

3. Clement Vallandigham's Copperhead Dissent, 1863

The men who are in power at Washington, extending their agencies out through the cities and states of the Union and threatening to reinaugurate a reign of terror, may as well know that we comprehend precisely their purpose. I beg leave to assure you that it cannot and will not be permitted to succeed. The people of this country endorsed it once because they were told that it was essential to "the speedy suppression or crushing out of the rebellion" and the restoration of the Union; and they so loved the Union of these states that they would consent, even for a little while, under the false and now broken promises of the men in power, to surrender those liberties in order that the great object might, as was promised, be accomplished speedily.

They have been deceived; instead of crushing out the rebellion, the effort has been to crush out the spirit of liberty. The conspiracy of those in power is not so much for a vigorous prosecution of the war against rebels in the South as against the democracy in peace at home. . . .

Thus, so far as it is possible, by an enactment having the form of law, the Congress of the United States have surrendered, absolutely, the entire military power of the country to the President. Now, if in possession of the purse and the sword absolutely and unqualifiedly, for two years, there be anything else wanting which describes a dictatorship, I beg to know what it is. Why did they not imitate the manhood of the old Roman senators when the exigency of the Republic, in their judgment, demanded it, and declare Mr. Lincoln a dictator in terms? . . .

As originally proposed, the bill not only would have but the 3 or 4 million males between twenty and forty-five under the military control of the President, as commander in chief, but would also have placed every man, woman, and child, by virtue of the two provisions that were stricken out, also in his power. Our civil rights would have been gone, and our judiciary undermined, and he would have been

an absolute and uncontrolled dictator, with the power of Cincinnatus, but without one particle of his virtues.

Yet, unfortunately, while this much was accomplished on that bill, the same tyrannical power was conferred by another bill which passed both houses, and is now, so far as forms are concerned, a law of the land—at least an act of the Thirty-seventh Congress. It authorizes the President, whom the people made, whom the people had chosen by the ballot box under the Constitution and laws, to suspend the writ of habeas corpus all over the United States; . . .

I will not consent to put the entire purse of the country and the sword of the country into the hands of the executive, giving him despotic and dictatorial power to carry out an object which I avow before my countrymen is the destruction of their liberties and the overthrow of the Union of these states. I do not comprehend the honesty of such declarations or of the men who make them. I know that the charge is brought against myself, personally, and against many of us. I have not spent a moment in replying to it—the people will take care of all that.

The charge has been made against us—all who are opposed to the policy of this administration and opposed to this war—that we are for "peace on any terms." It is false. I am not, but I am for an immediate stopping of the war and for honorable peace. I am for peace for the sake of the Union of these states. . . .

I am for peace, because it is the first step toward conciliation and compromise. You cannot move until you have first taken that indispensable preliminary—a cessation of hostilities. But it is said that the South has refused to accept or listen to any terms whatever. How do you know that? Has it been tried? . . .

Take the theory [advocating conciliation and compromise] for what it is worth, and let men of intelligence judge; let history attest it hereafter. My theory upon that subject, then, is this—stop this war.