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Abraham Lincoln and Unionism in East Tennessee

Often, the American Civil War finds itself painted in classrooms across the country as a conflict of clear-cut ideologies in the North and South. The citizens of the northern states wished to preserve the sacred Union, and northern forces fought valiantly while invading a rebellious South. The Unionists of eastern Tennessee put to rest the false generalization that all southerners were loyal to the Confederate States of America, as their struggle throughout the war on the behalf of the Union was a long and bloody event. On June 8, 1861, Tennessee voted to secede from the United States. The vote was far from unanimous, as 66 percent of the eligible voters of east Tennessee showed their northern tastes by voting to remain in the Union. Much to the dismay of these loyal Unionists, eastern Tennessee was soon brought under the control of the Confederacy. It was not until 1863 that a federal army entered eastern Tennessee, a full two years after the June of 1861 declaration of secession.¹ President Abraham Lincoln heard the cry of the eastern Tennessean Unionists even prior to the state's secession; the delay of liberation for the East was not from a lack of sympathies from the President. Lincoln wished to intervene quickly on the behalf of eastern Tennessee for both the protection of loyalists and the capture of a strategically important area, but an invading Union army was held back by non-cooperating Union generals. Indeed, pro-Union forces in east Tennessee created a situation that the Confederate government was

¹ Reuben J. Sheeler. "Secession and The Unionist Revolt." *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 2 (1944): 183.

unfamiliar with. Where most of the war was fought between North and South, the violence in east Tennessee was between neighbors. This violence was unlike anything else seen in the war, as the relative geographic isolation of east Tennessee led to a civil war inside the Civil War. The guerrilla warfare and subsequent bloody crackdown of Unionists created a difficult and unusual situation for the governments of both sides of the conflict to tackle.

East Tennessee differed from the rest of Tennessee in many ways. The Cumberland Plateau separated the East from the West, forming a geological barrier that created a sense of independence for the eastern Tennesseans. Where the Democrats held influence in the middle and western parts of the state, the Whigs held political power in the East. Eastern Tennesseans also held far less agricultural prowess as the two other regions of the state did, which worked to further separate the cultures of the state. The easterners held their own railroad system that ran from the North to the South. The railroad failed to run East to West, where it would have connected all three regions of the state. Slavery played perhaps the largest role in a separate eastern culture as slaves contributed to only 9.2 percent of east Tennessee's population, compared to the rest of the state whose population hovered around one-third enslaved.²

The East showed their independence as tension began to mount in Tennessee, even prior to the June 8, 1861 secession referendum. Leading Unionists united at the Knoxville Convention to declare the illegality of secession, and also proposed the possibility of creating their own state loyal to the Union.³ When Tennessee broke from

² James L. McDonough. "Tennessee and the Civil War." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1995): 194.

³ Reuben J. Sheeler. "Secession and The Unionist Revolt." *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 2 (1944): 184.

the United States, prominent Unionists from the East quickly showed the effects of their distinct culture. Andrew Johnson remained in his seat in the Senate. Knoxville printers such as William G. Brownlow continued to push out pro-Union rhetoric, and congressman Thomas A.R. Nelson used his pre-war popularity to rally easterners for the Union.⁴ Nelson in his speeches, according to the *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, spoke of “his unalterable attachment to the Union, denied the right of Secession, and repudiated the slavery agitation of the North.”⁵ The *Boston Daily Advertiser* described the eastern Tennesseans as “resolute anti-secessionists” who displayed “unconditional Unionism.”⁶ Elections soon ran in Tennessee, and in several eastern districts pro-Union congressmen were elected. These congressmen, in an act of defiance to their Confederate oppressors, attempted to journey to Washington to join the United States Senate, instead of its Confederate counterpart.⁷

President Lincoln knew of the forthcoming difficulties the Unionists faced even prior to Tennessean secession. On May 14, 1861, Lincoln received a letter from former Tennessee legislator John B. Rodgers that cited that Union men were now subject to persecution if they spoke out against the Confederacy. Rodgers described the east Tennessean’s situation as a “deplorable one... The Union men are now threatened with personal violence.”⁸ The Unionists steadfast support of the Union did indeed provoke

⁴ James L. McDonough. "Tennessee and the Civil War." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1995): 199

⁵ “The Hon. Thos. A.R. Nelson,” *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, May 1, 1861.

⁶ “The Union Spirit in Kentucky,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 27, 1861.

⁷ Martha L. Turner "The Cause of the Union in East Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1981): 370.

⁸ John B. Rodgers to Edward Bates, May 14, 1861. Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Available at Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project, [2000- 02]),

the loathing of their neighbors. As the election for governor rolled around in the state in late 1862, eastern Tennesseans once again showed their Unionist flavors by voting for the anti-secession candidate. This, coupled with the fact that the previously elected Unionists representatives for Congressional seats had made it to the United States of America Congress, showed Confederate leadership that the East was not to be trusted in governing itself. The acting governor of the state begged CSA president, Jefferson Davis, for troops to keep the eastern half of the state in order. For the Confederacy, control of eastern Tennessee was vital to the war effort. The idea of rebellion inside southern land frightened Confederate leaders. Far from being only a nuisance that would require troops diverted from the war front, the strategic and economic importance of the east portion of the state could not be understated. The eastern half of the state was an important producer of cattle, hogs, flour, and salt that would go to a rebel force that needed all the provisions it could muster.⁹ The Confederates also desperately needed control of the railroad that ran through east Tennessee. The railroad connected the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, to the rest of the entire South. Union control of the east portion of the state, or even acts of sabotage by Unionists inside of the state would spell disaster for Southern railway supply lines. The “Keystone of the Southern Arch” was a popular title for eastern Tennessee, a title well deserved.¹⁰

The 14,000 troops that Jefferson Davis sent at the request of the governor did little to prevent Unionists in eastern Tennessee from speaking out against the

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/alhome.html>, accessed [September 13th, 2017]

⁹ Martha L. Turner "The Cause of the Union in East Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1981): 370.

¹⁰ "On Dissent in Eastern Tennessee," *Richmond Enquirer*, December 19, 1861.

Confederacy. In the fall of 1861, a native son of Tennessee, Confederate brigadier general Felix K. Zollicoffer, was given military oversight of east Tennessee. Zollicoffer attempted to pursue a policy of leniency with the loyal Unionists, in hope that if the Confederacy kept out of their affairs, the Unionists would comply with a non-violent Confederate occupation. The hope was that eastern Tennesseans would be swayed to join the CSA, and Zollicoffer was tasked with the difficult job of convincing Unionists to abandon the Union. The conversion of the Unionists to the Confederate failed, as even with Zollicoffer's urgings, easterners continued to voice their support of the Union cause. William G. Brownlow's *Knoxville Whig* was a prominent catalyst for Union dissent. Brownlow continued to urge open acts of defiance against Confederate control, and informed his reader to prepare for war within the region. In one issue of the *Whig* he urged "all man, women, and child" to prepare for, "a great battle against the Confederate scourge." In another he labeled all secessionists as, "the negro-worshipping aristocracy [and] the cotton and tobacco-planting lord." Brownlow's criticism of the Confederacy led to his arrest on December 6, 1861 as Confederate forces began a crackdown on pro-Union publications.¹¹ The Confederacy tightened its grip on the eastern part of the state, censoring the press and preventing the meeting of small groups, other than those out in the open in full support of the Confederacy.

Lincoln stood strong in his urgency for liberating the Unionists as military leaders in the West put their focuses elsewhere. The East's strategic significance did not escape the President or others in the northern government. The possibility of cutting off the southern supply line and gaining control of the railroad would go a long way to

¹¹ *About Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* (Knoxville, 1868), *The Library of Congress*. Tennessee University. 17 December 2017. <<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99065841/>>

halting southern operations. It would also be vital to cutting off the capital of Richmond from the rest of the South, allowing Union forces a better chance to capture the capital. The President also promoted eastern Tennessee's strategic significance to the North, as gaining control of the East would mean control of its crops and livestock, as well as the railways needed to supply troops with these provisions as the Union armies marched through the South. In fact, the recapture of eastern Tennessee became somewhat of a pet project for Lincoln.¹² The President was motivated by his military and economic reasons, yet he also possessed a desire to end the suffering of the loyalists in east Tennessee. Freeing these loyalists from southern control would also mean the possibility of more Union reinforcements from eastern Tennessee.

It was in the fall of 1861 that Lincoln's wishes came to fruition, as William B. Carter of Tennessee proposed a plan to cut off the railroad supply lines that Lincoln so wished to see severed. The plan would see eastern Unionists rebel in full force and burn nine railroad bridges running through Tennessee. At the same time, the forces under General Don Carlos Buell would invade from the North. The sabotage of the bridges would deal a massive blow to the Confederacy, as the railroad from Richmond to Atlanta, Charlotte, and New Orleans would not be able to make up for the strength in transport that the eastern Tennessean line held. Carter presented the plan to Lincoln in September of the year, and the President happily obliged to approve the process. In November, a small group of Unionists men moved on their targets and attacked the railroad bridges. The Unionists were successful in burning five of the eight bridges, but were taken by surprise by Confederate forces at the other three. Buell failed to lead his

¹² Martha L. Turner. "The Cause of the Union in East Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1981): 371.

forces in a subsequent attack, and the Confederates were able to maintain control of the railway lines. This event triggered all-out violence in eastern Tennessee. Union men moved to continue their rebellion, and Confederates moved quickly to suppress any more outbreaks of pro-Union attacks.

Don Carlos Buell's failure to coincide his attack with the burning of the railway bridges came from his own self-interest and desire for power, feelings which put Lincoln's plans of freeing the Unionists in Tennessee on hold. After Lincoln expressed his desires to Buell of freeing east Tennessee, Buell proceeded to wait in Kentucky for months with his troops. When General Don Carlos Buell was given command of the invasion of Tennessee, he was given firm suggestions by both Lincoln and General-in-Chief George McClellan to ensure that Buell liberated the struggling Unionists first. Lincoln desired to send Buell's army from their encampment in Kentucky, over the border, and into eastern Tennessee, freeing the Unionists under siege.¹³ In writing, Lincoln argued to Buell that the President would prefer "a point on the railroad south of the Cumberland Gap than to take Nashville, which is not situated on a major east-west railroad."¹⁴ More importantly, Lincoln argued for the freeing of his Unionist friends in eastern Tennessee: "My distress is that our friends are being hanged and driven to despair, and even now I fear are thinking of taking rebel arms for the sake of personal protection. In this we lose the most valuable stake we have in the South." However, it was the lack of authority that Lincoln commanded over Buell that doomed the prospects of securing eastern Tennessee quickly, as Lincoln had no official sway over the self-

¹³ Stephen E. Ambrose. "The Union Command System and the Donelson Campaign." *Military Affairs* 24, no. 2 (1960): 80-82

¹⁴ James L. McDonough. "Tennessee and the Civil War." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1995): 193.

interested Buell. Buell's inaction and dodging letters frustrated the President. Lincoln would write to Buell on January 6, 1862 that, "Your dispatch of yesterday had been received, and it disappoints and distresses me." Although Unionist relief lay just a hundred miles north, Lincoln could do little to exert his will on the glory-seeking Buell, who believed that an attack on the Confederate capital of Nashville would cement his name in greatness much more than the freeing of the Unionists in Tennessee. So, Buell instead lay in wait in the relative safety of Kentucky, plotting his attack on Nashville while Unionists were murdered and tortured in east Tennessee.

Following the Unionist attack on railroad bridges on the vital eastern railway line, Confederate forces began occupying east Tennessee as though it were truly a rebellious state inside a larger country. Confederate officials began panicking as reports of hundreds of Union men gathering in armed militias were reported around the country side. The Confederates were convinced that a full Union revolt was happening in the eastern half of Tennessee, and would do anything to root out the rebellion. Threats were made to Union men, such as one ad in the *Memphis Appeal* asking to purchase thorough-bred bloodhounds, whose sole purpose were to "chase the infernal, cowardly Lincoln bushwhackers of east Tennessee... (who have taken advantage of the bush to kill and cripple many good soldiers,) to their haunts and capture them."¹⁵ The bodies of the suspected Union conspirators of the attack on the railroad bridges hung from tree branches near the tracks, allowing for passengers to hit them with sticks as they rode past. The city of Knoxville was placed under martial law, and the rights of citizens to their own personal weapons were taken away. The Confederates also began tracking rebelling

¹⁵ "Notice," *Memphis Appeal*, November 21, 1861.

Unionists with not only bloodhounds, but Indians as well. Other Unionists were simply torn from their homes, beaten severely, and left for dead. On some occasions, a whole neighborhood would be arrested for their suspected allegiance to the Union. Overall, between 2,000 and 3,000 Union civilians were murdered in east Tennessee due to their loyalty to the Union and disdain for the Confederacy.¹⁶ This purge of Union sympathizers reached its height in the weeks and months following the burning of the railway bridges, as Confederate forces worked to scare potential Unionists away from attempting any more acts of rebellion.

While conditions in east Tennessee worsened due to the aforementioned persecution, Lincoln continued to hear the pleas for action by Unionists. Representative William B. Carter wrote to Lincoln asking for “20,000 men, 20,000 stand of arms, and a competent commander,” while also relaying to Lincoln that he hoped not to have to return to his people “but with little hope that the Government which owes us protection will save us from the terrible evils which we are threatened.”¹⁷ Benjamin A. Prentiss, a Brigadier General in Illinois, even wrote to Lincoln on the influx of Tennessean refugees, along with Prentiss’s desire to stage an attack focused on liberating Tennessee.¹⁸ Lincoln sympathized with men such as Carter and Prentiss, and wished to provide aid quickly to

¹⁶ Martha L. Turner "The Cause of the Union in East Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1981): 373.

¹⁷ William B. Carter to Abraham Lincoln, August 1, 1861. Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Available at Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project, [2000- 02]), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/alhome.html>, accessed [September 13th, 2017]

¹⁸ Benjamin M. Prentiss, et al. to Abraham Lincoln, May 24, 1861. Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Available at Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project, [2000-02]), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/alhome.html>, accessed [September 13th, 2017]

the loyal Americans. Even as the Unionists waited for federal help that never came, the loyalists of Tennessee worked to undermine CSA control by forming bushwhacking units that used guerrilla warfare to harass Confederate forces. These units struck CSA supply lines and troops, striking fear into Confederate soldiers, while also prompting even greater persecution of Union citizens by Confederate forces. Wives and family members of suspected Union men were tortured by southern forces in response to suspicion of involvement with guerrilla groups. All out local warfare soon spread throughout east Tennessee as both Union and Confederate marauders began wreaking havoc on the countryside.

Eastern Tennessee proved to be unlike any other part of the South in the Civil War. Its northern culture fostered Union values, and in turn created a rebellious state inside a rebellious Confederacy. However, the Unionists of Tennessee faced persecution like no other citizens in the Civil War. They were arrested, beaten, and murdered, yet remained loyal to the United States of America. The Unionists fought their own guerrilla war, never giving up on the cause of the Union. Indeed, the east Tennesseans worked to undermine the CSA, even while they saw little support from the federal government. President Lincoln felt the suffering of the Unionists, and did all in his power to influence the Union forces to move into Eastern Tennessee and free the Unionists from their oppression. Lincoln and his associates in the northern government also saw the great strategic, economic, military value of East Tennessee. Yet, it was the failure of the Union command and the seeking of personal glory by military officers such as Don Carlos Buell that doomed the Unionists to two years of occupation. The East bled as Buell decided that it would be better to conquer an enemy capital than save his own people. Abraham Lincoln remained helpless to protect the very citizens that he swore he would protect,

and helpless to secure the railroad line that would help cut off Richmond from the rest of the South. Andrew Johnson would return to his state as military governor in 1863, and effectively recaptured Knoxville and Chattanooga, which gave the Unionists hope that their state was free of Confederate control for good.¹⁹ Johnson's arrival marked the beginning of the end of the suffering of the east Tennessee Unionists: a suffering that Buell helped cause on his search for glory, while President Lincoln powerlessly looked on.

Word Count: 2,894

¹⁹ Peter Maslowski. "From Reconciliation to Reconstruction: Lincoln, Johnson, and Tennessee, Part II." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1983): 347.

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