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## VOTES for MINNESOTA'S CIVIL WAR SOLDIERS

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IN 1944 the issue of whether or not to allow men in the armed services to vote agitated the public and the politicians. Although it seemed only fair to permit them to vote, was it wise to let the men who had to enforce national policy help decide that policy? Congress and the state legislatures took the chance and set up the voting machinery. As it turned out, the 1944 election was uneventful. Servicemen as well as civilians voted to keep the administration in office and World War II went on.

That the Civil War public had to decide a similar issue under more difficult circumstances is not very well known. In 1861-65 the nation was divided physically and the war then in progress was unpopular in large areas of the North. So long as men in the armed forces could not vote, they had to carry out the policy of an administration committed to complete suppression of the rebellion. If, however, soldiers could cast ballots, they might veto that policy and bring about a negotiated peace. To allow them to vote meant giving them a chance to decide whether they wanted to go on fighting.

Early in the Civil War the Minnesota legislature decided to allow soldiers from the state to vote. The act authorizing them to do so became law on September 27, 1862, and it remained in force through the year 1865.<sup>1</sup>

Without any prodding from the servicemen themselves, public officials began to worry about the growing numbers of disfranchised voters in the Union forces. On August 19, 1862, a strongly anti-Republican St. Paul newspaper, the *Pioneer and Democrat*, ran a front-page story on "The Disfranchisement of the Citizen-Soldier." In it the editor pointed out that large numbers of Minnesota men had enlisted and would doubtless be unable to reach polling places for the state election in November; he further commented that the law made no provision for absentee ballots. The following day, August 20, the same newspaper reported a "Serious Outbreak of the Sioux Indians" which for the next several weeks crowded nearly everything else off the front pages. Faced with war at home, Governor Alexander Ramsey proclaimed a state of emergency, and on August 23, he issued a call for a special session of the legislature to meet on September 9. Although he meant to have the session deal chiefly with the

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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota, *General Laws*, extra session, 1862, p. 13-18.

Sioux menace, Ramsey also stressed the soldiers' franchise.<sup>2</sup>

The special session convened on the scheduled date. In his opening address the governor dealt with the Sioux War and gave reasons why he thought it expedient at that time to provide for the soldiers' vote. He said that about a third of all Northern voters were then in the armed forces and that their numbers conceivably could increase to the point where voters in uniform outnumbered civilian voters. Servicemen might justifiably complain if during their absence political power fell by default into the hands of stay-at-homes who could exercise it to frustrate military accomplishments.<sup>3</sup>

Prepared in advance, Senator Rufus J. Baldwin introduced the soldiers' vote bill into the Senate on the first day of the session, and on that day the bill also had its first and second readings and went to the committee on elections. The committee reported it out and it came up for final consideration in the Senate on September 15, passing on September 18 by a vote of 13 to 6. The Democrats treated the bill strictly as a Republican party measure; no Democratic senator voted for it.<sup>4</sup> This is an irony of political history in the light of the election of 1864. The Republicans could not know that at some future date they might fear the soldiers' vote as heavily Democratic, and the Democrats could not foresee that they might want to claim the measure as their own gift to the soldiers two years later, when the Democratic standard bearer and presidential candidate was a very popular general.

In the House the bill went to the committee on the judiciary. During the first eight days of the session it received no attention, for bloodthirsty matters like "a petition from citizens of Brown county, asking for the extermination of all the Indians in the State" occupied the floor. On September 19 the bill came out of committee and on September 23 it was passed by a vote of 30 to 6, which was duly ap-

plauded in the Republican press. Because the House version differed from that of the Senate, the bill had to return to the Senate, which accepted the modified form on September 24 by a vote of 16 to 0. The engrossed bill then went to the governor, who signed it on September 27.<sup>5</sup>

THE NEW LAW applied to the Congressional election set for November 4, 1862, and to "all subsequent elections" during the war. It gave soldiers no new rights, but furnished the machinery for exercising those already existing. If a man was not a qualified voter before entering the service, the act did not help him. The original act allowed the governor to appoint six commissioners, "selected equally from the two recognized political parties of the State," who were to carry ballots to the troops; two were to serve on the Eastern seaboard, two in the Middle and Southern states, and two in Minnesota itself. Later acts and resolutions provided for additional commissioners.<sup>6</sup>

The commissioners visited the troops in person and distributed ballots for both the Republican and Democratic tickets. A soldier chose the ballot he preferred, marked it, placed it in a sealed envelope on which he wrote his name, rank, and unit, and addressed it to the judges of election in his home voting district. The envelope showed clearly that it contained a serviceman's ballot. The soldier then appeared before a commissioner, swore that he was a

<sup>2</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), August 19, 20, 22, 24, 1862.

<sup>3</sup> *Minnesota Executive Documents*, 1862, p. 13; *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 10, 1862.

<sup>4</sup> *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 10, 1862; *St. Paul Press*, September 19, 23, 1862; *Minnesota, Senate Journal*, extra session, 1862, p. 11, 12, 29-31, 33, 43-47, 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Press*, September 24, 1862; *Minnesota, House Journal*, extra session, 1862, p. 8, 9, 12, 58, 63, 65, 77-80, 84-89, 95; *Senate Journal*, extra session, 1862, p. 78, 83, 104, 116. The measure appears as Chapter 1 in the *General Laws* of the extra session for 1862.

<sup>6</sup> *General Laws*, extra session, 1862, p. 14, 17; 1863, p. 267; 1864, p. 380.

RAMSEY (lower left)  
and a group of  
Civil War soldiers



registered voter in the district to which he addressed his ballot, and the commissioner indorsed the envelope and certified that it contained a duly acknowledged military ballot. Apparently it was then deposited by the voter in his unit's regular outgoing mail.<sup>7</sup> On election day the judges of election checked the soldier's name against the list of registered voters, and if it appeared there, they opened the envelope and deposited the ballot in the regular ballot box, where it lost its special identity.

THE LEGISLATURE acted on the soldiers' franchise at a time when the pressure of other events would have justified delay. Affairs in the summer of 1862 ran to violent ups and downs. On July 13 the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry surrendered at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Between August 17 and 26 the most savage battles of the

Sioux War took place in the Minnesota Valley. Between August 27 and September 2 the Confederates were victorious in the second battle of Bull Run. A short time later, however, the Union won its first great battle of the Civil War at Antietam—a victory which Lincoln exploited by issuing his Emancipation Proclamation and converting the war for the Union into a war to free the slaves.<sup>8</sup>

Although the military situation looked better for the Union at the moment, members of the new Republican party felt that they faced a hard fight in the political campaign of 1862. The party, a mere infant born in 1856, had carried the country in 1860 only because the nation was critically divided. The first Republican national administration, committed to emancipation and root-and-branch suppression of the rebellion, had to take every possible measure to stay in office and needed every vote.

In Minnesota, Governor Ramsey headed the Republicans; Henry H. Sibley, the Democrats. Both could be violently partisan, but not petty; in fact Sibley owed to Ramsey his position as commander of the 1862 punitive expedition against the Sioux. The appointment doubtless caused some

<sup>7</sup> In articles appearing in the *St. Paul Pioneer* from November 2 to 6, 1864, President Lincoln was accused of impounding all New York servicemen's ballots. Such action would have been impossible unless the ballots were still in military custody and, what is more, segregated.

<sup>8</sup> For Minnesota reports on these events, see the *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 17, 23, 24, 26, 1862.

political second thoughts. The successful campaign of a military commander who also headed his party was becoming a somewhat too inspiring example of Democratic genius to both civilian and military voters.

Among the troops, however, Governor Ramsey had at his disposal valuable military patronage in the right to appoint field officers. Those of the higher ranks, indebted to a Republican governor for their appointments, might understand what guidance to give voters under their command; so, at least, the critics said.

There was no doubt that soldiers might find themselves coerced. In addition, the soldiers' vote does seem to have proved subject to manipulation. Long after the conflict ended, a distinguished historian of Minnesota who had lived through the Civil War charged that "The act was effectively carried out and it assured, as was expected, comfortable majorities for the Republicans."<sup>9</sup>

The state's chief Democratic newspaper, the *Pioneer*, did not attack the measure as pro-Republican when it was passed in September; in fact, it printed the bill with approval and applauded the first commissioners chosen. The Republicans were more pugnacious, accusing the Democrats of favoring secession and fearing the soldiers, and urging postmasters to make every effort to speed all "mail matter" because it might contain soldiers' ballots.<sup>10</sup>

Three days before the November election of 1862—the first in which the servicemen voted—the *Pioneer* published an article quoting several letters from soldiers in the field. One stationed at Harpers Ferry with the First Minnesota wrote on October 25 that, although the boys in the service paid very little attention to politics, they did vote, and that about two-thirds voted Democratic. A soldier at "Sibley's Camp" in the Sioux War area reported that about half the men in his unit had voted, and commented: "It is true, many of the officers appointed by Ramsey, felt that they had

to pay for their epauletts, by appearing to work for Republicans, but the boys would not be seduced." A member of the Fourth Minnesota, interviewed in person at St. Paul, said that a majority of the men in his unit were Democrats and stated that "the soldiers have lost all confidence in the Abolition Republican members of Congress."<sup>11</sup> Judging from reports in the Republican press, it must have been talking about a different army from that described in the Democratic newspaper; at least each paper chose its informants carefully. On October 31 the Republican *St. Paul Press* discussed the soldiers' vote and confidently asserted, "It may be safely said that *nine-tenths* of all the soldiers' votes are Republican."

The Republicans did win the election of 1862, but it is impossible to tell what part the soldiers' vote played in the victory, since there is not even an official report of the number of soldiers' ballots distributed or counted in Minnesota. At any rate, the state's soldiers' vote act did go into effect, and the servicemen actually did participate in the election.

IN THE SUMMER of 1863 Ramsey was named to the United States Senate and Henry A. Swift succeeded him as governor. The new executive named an enlarged panel of commissioners for the soldiers' votes: two for the Army of the Mississippi, two for the Army of the Cumberland, two for the Army of the Potomac, two for Minnesota north of the forty-fifth degree of latitude, and two for the rest of the state.

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<sup>9</sup> William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:333 (St. Paul, 1924). The statement was first made by Folwell in his one-volume work on *Minnesota*, 248, published in 1908.

<sup>10</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer*, September 25, 30, October 2, 1862; *Press*, September 27, October 31, 1862. The former paper was known earlier as the *Pioneer and Democrat*.

<sup>11</sup> *Pioneer*, November 1, 1862. In general, Union soldiers treated the Civil War as a struggle to save the Union by putting down rebellion, not as a crusade on behalf of the Abolitionists, who were largely considered crackpots.

Somehow, the governor forgot to remove the commissioners appointed in 1862, but the attorney general saved the muddled situation by ruling that the new appointments automatically removed the earlier officials.<sup>12</sup>

In 1863 the secretary of state was able to give an official report on the soldiers' vote, first noting that "The Commissioners report that their appearance among the brave defenders of our government was hailed everywhere by manifestations of peculiar favor, and that the opportunity afforded them to exercise the right of suffrage, was promptly and gratefully embraced." Soldiers' comments on this subject are unavailable, but not beyond all conjecture. Rhetoric notwithstanding, the commissioners of 1863 escaped partisan criticism, conceivably because it was an off year politically. According to the secretary of state, Minnesota soldiers cast approximately the following numbers of votes: Army of the Potomac, 400; Army of the Cumberland, 400; Army of the Mississippi, 750; northern Minnesota, 900; and southern Minnesota, 2,300—a total of 4,750. The official tally for the election of 1863 gives Stephen H. Miller, Republican candidate for the governorship, 19,628 votes, and H. T. Welles, Democrat, 12,739.<sup>13</sup> In this election, the soldiers' vote could not have made a difference in the result.

IN MANY WAYS the year 1864 was the most critical year of the war. While, logically, the Confederacy should have surrendered, it did not do so; the war went on; men died; the North became discouraged; disaffection and actual treason spread.

<sup>12</sup> Secretary of State, *Reports*, 1863, p. 47-49; Attorney General, *Opinions*, 1863, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Secretary of State, *Reports*, p. 52, and Appendix C.

<sup>14</sup> If the accusations against Harmon were false, the article was clearly libelous. No retraction appeared, indicating either that the charge was partly true, or that Harmon did nothing about it. See also the editorial comment in the *Pioneer*, October 15, 1864.

<sup>15</sup> *Pioneer*, November 2, 1864.

The greatest danger to the Republicans and their commitment to continue the war was probably General George B. McClellan, thirty-seven years old, handsome, popular with troops and civilians, and willing to run against his commander-in-chief on a platform interpreted to call for an end to the war through a negotiated peace. In view of "little Mac's" tremendous popularity with the army, the soldiers' vote would be crucial.

The Minnesota Republicans realized the significance of the military ballot. The state's commissioners for soldiers' votes became important men. Minnesota's new Governor Miller, former colonel of the Seventh Minnesota and a strong Union man, began by appointing a completely new set of commissioners. As election day, November 8, came closer, Democratic criticisms grew louder. On October 12 the *Pioneer* accused the commissioners of giving out more than one ballot to a soldier and local election judges of censoring the voting by opening soldiers' ballots before election day. On October 15 the same newspaper ran an article about the "Disgraceful Conduct of the Republican Voting Commissioners" at Memphis, accusing Commissioner Allen Harmon of Hennepin County of rigging the vote by "forgetting" to take McClellan ballots with him and by trying to tell the men how to vote.<sup>14</sup> On October 26, as if to prepare for some future charge, the *Pioneer* quoted a soldier stationed at Decatur, Georgia, who claimed that at least seven-eighths of the men in the Army of the Ohio favored McClellan.

And yet, on November 8, 1864, Lincoln, who had been accused of being a dictator and was described as "faithless," "imbecile," and "despotic," was re-elected, and the war went on to its victorious end.<sup>15</sup>

What part the soldiers' vote actually played in Lincoln's second election is unknown, but circumstances tease any student of the times into suspicion and speculation. What follows is speculation based on suspicion. It is reasonable to suspect that



many Minnesota soldiers voted Democratic because they were tired of the war and wanted to see it end. It is also reasonable to suspect that the Republicans nullified some of their opponents' ballots, and to assume that they had a safe majority among the civilians. The report of the secretary of state for 1864 is not helpful; it merely gives the names of the commissioners.<sup>16</sup>

To the suspicious mind, Governor Miller's annual message of January 8, 1865, is more interesting than the secretary of state's record. He told the legislature that he sent the commissioners out with the ballots fifty-three days before the election—that is, about mid-September. He also said that rapid troop movements in Alabama, Georgia, and Missouri kept five Minnesota regiments (about five thousand men at normal Civil War strength) from voting. He further asked the legislature to provide machinery to allow men on detached service to vote, since the present act did not cover them.<sup>17</sup>

As a speculation, could the governor have been a little less than candid in saying that the commissioners could not keep up with the troops? Statements published by the *Pioneer* on October 12 and 15 show that the commissioners were already at work in southern Tennessee. If Harmon, commissioner to the Army of the Mississippi, was in Memphis before October 15, is it not possible that he could have reached units in Arkansas and Missouri before November 8? The solicitude for men on detached service may hint that, after the election was safely won, the legislature could take care of a group perhaps diligently overlooked earlier.

**SHORTLY AFTER** the election of 1864, the Civil War came to an abrupt end through victory for the North, and not through negotiation. Some Minnesotans, however, remained in military service for more than a year after Appomattox, and the law of 1862 continued to allow them to vote as absentees

until the end of 1865.<sup>18</sup> It is rather doubtful that the soldiers' vote had much influence on the back-to-normalcy local elections of 1865.

Although Minnesota and other states passed soldiers' vote acts to give their fighting men what in all fairness they deserved, these measures did expose the nation to an unexpected risk when a soldier ran for president in 1864. If, as has been reasonably charged, the Republican administration counted soldiers' votes where they would help and suppressed them when they would not, its action seems wise in the light of history. It can, however, be excused only on the theory that the end justifies the means and that at present the end is considered a good thing. No one knows with certainty if President Lincoln and Governor Miller did manipulate the soldiers' votes for the good of the cause, but it was possible to have done so and the stakes were high.

While hostilities were in progress, coercion in casting votes seems to have received little attention. It may be of some significance, however, that not until February 25, 1865, did a radical Republican Congress enact a statute formally warning army officers against trying to decide who was a qualified voter or interfering with the exercise of the franchise.<sup>19</sup> By then such action was perfectly safe.

The Minnesota soldiers' vote act expired at the end of 1865, but it is still remembered, and practices under it doubtless served as models some eighty years later when Minnesota again authorized military ballots under a system much like that of 1862.

<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State, *Reports*, 1864, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> *Executive Documents*, 1865, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Secretary of State, *Reports*, 1865, p. 117; *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:550, 583, 601, 676 (St. Paul, 1890).

<sup>19</sup> United States, *Statutes at Large*, 13:437.

**THE PICTURE** on page 169 is reproduced from a tintype in the collection of Governor Ramsey's granddaughters, the Misses Anna E. R. and Laura Furness of St. Paul.



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