

# Union and Confederate Politics

By Dr. Michael Todd Landis, Tarleton State University

2. The goal of the **Confederate States of America** was clear: a new, **independent nation based on deep racial and class inequalities**. **“Our new government,”** declared rebel **Vice President Alexander Stephens** of Georgia in **March 1861**, **“rests upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man.”**

18. Conversely, **Copperheads**, whose name was coined by the Cincinnati Commercial in 1861 and **referred to the poisonous snake**, were virulently anti-war. They **constituted a near majority of Northern Democrats by the end of 1861** and demanded an immediate cessation of hostilities and return to the antebellum status-quo; **their motto** intoned, **“The Constitution as it is, and the Union as it was.”** They argued that secession was legal and that the Republicans were the unconstitutional aggressors. **(New York Mayor Fernando Wood even advocated the secession of his own city!)** **Copperheads were also militant white supremacists and believed strongly in the virtues of slavery.** In October 1861, for instance, **the Democratic paper** Weekly Day Book (New York) changed its name to **The Caucasian, proclaimed** across its masthead that **“White Men Must Rule America,”** and **announced its goal was to defend slavery and defeat Republicans.**<sup>8</sup> **Democrats, observed Dickinson,** **“are the mainsprings of this murderous rebellion,** by promoting strife at home, and they give its chief aliment and life and hope and endurance. **They have been, by a common consent, designated as Copperheads, and no name could be more appropriate.”**<sup>9</sup>

19. Democrat Samuel Cox of Ohio claimed that Republicans were “fanatics” who were “conducting an abolition crusade, - a war of conquest, of subjugation, and constitutional amendment, by force of arms.” This, along with white supremacy, became a central, unifying theme for Democrats..

21. When, in September 1862, Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Copperheads and War Democrats instantly united under a single anti-emancipation banner. Democrats, employed fear tactics to exploit Northern racism. They claimed “Black Republican” leaders were part negro, warned of an impending race war between blood-thirsty former slaves and innocent whites, and asserted that freed blacks would steal white jobs. Anti-black poems, songs, posters, newspaper cartoons, and pamphlets were widely distributed, leading to anti-black riots throughout the North.

Republicans argued that the best way to win the war was to free the slaves, but Democrats labored to shift the campaign away from Union and on to racial fears, aiming to arouse public passions.

22. Northern Democrats denounced emancipation as racial suicide and federal tyranny. Democratic victories of 1862 had proven the effectiveness of race-baiting, but not the popularity of Democratic policies.

23. Race would continue to play a central role in Northern politics, particularly after the federal government began recruiting black soldiers (made possible by the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863). Once again, Northern Democrats were in furious opposition, worried that arming black troops would lead to racial equality. In January and February 1863, intense debates raged in Congress over the issue. **“This is a Government of white men,”** declared Democrat Chilton White of Ohio, **“made by white men for white men, to be administered, protected, defended, and maintained by white men.”** Unable to stop the recruitment of black soldiers, Democrats worked to influence public opinion. To educate the public on the dangers of emancipation, leading Democrats gathered in New York City in February 1863 to establish the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge. This partisan committee would disseminate white supremacy propaganda and see to the publication of anti-Republican diatribes. 12

24. the passage of the Conscription Act in March 1863, which potentially touched the lives of every white man between twenty and forty-five and his family. Democrats also painted the issue as one of class and race, claiming (falsely) that immigrants bore the brunt of conscription and that hard-working white men were being sent against their will to die for “niggers.” If Democrats could build on their 1862 campaigns and whip voters into a racial frenzy, they could possibly oust Lincoln in 1864. To this end, Democratic partisans incited anti-draft riots and anti-black mobs. In Holmes County, Ohio, for instance, a group of protesters stoned a conscription officer. When a marshal arrived a week later to arrest the assailants, he too was assaulted and forced at gunpoint give up his prisoners. Likewise, three conscription agents were murdered in Indiana. Even more famously, riots erupted in Manhattan in July 1863. A lethal combination of a large immigrant population and a powerful Democratic organization resulted in four days of murder, looting, and destruction. Most of the violence, it is worth noting, was directed not at federal agents but at innocent blacks. The New York City riots inspired Democrats in other cities to take to the streets in militant protest.

25. **Democrats** declared Lincoln a despot and **used their network of newspapers, journals, and public speakers to whip-up public anger**. The most famous battle over civil liberties starred the **boisterous pro-slavery** firebrand from Ohio, **Clement Laird Vallandigham**. Determined **to stem the spread of Copperhead poison**, commander of the Department of the Ohio Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside issued **General Order No. 38 on April 13, 1863**. The order stated that **any person committing treasonous acts would be arrested, tried by military court, and punished by death or banishment**. On cue, **Vallandigham's supporters** took to the streets and went wild with **protest**, even **burning down the building housing Dayton's Republican newspaper**.

26. United States victories in the summer of 1863, most notably at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, put **Democrats** on the ropes. In key races in Ohio and Pennsylvania, Democrats found their criticisms of the Lincoln administration falling on deaf ears. **In desperation, they** mimicked their previous strategy and focused on emancipation as the real crisis. Campaign committees **sent propaganda letters to soldiers claiming their jobs at home would be taken by free blacks, and they fabricated tales of "Negro Outrages," where blacks attacked innocent white women and girls**. On the whole, however, Northerners had come to accept emancipation as a central war aim and were, **by the fall of 1863, impressed with the performance of black troops**. With this shift in public opinion, **Republicans could run confident, optimistic campaigns, a stark contrast to the doom-and-gloom of the Democrats**. Thus, Republicans won significant victories in Congressional, state, and local elections, especially since soldiers could now vote via absentee ballot.

28. **The** real test of **Republican** strength came with the **proposed Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution**, which would **abolish “involuntary servitude.”** The amendment was anathema to **Democrats** both morally and politically, and they **fought it ferociously in Congress.**

31. Revelations of Copperhead plots further eroded Democratic strength, and **Democrats once again turned to their most effective weapon—racism.** Both War **Democrats** and Copperheads railed against emancipation, black troops, and the Thirteenth Amendment. Partisan papers **claimed** the Lincoln administration was implementing a secret “miscegenation” program, **that Republicans aimed at total racial equality, that Lincoln himself was negro (“Abraham Africanus the First,” they dubbed him), and that “filthy black niggers” were attacking white women.** **Grotesque cartoons, racist propaganda, and pamphlets describing the horrors that would be committed by black men on white girls were widely disseminated.**

**Lincoln’s murder by** a rebel sympathizer on April 14 raised Northern suspicions about **Democrats**, who had **made plain their visceral hatred of “The Great Emancipator.”** But **Lincoln’s successor, Democrat and virulent white supremacist Andrew Johnson of Tennessee**, quickly revived the party. Johnson’s Reconstruction policies in the summer of 1865, before the new Congress convened, **put Democrats back in power, returned African-Americans to virtual slavery, and allowed rebel leaders to keep their authority—exactly what Northern Democrats had hoped for, and exactly what Republicans had fought the war to prevent.**