2013

Charles S. Wainwright: The Development of Loyal Dissent from 1861-1865

J.J. Beck ’13
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe

Part of the United States History Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Available at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe/vol3/iss1/5

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.
Charles S. Wainwright: The Development of Loyal Dissent from 1861-1865

Abstract
Charles S Wainwright had participated in all three days of battle at Gettysburg. He witnessed his close friend and compatriot General Reynolds struck down on the first day. On July 5th, 1863, Wainwright traveled to what would later be known as Pickett’s Charge. Upon seeing the battlefield scattered with the bodies of the dead and smelling the stench of bloat, he lamented: “There was about an acre or so of ground here where you could not walk without stepping over the bodies, and I saw perhaps a dozen cases where they were heaped [sic] one on top of the other”. Two months after the Battle of Gettysburg, Wainwright reflected on those fateful days in July and the causes of this “vile” war. Sitting in his tent near the Culpeper Courthouse on the Rappahannock, Wainwright attempted to understand how abolition had come to dominate the Union war aims and why so many men had perished for the freedom of blacks. The radicals of Congress, Wainwright wrote, “did not want to see the Union restored without the abolition of slavery”. He believed that abolition was a stance taken by a select few “who had negro on the brain”. Wainwright was bitter that his men and others had died for those he believed to be inferior to the white race. He was positive that President Lincoln had been heavily influenced by the Radical abolitionists. This was, according to Wainwright, a calculated plan to win over the masses of the Union and coerce them into favoring emancipation. Tirades against African Americans and the Lincoln Administration came to dominate his thought. Believing that Lincoln was no longer waging war just for the Union, Wainwright became conflicted. His representation of racial stereotypes and changing purpose of his diary revealed a simmering anger towards the Lincoln Administration and African Americans, yet he continued to fight for the Union. Forced into continued service by the cultural paradigms of Victorianism, Wainwright put his life in peril for a cause that no longer aligned with his political values. Wainwright clung to battle because resigning was not a choice. Cowardice and desertion were unforgiveable offenses that hurt not only the man but his family as well. Apart from this, Wainwright’s attachment to his duty and role as a head of household necessitated his continued participation in the war. Yet, despite his anger with the war, Wainwright fought valiantly. [excerpt]

Keywords
Charles Wainwright, loyal dissent, Army of the Potomac, War Democrat, Democratic Party, New York, Emancipation Proclamation
Charles S. Wainwright: The Development of Loyal Dissent from 1861-1865

J.J. Beck
Academic Essay

Charles S Wainwright had participated in all three days of battle at Gettysburg. He witnessed his close friend and compatriot General Reynolds struck down on the first day. On July 5th, 1863, Wainwright traveled to what would later be known as Pickett’s Charge. Upon seeing the battlefield scattered with the bodies of the dead and smelling the stench of bloat, he lamented: “There was about an acre or so of ground here where you could not walk without stepping over the bodies, and I saw perhaps a dozen cases where they were heaped [sic] one on top of the other”.50

Two months after the Battle of Gettysburg, Wainwright reflected on those fateful days in July and the causes of this “vile” war. Sitting in his tent near the Culpeper Courthouse on the Rappahannock, Wainwright attempted to understand how abolition had come to dominate the Union war aims and why so many men had perished for the freedom of blacks. The radicals of Congress, Wainwright wrote, “did not want to see the Union restored without the abolition of slavery”.51 He believed that abolition was a stance taken by a select few “who had negro on the brain”.52 Wainwright was bitter that his men and others had died for those he believed to be inferior to the white race. He was positive that President Lincoln had been heavily influenced by the Radical abolitionists. This was, according to Wainwright,

51 Ibid, 283.
52 Ibid.
a calculated plan to win over the masses of the Union and coerce them into favoring emancipation. Tirades against African Americans and the Lincoln Administration came to dominate his thought. Believing that Lincoln was no longer waging war just for the Union, Wainwright became conflicted. His representation of racial stereotypes and changing purpose of his diary revealed a simmering anger towards the Lincoln Administration and African Americans, yet he continued to fight for the Union. Forced into continued service by the cultural paradigms of Victorianism, Wainwright put his life in peril for a cause that no longer aligned with his political values. Wainwright clung to battle because resigning was not a choice. Cowardice and desertion were unforgiveable offenses that hurt not only the man but his family as well. Apart from this, Wainwright’s attachment to his duty and role as a head of household necessitated his continued participation in the war. Yet, despite his anger with the war, Wainwright fought valiantly.

A loyal dissenter held a complicated set of beliefs that evolved as political and military events shifted and changed. Wainwright’s displeasure with Lincoln and the Radicals was typical of any Democrat in 1861, but this displeasure matured into hatred after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Wainwright was representative of a larger trend of Democrats in the Army of the Northern Potomac. Democrats from Maine to Pennsylvania felt betrayed by the proclamation. The war had completely changed, and soldiers used Lincoln and African Americans as a target for their hardships. Good men were now dying for the freedom of individuals who they viewed as unworthy. In response to these feelings, Wainwright’s rhetoric mirrored other loyal dissenters. His language targeting Lincoln and the radicals became more spiteful after the Fall of 1862, and he began
to see the President as an abolitionist who was controlled by the Radicals. Wainwright’s discomfort with Radial Republican values translated to intense racism against African Americans.

The purpose of Charles Wainwright’s diary deserves special attention. When he first enlisted, the diary was only to be used as a way to recount memories of the war. Originally, the leather bound book would only be used to recount mundane events of his day. The army was at a standstill and as a result the diary entries served as way for Wainwright to reflect on the immediate events of that day. Reflections on personal beliefs or the future were markedly absence from these early entries. Included in these early pages were meetings, meals, and the state of his unit. Although a Democrat, commentaries on race and politics were initially scarce. Perhaps Wainwright’s ability to display and talk of his discontent with the president in the public sphere served as his outlet for political frustration. Wainwright still fully believed that the war was being fought for Union. “Union” had a specific definition in the 1860s, and in order to understand what this word meant to Wainwright, it must be deconstructed.

Loyalty and sacrifice to the Union were the hallmarks of a good Victorian soldier. Union is a word that has fallen out of use, but in the 1860s it evoked an emotional appeal to duty and patriotism. Gary Gallagher in *The Union War*, defined the term as an ideology essential to all Americans. The word represented a country that was united in its defense of democracy and destined for prominence on a world stage. In the mind of the common man, Union was proxy for linguistic, historical, and cultural factors that defined

---

the United States. By this token, the true historical Union these men were fighting for was steeped in revolutionary legacy. Union was synonymous with the great experiment the founding fathers embarked on in 1776. To fight for Union was to fight for the continuation of this legacy and this experiment.55

In his well-received work, *For Cause and Comrades*, James McPherson argued that the legacy of the American Revolution motivated men like Wainwright to arms. Fighting this war was the great test of his generation.56 McPherson argues that many soldiers were seeking to participate in the great crusade that would define their generation. The ancestry of the Revolutionary War pulled these men into the military ranks. McPherson believed that the men fought to show that they were worthy heirs to the legacy of the American Revolution. Wainwright left home to defend the experiment of democracy and the rule of law.57 He acted out of a need to prove his worth in the eyes of history. The United States represented a hope for the world: democracy not ruled by kings or oligarchs, but a country governed by the people where the ruler was subject to the demands of the populace. Wainwright’s Revolutionary heritage was a motivating factor in enlisting.

Although scarcely noted in his dairy, Wainwright’s home state of New York played a crucial role in creating and shaping his views of the Union. Dutchess county, New York, was steeped in the patriotic tradition.58 The men in this county were the progeny of the citizens who carried out

---

55 Ibid, 47.
57 Ibid.
the American Revolution. Wainwright’s grandfathers on his mother’s and father’s side participated in the war. As a result, he inherited membership to the Sons of the American Revolution, and this imbued Wainwright with a sense of duty that transcended state boundaries. Because of the familial ties to the Revolution, he fought for the Union that the forefathers had helped to free and keep whole. The urgency of the war was felt throughout the town. On the day Fort Sumter was attacked, Dutchess County began assembling money and men to send towards the war effort. This sense of immediacy helped define what Wainwright termed as political duty. To Wainwright specifically, the term duty originally meant “acting intelligently” in the face of adversity but this definition would change. Logically, if the town where Wainwright had spent all his life believed it patriotic, moral, and intelligent to fight for the Union, then Wainwright would adopt these principles readily. These values were not unique to New York, but rather they represented the Victorian values that dominated society.

Men throughout the Union were fighting for a moral imperative. At the forefront of thought was the ideal of the United States as a singular entity and the male as a courageous sufferer. The secession of the South had been an injustice to not only the Republic, but also to the memory of the heroes who fought in the American Revolution. This sense of injustice shaped the duty that permeated the male mind, especially the mind of Wainwright. This service was to be fulfilled courageously. The Victorian male championed stoic fighting for a noble cause. In this war, Wainwright

59 Ibid.
60 Charles Wainwright, A Diary of Battle, xxi.
61 Ibid.
62 Charles Wainwright, A Diary of Battle, 193.
63 Ibid.
viewed fighting for the Union as the noblest cause, and suffering for this cause was to be a welcomed exaltation of duty.\textsuperscript{64} This stoicism in the face of death was characteristic of the Victorian culture that overshadowed society in the 1860s and scorned cowardice. Men who exhibited weak traits were cast out by their peers. Many soldiers deeply feared being perceived as cowardly. During the Civil War, the term coward became synonymous with being dishonorable, unpatriotic, and weak.\textsuperscript{65} Men considered cowards were ostracized from their unit and shamed. At Williamsburg, Wainwright would fulfill the Victorian stereotype of the courageousness in the face of battle.

Wainwright engaged in his first battle at Williamsburg in 1862. When reflecting on his first time under fire, Wainwright pondered why he had not felt fear or anxiety when he was shot at.\textsuperscript{66} He found that his pride overtook his fear and that upon “seeing the dead and wounded” he felt nothing but indifference.\textsuperscript{67} He acted in a cool calculated manner. When speaking of the dead, Wainwright stated, “I had no more feeling for him, than if he had tripped over a stump and fallen; nor do I think it would be different it had been my brother.”\textsuperscript{68} This anecdote works to explain his overall indifference to death on the battlefield. Fighting for the noble cause of Union also defined an important party line for the Democrats (soon to be War Democrats) of which Wainwright was a staunch supporter.

Wainwright’s own beliefs were heavily influenced by periodicals and Democratic party ideology. The culture of the Officer Corp in the Army

\textsuperscript{64} Frances M. Clarke, \textit{War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 12.
\textsuperscript{65} James M. McPherson, \textit{For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War} (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), 77.
\textsuperscript{66} Charles Wainwright, \textit{A Diary of Battle}, 56.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
of the Potomac revolved around political stances and literature. The officers read whatever periodical was available based upon their geographic location and political ideology. Wainwright was informed by the Democratic Party. He would define his political ideology through *The New York Times* and *New York Tribune*. He utilized these papers to give shape to his political ideology. For example, during the Peninsular Campaign, Wainwright stressed his impatience when waiting to receive the paper.\(^6\) The newspapers defined Wainwright’s political ideology and he was not able to divorce his own beliefs from those of the party.

Immediately after succession and into the first days of the war, the Democratic Party attempted to regain ideological stability by reformulating its policy. The new party line distanced the Northern Democrats from the Southern Democrats.\(^7\) These politicians believed the actions of the South were a declaration of war against democracy and majority rule.\(^8\) Similarly to Wainwright, the opinion of writers in *The New York Times* portrayed the South as creating an illegal and unnecessary war.\(^9\) These papers supported the call of men to war. Wainwright, while reading the *Baltimore Herald*, supported the large call for draftees in New York in 1862.\(^10\) He believed that this new round of drafting would “draw the most efficient and best men” to the Union cause.\(^11\) Wainwright found ideological comfort in these papers. They informed his political posturing and enabled him to command

---

70 For more on the reformulation of the Democratic Party in 1860 see Mark E. Neely’s *The Union Divided*.
73 Charles Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle*, 93.
74 Ibid.
a working knowledge of the upper echelons of command. Periodicals all had agendas and Wainwright bought into these agendas without question. This inability to separate reality and politics was shown specifically in his commentary on the John Fitz Porter Trial.

In 1863, Wainwright commented heavily on the court martial of McClellan’s right hand man, John-Fitz Porter. All of Wainwright’s knowledge of the case was read from Democratic periodicals. He believed that the court was purposely stacked against Porter. In the eyes of Wainwright, the trial was being used as a proxy to strike at McClellan. Believing this, he attributed the majority Republican tribunal to partisan motives, but these men were known not to rule along party lines. Even so, Wainwright ignored this commonly known fact. He believed that Republicans would rule along party lines and convict Porter, a Democrat, because of his party. This small instance in Wainwright’s diary represented a shift in the usage of written language. Wainwright was subtly commenting on the biased political proceedings of this trial. This also revealed that men relied heavily on the lines of their party to inform them of stances to take on key issues. Wainwright showed skepticism towards and even suspicion of Republicans. Porter was ruled guilty, but was later acquitted in 1879. Partisan rhetoric would continue to inform Wainwright’s political ideology throughout the war and affect how he operated within the army. This was a watershed moment in the purpose of Wainwright’s diary; for the first time it was being utilized as a reflective tool for Wainwright’s political beliefs. This shift set the stage for subtle racial critiques to begin surfacing in his writing.

75 Ibid, 161.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
Wainwright’s political ideology and the print cultural surrounding the War Democrats were mutually reinforcing. Political cartoons utilized by *The New York Herald* and *The New York Times* often likened Lincoln to a pompous Baboon. Wainwright seized this commentary and employed it within his diary.\(^78\) Although critical in nature, this does not constitute loyal dissent. Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, it was still considered appropriate to openly criticize President Lincoln’s policies on the war. In addition to this, Democrats both on the field and in office had no reason to believe that Lincoln was fighting for anything besides Union, law, and the constitution. Loyal dissent is defined by those in power. Lincoln produced a closed hegemonic relationship between himself and the Democrats. Dissent in society was therefore defined by the Republican Party line. Wainwright

---

\(^78\) Ibid, 109.
used explicit language when talking about the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Employing the word “good” or “just” was directly referring to the ideals of the Democratic Party and the opposites to the Republicans and African Americans.

Wainwright’s change in mess cooks was an excellent anecdote to explain how language portrayed his increasingly polarizing political and racial beliefs. Soldiers grew attachment to their cooks and Wainwright was no different. He had grown fond of his French cook. Throughout 1861 and 1862, Wainwright was happily served by the Frenchman, but, when he received a job at West Point, Wainwright was left with an African American cook named Ben. Preconceived notions of African American food affected Wainwright’s opinion on the matter. He believed it was repulsive and not fit for a white man to eat. Without even tasting the food, Wainwright had stated that “it is hard work coming down to nigger grease.” Wainwright was reflecting on more than just taste. He was using the food as a way to comment on racial stereotypes. Describing the Frenchman’s food as “really good” and “veritable artiste,” Wainwright was commenting on more than the cuisine. This food was western in nature. It fit the palate of a White middle class officer; Ben’s food, associated with decidedly negative abrasive adjectives, was below Wainwright. This subtly commentary revealed a good deal about Wainwright’s increasingly racial and stereotypical views. He further commented that by the end of the summer, his contraband had learned nothing of cooking. Wainwright’s use of the word “contraband” opens another avenue of linguistic analysis.

79 Ibid, 209.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
Contrabands had been a part of the Union war effort since the beginning, but Wainwright was silent about them in his diary until he was displeased with them. The term contraband meant the confiscation of goods during a time of war. Runaway slaves that were taken by Union and put to work as servants earned this title. However, the term contraband implied ownership, which reinforced the second class nature of these runaways. Men had trouble divorcing themselves from the racial prejudices that they were imbued with. Soldiers like Charles Brewster chose to fight these tendencies, but men like Wainwright embraced them more readily as the war continued.

An excellent example of the relationship between a contraband and a Union officer were the letters of Charles Brewster. Brewster believed in abolition and the civilizing process, but with this came a set of preconceived notions about African Americans. Brewster adopted the doctrine of equality, but in his letters he still insisted on calling his African American servant David a contraband. Although he was attempting to embrace abolitionist ideology, Brewster’s prejudice was still evident in his letters: “I have got a contraband though I believe I wrote you that before. He is quite smart for a nigger though he is quite slow”. Brewster continually held to the stereotype of blacks being mentally inferior, even though he believed that these people should be freed. Although not an abolitionist by any means, Wainwright shared similar views with Brewster on African Americans. Utilizing the term contraband more often, Wainwright’s diary was slowly becoming a

83 Ibid.
84 Charles Harvey Brewster, *When This Cruel War is Over*, ed. David W. Blight (Amherst, Ma: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 78.
85 Ibid, 81.
confessional for his dissatisfaction with African Americans at large. His displeasure with Ben was just one of many instances where Wainwright used racialized language as a proxy to attack the Lincoln administration. He transferred the mistakes and stereotypes of the contraband policy into critiques of Lincoln. This worked the opposite direction as well. Wainwright’s anger at Lincoln for his policies caused the implementation of racialized language against African Americans in his diary. Wainwright’s opinion of contrabands was a conduit to understanding his displeasure with the war. During the opening of the Peninsular Campaign, Wainwright seemed angered at the entrance of contrabands into the service of the Union: “Neither have we taken any prisoners, but lots of ‘contraband’, as runaway niggers are now called.”86 It is clear that Wainwright was unhappy with the amount of contrabands taken and the lack of Confederate prisoners. This was a war for Union, but when the army liberated slaves Wainwright felt the war aim was slowly being bastardized. Still, his views of race were scarcely mentioned in his diary before the Emancipation Proclamation. Post 1862, issues of race were discussed with more vibrant and intense language.

Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation Charles Wainwright wrote in his diary: “For one, I shall wish myself at home if the war is to be turned from its original purpose into an abolition crusade, and I believe most of the army have the same feeling.”87 This was the language of the War Democrats. It was politically and racially charged. Wainwright viewed the African Americans as a threat to the white working class hierarchy. Many Northern held similar sentiments. Abolition was not a moral question, but an

86 Charles Wainwright, A Diary of Battle, 32.
87 Ibid, 74.
economic one. In his study of the American working class, David Roediger commented on the complicated relationships between the white workers and slaves. The white working class was self-conscious of the terminology employed towards their socioeconomic condition. The term “servant” and “hireling” were close to the definition of slave. White workers did not want to be associated with the slaves because they believed them to be of a lower class. If abolition occurred, white workers were afraid of being considered in the same socioeconomic class as freed slaves. Although Wainwright was an officer and upper class farmer, he held these fears as well. At heart, he was a white supremacist and understood the troubles of the white working class. Wainwright’s anger towards the Proclamation was rooted in a deeper sense of racial awareness and superiority. The Proclamation had completely changed the aims of the war both at the individual and government level. Other men on the front echoed Wainwright’s frustration with the president. The meaning of the war had changed completely post 1862, and this changed the nature of Wainwright’s diary from a recounting of daily activities to his private confessional.

To this point the character of Wainwright has been developed extensively. He derived meaning for fighting from the patriotic character of his home in New York and from the War Democrat political platform. Retaining these values became more difficult as the war raged on. Wainwright lost many men under his command, but the death of General Reynolds of the Iron Brigade was a painful. Reynolds and Wainwright had been close friends throughout the campaign against the South. Reynolds was

89 Ibid, 49.
killed on the first day of battle at Gettysburg, and Wainwright witnessed his corpse being transported off the battlefield. Although he does not tangibly express sadness, he notes Reynolds’ death. Throughout his diary, Wainwright rarely mentions death or those whom he knew being killed. He makes explicit mention of Reynolds. Three months after his death, Wainwright continued to reflect on Reynolds. It was this death that called Wainwright’s fight for Union and patriotism into question. The diary becomes a place of struggle for Wainwright. He grappled with Victorian expectations of courage and his own political beliefs. What had Reynolds died for? Wainwright’s heart would tell him the Union, but his brain would tell him abolition. It was this dichotomy that deeply disturbed Wainwright. Questioning the deaths of comrades was not a part of the common discourse in the diary. These questions moved to the forefront of Wainwright’s mind and the lack of answers and understanding began to manifest itself in vibrant, prejudice diary entries.

Intense racial language was employed by Wainwright in 1863 before his first trip home. His white servant, John, was resigning his position. John and Wainwright had a friendship that transcended servitude. Wainwright valued the hard work and loyalty of John. His servant would be up at day break tending to the horses and preparing Wainwright’s uniform.\footnote{Ibid, 201.} Specifically, Wainwright stated that John did not have a single lazy bone in his body. Although of a lower socioeconomic class, the respectful and grateful language Wainwright employed to describe his servant revealed favoritism towards white servants. Wainwright feared that in John’s stead he would have to hire “a wretched nigger” whose “laziness, lying and dirt
of negro surpasses anything that a white man is capable of.”92 Wainwright goes on to apply his own experiences with African Americans to the entire race. He believed that all African Americans were naturally incompetent and could not function with the same mental capacity as even the dimmest white male. These assumptions and stereotypes are far more intense than the language originally employed to describe Ben, the contraband cook. Wainwright believed that the call for abolition had extended the war indefinitely. As a result, he and many other officers began to privately vent their anger against African Americans and the administration. The diary had transformed from a mundane record keeping device to a complex political and racial narrative.

Wainwright originally had no intention of using his diary as a sounding board for his political and moral conundrums. Originally he admitted that his diary was merely to remember his participation in this great war.93 However, with the Emancipation Proclamation and Republicanism becoming the dominant discourse, Wainwright began to utilize his diary in a reflective manner. The diary post-1862 became a confessional for Wainwright. Frustration with the changed war aims caused many soldiers to turn to their diaries to voice their secret displeasure. Wainwright would grapple with what constituted treasonous thoughts and whether or not to publically voice his opinions. He was now fighting a war for abolition, which ran counter to his own beliefs. Wainwright and many others would continue to fight loyally for the Union cause. It was in his diary, that Wainwright felt safe to voice his own unfiltered views of the war. Censure was rife during this time period and the diary offered Wainwright reprieve

92 Ibid.
93 Charles Wainwright, A Diary of Battle, xxi.
from being considered a traitor in the public sphere. The War Democrat position against abolition had led to the public believing they were in bed with the Copperheads. Wainwright’s fear of being termed a Copperhead further reinforced his reliance on his diary.

The Copperhead movement was started by Clement Vallandingham. The movement was a reaction to the Civil War. Vallandingham had called for peace and compromise with the South, but this movement pushed the limits of acceptable dissent in the Union. Reacting to the State of Union Address in 1861, Vallandingham blamed the Federal government for the Civil War and believed that if successions were given, the South could re-enter the Union without bloodshed. The first sect of the Democratic Party to agree with Copperhead policies were the Maryland Democrats. They adopted the policy of appeasement in late 1861. Out of spite and shame, another Democratic Party was formed in opposition to the Copperheads in Maryland. They called themselves the War Democrats and repudiated the platform of the Copperheads. Although the two parties were ideologically opposed, they came together in an attempt depose Lincoln in 1864. It was this union of Copperheads and War Democrats that forced Wainwright to hide his political ideology.

Among the Democrat and Republican circles, the word Copperhead came to have a highly negative connotation. This meaning was derived from the political policies of the party, as well Republican slander. Prior to the election of 1864, McClellan had been chosen as the Democratic

---

95 Ibid, 9.
96 Ibid, 79.
97 For a strong counter narrative on the influence of the Copperheads see Frank L. Klement's *Limits of Dissent*. 
Party nominee for president. The Democrats, working in conjunction with Copperheads, elected John Pendleton, a Copperhead, to be his vice President. This proved disastrous for both parties. Republicans took this opportunity to reinforce the similarities between Copperheads and War Democrats, in the process both were labeled treasonous and disloyal. These connotations stuck. In addition, Copperhead deserters in the Appalachians had armed themselves in resistance against the federal government. This brought more negative press to the War Democrats. Having a Copperhead on the ballot put War Democratic views in danger of being considered treasonous. Public opinion of the Copperheads was captured by an enraged Ambrose Henry Hayward in a letter home to his wife: “I say let the war go on until every traitor Copperheads and all are made to kneel at the Goddess of Liberty.” Hayward goes on to postulate that if Vallandingham were to come before Congress the soldiers would kill him. This tirade coupled with Republican slander turned the meaning of Copperhead into traitor. The public viewed Democrats and Copperheads as the same, as a result Wainwright was pushed to confide, shape, and cope with his political ideology only with the use of his diary.

Wainwright’s ability to express himself in the public sphere had been made taboo, but he continued to hold to a potentially treasonous viewpoint of anti-abolition and anti-Lincoln. Wainwright was a loyal dissenter who operated within the bounds of acceptable, private government criticism. A traitor would have deserted the army, but a loyal dissenter

100 Ibid.
continues to serve regardless of ideological conflict. This begs the question, how and why did Wainwright continue to fight in a war that was running counter to his political ideology? Wainwright was not alone in his dissent from the Lincoln administration; many others shared similar views. Among these men was Charles Biddlecom. In her book entitled *No Freedom Shrieker*, Katherine Aldridge analyzed Biddlecom through his letters to his wife Ester. Biddlecom and Wainwright were different snakes with the same venom. Much like Wainwright, Biddlecom felt betrayed by the change in war aims. His racial rhetoric intensified and he questioned the purpose of the wide spread, senseless death.\(^{101}\) He entered the war because of his family ties to the Revolutionary War and the social pull of Victorianism.\(^{102}\) His motivations help explain Wainwright’s decision to continue to stay in the war. Biddlecom expressed his thoughts more openly in his letters than Wainwright did in his dairy. When comparing the two men, the silences in Wainwright’s diary come to light.

Within Wainwright’s diary, his family was scarcely mentioned, but they were a primary factor in his decision to keep fighting. In 1864, Wainwright received leave to go home for two weeks to visit his ailing father and see his family.\(^{103}\) When Wainwright arrived, he noted that his father had survived the sickness, but showed concern for both his future and the future of his farm. While Wainwright was gone, his father was running his farm, and if the farm’s primary caretaker passed away income would drop heavily.\(^{104}\) This was one of the first times Wainwright had mentioned

\(^{102}\) Ibid, xi.
\(^{103}\) Charles Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle*, 302.
\(^{104}\) Ibid, xxi.
his father or the farm within his diary. Biddlecom’s letters were much more emotionally charged than Wainwright’s diary. The language which Biddlecom employed revealed unbridled passion for his wife and intimate compassion for his children. Writing to his wife Ester, Biddlecom often mentioned his longing to see her and often signed his letters “still your faithful husband.” Biddlecom also admitted openly to being homesick to his wife which represented a longing to be by her side in order to help with the managing of the household. Although Wainwright was much more reserved, his reluctance to involve his family in his dairy spoke volumes about his compassion. Wainwright was fighting for his family’s well-being, the same way Biddlecom was. However, the absence of Wainwright’s family from his diary revealed that he was trying to separate his home and the war. The two spheres of life, although equally important, needed to be sequestered to different spheres in order for Wainwright to cope with the war. His decision to stay in the war was affected by his family who relied on his monetary support. Not only this, Wainwright and Biddlecom fought for a Union that they believed in and one that they wanted to raise children in. This harkened back to the Revolutionary tradition that both soldier’s grandparents fought for. Biddlecom and Wainwright also shared a common belief in duty as the supreme test of patriotism.

When comparing Biddlecom’s letters to Ester and Wainwright’s diary it was evident that the two men handled the term of duty differently, but each dissenter cited it as a reason to remain in the war. In the most emotionally charged letter, Biddlecom sent to Ester he described his

---

105 Charles Biddlecom, No Freedom Shrieker, 71.
feelings on duty. Biddlecom openly proclaimed that his duty in this war was originally to protect Union and Constitution, but the sanctity of this duty had been violated by the war itself.\textsuperscript{107} Biddlecom proclaimed, “I am no freedom shrieker. I am a peace man.”\textsuperscript{108} Freedom shrieker was derogatory term used against men who were too vocal in regards to their anti-slavery sentiments. Biddlecom was not fighting this war for the freedom of African Americans, in fact he was not even sure why he was still fighting. Pride was driving Biddlecom. He refused to bring disgrace to himself or his family by being labeled a coward during this time of war.\textsuperscript{109} The fear of being labeled a coward was delineated by his opinion on deserters. Deserters, according to Biddlecom, had not done their duty. They had abandoned the ideology and experiment the founding fathers had embarked.\textsuperscript{110} The thought of committing such an act was unfathomable to Biddlecom as it would be for Wainwright as well. Freedom shrieker was never mentioned in Wainwright’s diary, nor did he ever express fear of being called a coward, but Wainwright was privately a freedom shrieker and questioning the war to the same degree Biddlecom was. However, much like Biddlecom, duty bound Wainwright to battle.

Wainwright’s opinions on deserters can be used as a proxy to understand his inner feelings on duty. Wainwright witnessed numerous desertions during his time in the Army of the Northern Potomac. According to Wainwright, the president was too lenient when pardoning these men. Deserters were cowards and deserved to be shot, according to Wainwright. Biddlecom’s fear of being termed a coward revealed that the term was not used lightly. Wainwright’s hatred for men who abandoned their duty was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[107] Ibid, 191.
\item[108] Ibid, 192.
\item[109] Ibid.
\item[110] Ibid, 178.
\end{footnotes}
obvious, and as an officer, Wainwright was predisposed to judge these men even harsher. Based upon these sentiments, one can see that Wainwright held duty to the army as one of the most important factors in the war. Wainwright was silent about his motivations for staying in the war after the proclamation, but analysis of Biddlecom and the deserters revealed that duty bound Wainwright to the Army of the Northern Potomac until Appomattox. Biddlecom and Wainwright were each entrapped into staying with the army, regardless of their ideological concerns with the aim of the war. These men utilized these motivations to continue to find meaning in fighting a war with aims that did not align with their own.

Charles Wainwright found meaning in loyal dissent. He represented a contingent of men whose opinions had been relegated to political obscurity during the Civil War. At first glance many individuals would believe that these men had been betrayed by their government. They were labeled traitors, Copperheads, and freedom shriekers, but these men found meaning in a war that was ideologically opposed to their goals. They silently obeyed and carried out the orders of their superiors to ensure the preservation of the Union. All the while, these men privately dealt with extreme frustration and internal suffering. These loyal dissenters, like Wainwright and Biddlecom, had been torn away from their families for a war whose meaning had been changed from Union to abolition. Although the war aims had changed ideologically, duty, country, and family enabled Charles Wainwright to fight for a government and operate within an army that promoted African American freedom as its top priority. His words and thoughts, although vulgar, offer a glimpse into how loyal dissenters created individual meaning out of a national war for supposedly inferior race.
Wainwright would survive the war without a single wound. He attended the Grand Review in Washington, DC. It was here the eastern and western armies mustered and marched before the president for the first time. After the review, Wainwright would ask a Miss Woosley why she felt so strongly towards Sherman’s army. Miss Woosley stated, “the army of the Potomac marched past just like it’s commander (Meade), looking neither right nor left, and only intent on passing the reviewing officers properly; while Sherman’s officers and men were bowing on all sides and not half so stiff.” In perhaps one of the most telling comments Wainwright would make throughout his entire diary, he replied, “[you have] paid the greatest compliment to the Army of the Potomac I have ever heard.”

111 Charles Wainwright, A Diary of Battle, 530.  
112 Ibid.
Bibliography


Brewster, Charles Harvey. When This Cruel War is Over. Edited by David W. Blight. Amherst, Ma: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.


