslavery interests, and the Knights became especially active in Texas. Secession and the outbreak of the Civil War prompted a shift in its aims from filibustering in Mexico to support of the new Southern government. Appealing to the South's friends in the North, particularly in areas that were suffering economic dislocation, the order soon spread to Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri. Its membership in these states, where it became strongest, was largely composed of Peace Democrats, who felt that the Civil War was a mistake and that the increasing power of the federal government was leading toward tyranny. They did not, however, at this time engage in any treasonable activity. In late 1863 the Knights of the Golden Circle was reorganized as the Order of American Knights and again, early in 1864, as the Order of the Sons of Liberty, with Clement L. Vallandigham, most prominent of the Copperheads, as its supreme commander. Only a minority of its membership was radical enough—in some localities—to discourage enlistments, resist the draft, and shield deserters. Numerous peace meetings were held. A few extreme agitators, some of them encouraged by Southern money, talked of a revolt in the Old Northwest, which, if brought about, would end the war. Southern newspapers wishfully reported stories of widespread disaffection, and John Hunt Morgan's raid (1863) into Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio was undertaken in the expectation that the disaffected element would rally to his standard. Gov. Oliver P. Morton of Indiana and Gen. Henry B. Carrington effectively curbed the Sons of Liberty in that state in the fall of 1864. With mounting Union victories late in 1864, the order's agitation for a negotiated peace lost appeal, and it soon dissolved.

See G. F. Milton, *Abraham Lincoln and the Fifth Column* (1942, repr. 1962); R. O. Curry, *A House Divided* (1964).

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