



*A portrait of  
Alexander Ramsey,  
probably taken  
in the 1860s*

## POLITICS, PATRONAGE, *and Ramsey's Rise to POWER, 1861-63*

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ON APRIL 14, 1861, when news of the fall of Fort Sumter reached Washington, Alexander Ramsey, governor of the three-year-old state of Minnesota, hurried "in company with Senator Wilkinson and Thos. J. Galbraith and tendered to Secy. War 1000 men on behalf of Minnesota." He thus became the first governor to offer troops for federal service in the Civil War—a distinction which has been widely hailed in Minnesota, and which in the eyes of posterity probably constitutes the summit of his long career.<sup>1</sup>

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How did Ramsey, chief executive of a remote frontier state, come to be so opportunely in the nation's capital at the moment hostilities began? The answer has more to do with partisan politics than with patriotism. Ramsey's trip east in April, 1861, was not prompted by concern with military affairs or with the crisis the nation faced in that dark month. It was but one incident in an internecine struggle for control of the Republican party in Minnesota—a contest which extended from January, 1861, to January, 1863.

The election of Abraham Lincoln to the

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsey Diary, April 14, 1861, Ramsey Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

presidency in November, 1860, was the spark that ignited the flame of secession. It also gave Republicans, for the first time, control of the national administration, and with it a wealth of government jobs. When Lincoln moved to Washington he found that thousands had moved with him hoping to feast at the trough of public patronage. It was reported that seven hundred applicants from Minnesota alone had hopes of securing federal appointments.<sup>2</sup>

There was at that time no civil service commission, nor were there statutes to regulate the appointment of people to public office. A change in the national administration was usually followed by wholesale removal or resignation of federal employees. The spoils system was an integral feature of partisan politics, and for leaders in the parties it was an opportunity to acquire power and provide remunerative positions for political supporters. The ability of a party leader to secure appointments for his followers was a fair measure of his influence and standing within the organization on both local and national levels. Minnesota was not unlike any other state in this respect, and the struggle for the spoils was a hotly contested one.

In the days immediately following Lincoln's election it appeared that the Minnesota Congressional delegation, consisting of Democratic Senator Henry M. Rice, Republican Senator Morton S. Wilkinson, and Republican Representatives William Windom and Cyrus Aldrich, would work hand-in-hand with Governor Ramsey. Senator Wilkinson, a prominent attorney from Mankato, and Representative Aldrich, a Minneapolis real-estate man who had been elected to Congress in 1859, had both signified their intentions to "consult and satisfy" Ramsey with regard to appointments. No

doubt they felt reason to fear his influence as acknowledged leader of the Republican party in Minnesota.<sup>3</sup>

Ramsey himself apparently assumed that he would bear a large share of responsibility in the distribution of patronage. Writing to Aldrich on February 26, 1861, concerning three possible appointees, the governor stated he had "no selfish motives in writing you this but as party men we must have a preference. . . . I trust you will see that something of a geographical propriety is preserved in . . . appointments. . . . As I may not come on to Washington until late and possibly not at all I trust you will do me the favor to consider these as merely friendly suggestions and not intended to arrogate to yourself any special influence in the distribution of patronage."<sup>4</sup> Ramsey evidently wished to impress upon Aldrich that he was not to assume a greater role in patronage matters than any of the other three members of the delegation.

THE MOOD of friendly co-operation did not last long, however. Three considerations militated against a mutual understanding between Governor Ramsey and the Congressional delegation. First, there was the difficulty in maintaining party unity once the battle against a political foe had been won and the spoils of victory were available. A second factor of importance was the make-up of the delegation, which included individuals with high political aspirations of their own. And finally, there was the policy adopted by President Lincoln in determining the distribution of patronage.

The influx of job seekers to Washington was so great in the early months of the new Republican administration that the president and his cabinet were tremendously overworked in attempting to place and satisfy all those who sought public office. Preoccupied with the deteriorating relationship between the federal government and the seceding states, and unable to bear the burden of meeting all the office seekers who clamored for his attention, the president

<sup>2</sup> *State Atlas* (Minneapolis), quoted in the *St. Paul Daily Press*, January 26, 1861.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Miller to Ramsey, February 22, 1861, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Ramsey to Aldrich (copy), February 26, 1861, Ramsey Papers.

instructed his cabinet to consult the appropriate Congressional delegation when there were contests for particular positions. The delegation, directed Lincoln, must approve each applicant for office, and gubernatorial endorsements were to carry little weight. By this means he hoped to ease the patronage problem and to weld the Republican party into a national organization.<sup>5</sup>

The hand of the Congressional delegation was thus tremendously strengthened, and as the weeks passed many applicants endorsed by Ramsey found themselves unable to secure appointments. Indicative of the growing schism between Ramsey and the delegation was the unsuccessful attempt by the governor to place four men in the best patronage positions in Minnesota. John W. North, a regular Republican and a delegate to the national convention that had nominated Lincoln, aspired to the position of superintendent of Indian affairs in Minnesota. Though North was endorsed by both Ramsey and the president, the delegation favored the candidacy of Clark W. Thompson, who had a milling establishment in Houston County. Senator Wilkinson, who strongly recommended Thompson, was so vehement in his espousal of the man that he wrote William H. Seward, the secretary of state, that "If the President should think proper to appoint some other person to fill this office, I shall feel constrained to *refuse* here after to present the name of any person whatever for an appointment under this administration."<sup>6</sup>

North was naturally concerned when he and other friends of Ramsey proved unsuccessful with the delegation. He lamented the fact that the governor was not in Washington to intercede personally in his case and charged that the delegation "evidently think that offices were invented for the purpose of employing men in their individual service."<sup>7</sup>

North, however, was not the only one to feel the coolness of the delegation. Ramsey had also recommended Stephen Miller, an old personal and political friend from St.

Cloud, for the office of surveyor general. Thomas Foster, Ramsey's personal secretary, whom he had befriended many times (especially in money matters), wanted the Winnebago Indian agency, and the office of postmaster at St. Paul was sought by Robert F. Fisk, a St. Paul Republican.

Two of the aspirants, Fisk and North, were in Washington during March, 1861, at the time appointments were being made, and they were keenly aware of the delegation's efforts to snub them. Frustrated at every turn, North decided that forceful individual initiative was necessary if he were to be at all successful. In desperation he went to the private rooms of Aldrich and Windom in order to get papers and petitions that the delegation had been holding back. Fisk summed up the trying situation when he wrote to Ramsey: "We only call on the delegation when it is absolutely necessary. . . . I have not yet let North and Baker [*James H. Baker, secretary of state in Minnesota*] know of your intention not to come down until next month [*April*], for fear they would break down. . . . We are using your name and influence, where we can, with propriety, and the Cabinet understand now pretty fully that Wilk. and the others, in their distribution of the public patronage, are not disposed to do it, for the benefit of the party."<sup>8</sup>

Senator Rice, being a Democrat, was seldom consulted on appointments, but he, too, lamented the fact that Ramsey was not in Washington when he was really needed by his supporters and by those whom he had recommended for office. The Senator had the impression that the appointments

<sup>5</sup> William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 138 (New York, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Wilkinson to Seward, March 15, 1861, in the Clark W. Thompson Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. For an account of North's political background see Carlton C. Qualey, "John W. North and the Minnesota Frontier," in *Minnesota History*, 35:101-116 (September, 1956).

<sup>7</sup> North to Ramsey, March 13, 1861, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Fisk to Ramsey, March 20, 1861, Ramsey Papers.

being made were ones that Ramsey did not favor.<sup>9</sup>

Stephen Miller was very critical of Ramsey and advised him "to lay off your coat, put down your foot, and be a politician with the rest of us." By doing this Miller felt that Ramsey would rally the support of most Minnesota Republicans. "What we need," wrote Miller, is "a bold, fearless, and if need be an aggressive leader, and above any or all others you are the man. . . . Determine to be Governor, and then [United States] Senator, and above all to win for both. In doing this in this particular way, I know that you will have to bear the brunt of . . . abuse and opposition, but in doing so you have an object, national as well as personal, for which to labor."<sup>10</sup>

Either Ramsey was not the man to do what Miller asked or circumstances prevented his action. The state legislature adjourned on March 10, 1861, but Ramsey did not leave for Washington until April 3, arriving in that city on April 10. During the three days before the outbreak of war, Ramsey visited various cabinet members and attempted to see the president on matters of patronage. But April 10 was too late—almost all the important appointments had been made. In place of the superintendency of Indian affairs in Minnesota, North was forced to be content with the office of surveyor general in Nevada Territory. The Winnebago agency went to St. Andrew D. Balcombe instead of Thomas Foster, and William D. Washburn rather than Stephen Miller became surveyor general in Minnesota. Robert Fisk, aspirant for the office of

postmaster in St. Paul, lost out to Charles L. Nichols. Thus the best offices in Minnesota—those that were most lucrative and offered the greatest number of subordinate appointments—went to the followers of Aldrich and the Congressional delegation rather than to Ramsey's friends.<sup>11</sup>

THE POLITICAL undertow, however, was not all in Washington. There were problems in Minnesota that also had long-range effects. Ignatius Donnelly, the young lieutenant governor, by nature impatient and volatile, had suffered two rebuffs at the hands of Ramsey in the first six months of 1861. At the time of Ramsey's tender of troops, the governor wired news of the offer to the adjutant general, William H. Acker, and to his secretary, Samuel P. Jennison, but not to Donnelly. This was a slight that Donnelly did not overlook. Writing to his wife, Kate, he explained that "Gov. Ramsey then in Washington, totally ignored my existence here, sent two telegraphic despatches . . . to issue a Proclamation in his, Ramsey's name. I informed Mr. Jennison that I held my office by as good a title as Gov. Ramsey—that I was acting Governor, and that if Mr. Ramsey thought he could ignore my existence and ride over me rough-shod he had mistaken his man."<sup>12</sup>

The second rebuff came a short while later, after Donnelly asked Ramsey for an appointment as colonel in one of the volunteer regiments. The youthful lieutenant governor was told that no one but a military man would be appointed colonel, and Ramsey confided to Thomas Foster that he thought Donnelly a dunce to propose such a thing. In Donnelly's eyes, the governor's refusal to let him have command of a regiment carried overtones of political expediency. Writing again to his wife, he said, "The old 'cuss' fears that anyone might interfere with his plans for the U.S. Senate in the future. If it turns out that he does not appoint me I will make him regret it." These incidents strained the

<sup>9</sup>Rice to Ramsey, March 21, 1861, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Miller to Ramsey, March 27, 1861, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>11</sup>Ramsey Diary, April 3 to 14, 1861; United States Senate, *Journal of Executive Proceedings*, 11:352, 353, 466 (Washington, 1887).

<sup>12</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:1-3 (St. Paul, 1892); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:77 (St. Paul, 1924); Ramsey to Jennison, April 15, 1861, Ramsey Papers; Donnelly to Kate Donnelly, April 17, 1861, Donnelly Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.



personal relationships between Ramsey and Donnelly, who thereafter sought the support of Cyrus Aldrich in an attempt to strike out on his own.<sup>13</sup>

Albeit there was distrust and dissension among the members of the party, there was little opposition to Ramsey's re-election as governor in the fall of 1861. The Minnesota Republican convention, meeting in St. Paul on September 4, renominated by a single resolution all of the state officers. In the election that followed, the Republican state ticket was returned to office, and the party continued to hold a decisive majority in the legislature.<sup>14</sup>

Governor Ramsey's power to appoint officers in the new regiments formed for service against the rebel states somewhat offset his lack of influence in Washington. As in the case of civilian offices, the Congressional delegation and the governor frequently could not agree on military appointments or even on promotions. Colonel Willis A. Gorman, commander of the First Minnesota Volunteer Regiment and former territorial governor, was promoted to brigadier general in September, 1861. His new rank, however, had to be confirmed by the United States Senate. The Minnesota delegation favored the promotion of Colonel Napoleon J. Dana, in part because there had been criticism of Gorman in various matters, and also because Gorman was a Democrat. Donnelly cautioned Ramsey not to back Gorman too vigorously because he had little standing in the Democratic party, and was certainly without influence in the Republican party. Ramsey, however, did support Gorman in the face of the delegation's opposition, not so much out of personal liking for the man, but because he feared there might be political repercussions if he did not. He reasoned that "what-ever else we may think of him [*Gorman*] his rejection now would be ascribed to political prejudice and would at once give him strength here at home either for Congress in October [1862] or the Senate in January '63 and he would be used for this

purpose by the very men who are now down on him."<sup>15</sup>

Gorman's promotion was confirmed on March 18, 1862, but discontent over the selection of officers continued. Nevertheless, Ramsey remained adamant in his criteria for establishing the suitability of candidates. These included military experience, the efforts of an individual in raising troops for service, and lastly, political considerations. Attempts were made to maintain a balance between Republican and Democratic appointees, to preserve some equality in geographical representation throughout the state, and to recognize popular leaders in order to secure support for the war effort. Ramsey admitted that when geographical and other conditions made it possible, he appointed a friend in preference to an enemy, but he maintained that he had done justice to his political and personal opponents.<sup>16</sup>

Among the twenty-one Minnesotans who rose to the rank of brigadier general or above, there were many close friends and supporters of Ramsey. Baker, who had been secretary of state in both Ramsey administrations, was one, and Ramsey's secretary, Jennison, was another. The list also included William R. Marshall, founder of the *St. Paul Press*, which served as the voice of Ramsey's political interests for

<sup>13</sup> Foster to Donnelly, July 7, 1861; Donnelly to Kate Donnelly, June 26, 1861, Donnelly Papers. As an alternative to a military appointment, Donnelly had suggested that James W. Taylor's position as special agent of the treasury department be made available to him.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene V. Smalley, *A History of the Republican Party*, 169 (St. Paul, 1896).

<sup>15</sup> Donnelly to Ramsey, December 24, 1861, Ramsey Papers; Ramsey to Donnelly, December 27, 1861, Donnelly Papers. In his letter to Donnelly, Ramsey explained that he had three times asked Dana to be colonel of the First Minnesota but that Dana had refused. Because of public pressure and Donnelly's recommendation, Ramsey had then appointed Gorman.

<sup>16</sup> John D. Hicks, "The Organization of the Volunteer Army in 1861 with Special Reference to Minnesota," in *Minnesota History Bulletin*, 2:350 (February, 1918); Ramsey to Miller, April 1, 1862, Ramsey Papers.

many years, and Stephen Miller, who had been disappointed in his hopes for office in 1861. Henry H. Sibley, appointed colonel during the Sioux Uprising of 1862, was a former territorial and state governor and a personal friend of Ramsey, but not a political ally. Although some of these men had had previous military experience, all owed their initial appointments in Minnesota volunteer regiments to the governor.

CONSPICUOUS by its absence from this list is the name of Ignatius Donnelly. His vow that he would make Ramsey regret denying him a colonel's commission was made early in 1862, when he began to chart a political course largely independent of the governor. It was assumed throughout the state at this time that Ramsey would try for the Senate seat then held by Rice, whose successor would be chosen by the legislature in January, 1863. Thus the gubernatorial nomination in the following (1863) election appeared the next logical step for Donnelly. At first he indicated some interest in it, and the supporters of Congressman Aldrich willingly offered their aid to him. Within a few weeks, however, the aspiring young lieutenant governor changed his political sights and set as his goal the Congressional seat of the second district, operating on the assumption that Aldrich would vacate it if he challenged Ramsey for the Senate. As early as March 6, 1862, Donnelly felt fairly confident that he would be a candidate for Congress and "in all human probability will be elected." This prospect was less pleasing to Aldrich, how-

ever, who preferred that nominations for both Congressional seats be directly associated with his own goal of defeating Ramsey for the Senate.<sup>17</sup>

Although Donnelly was carrying on a surreptitious correspondence with Aldrich and his political lieutenant, William S. King, then postmaster in the national House of Representatives, he was in the fortunate position of representing himself to Ramsey's supporters as a friend of the governor. Political maneuvering was further complicated by the intentions of Miller, then serving as lieutenant colonel in the First Minnesota. He felt that with Ramsey's support, he could win the Congressional seat in the second district. After surveying the situation, Ramsey decided there was not much strength in Miller's candidacy and on May 7, 1862, sent a letter to Donnelly saying that he was not going to support Miller. Discouraged by the seeming neutrality of the governor, Miller wrote to him declaring: "Ever since I went to Minnesota I have thought your course too negative for a politician; and altho' your continued success sometimes shook my conclusion, I am more than ever convinced of it now. . . . Had you and the 3 friendly electors gone to Washington when I suggested it, we should have probably secured half of the appointees in the state, and these would now have been your active friends. As it is I fear that they will all be actively against you."<sup>18</sup>

Secretary of State Baker advised Donnelly that the governor liked all three candidates. (Jared Benson, former chairman of the Republican state committee had also thrown his hat in the ring.) Baker thought that Ramsey would not meddle in the matter and "In your triangular contest he will maintain his 'masterly non-consentualism,' or I misunderstand the man." Jared Benson apparently had a similar opinion of Ramsey, for he wrote Donnelly: "I suppose the Governor is not doing much. He never is."<sup>19</sup>

At the second district convention Donnelly, true to his prediction, was successful in gaining the Republican nomination

<sup>17</sup> William S. King to Donnelly, March 31, 1862; Donnelly to John P. Persch (copy), March 6, 1862, Donnelly Papers. The second district, embracing the northern part of the state and including the towns of St. Paul and Minneapolis, had been created during the previous legislative session. Before 1862 the state's two Congressmen had been elected at large. See Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1862, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey to Donnelly, May 7, 1862, Donnelly Papers; Miller to Ramsey, May 8, 1862, Ramsey Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Baker to Donnelly, May 21, 1862; Benson to Donnelly, May 21, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

for Congress. But the political aspirations of Donnelly and his quest for independence were closely linked to Ramsey's maneuverings to become a United States Senator. The latter's senatorial campaign had actually begun as early as January, 1862, as had that of his prospective opponent. At this time Aldrich had requested Donnelly to watch events in St. Paul. "You can judge better than I what to do and how to do," he wrote. "I leave my chances, my all in your hands and trust you will do the best you can—if so, I shall be satisfied."<sup>20</sup>

In the meantime, the Congressional delegation had been able to diminish the political prestige of the *St. Paul Press*, Ramsey's organ, by having the federal public printing in Minnesota transferred to the *Pioneer and Democrat*. Wilkinson and Aldrich had requested the change in the summer of 1861, claiming that the *Press* was hostile to the Congressional delegation. With the printing contract, the *Pioneer and Democrat* received the tacit endorsement of the national administration, and announced its intention to support the Republican party and its principles.<sup>21</sup> This it did with relation to national policy—a course which was neither unusual nor particularly inconsistent for a paper that, like the *Pioneer and Democrat*, had traditionally supported the free-soil wing of the Democratic party. The conditions of wartime blurred political lines and naturally led to a certain amount of bipartisanship. With relation to the local political picture, however, the circumstances were totally different, and it quickly became evident that the *Pioneer's* support for the state Republican administration was considerably less than lukewarm.

The rift in the ranks of Minnesota Republicans continued to show itself in the recommendations for federal appointments made by Ramsey and the Congressional delegation. In the summer of 1862 this caught the attention of the secretary of the treasury, Salmon P. Chase. When he inquired about the inconsistencies and questioned why the delegation always won out,

he was informed that Aldrich and Ramsey were both candidates for the United States Senate, and therefore their views were naturally different. To Aldrich's alarm, Chase had offered to follow Ramsey's wishes in making treasury appointments in Minnesota, but he finally decided that it would be wiser to side with the delegation. Thus the administration's patronage policy was reaffirmed and Ramsey met with another defeat in the battle for spoils.<sup>22</sup>

WHILE THESE political machinations were occurring, the Civil War continued unabated. But the actual fighting took place many miles from Minnesota. War in the military sense did not come near the borders of the state until late in the summer of 1862, when the Sioux Indians rose in rebellion. The outbreak began with the killing of white people at the Lower Sioux Agency, located on the Minnesota River, on August 18, but word did not reach Governor Ramsey until the nineteenth. On that day, the *Pioneer and Democrat* ran a front-page editorial on "The Disfranchisement of the Citizen Soldier," calling for "Some means . . . by which the volunteer can have his rights saved to him, and the free and full enjoyment of them guaranteed." Joseph A. Wheelock, editor of the *St. Paul Daily Press*, picked up the sentiment and ran a series of editorials on the subject, at the same time voicing a need for a special session of the legislature. On August 23, Ramsey resolved to call such a session be-

<sup>20</sup> Aldrich to Donnelly, January 2, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

<sup>21</sup> William R. Snider to Clark W. Thompson, December 8, 1861, Thompson Papers; William Windom to Ramsey, January 22, 1862, Ramsey Papers. The *Press* received no federal money during the second session of the 37th Congress (1862). The *Mankato Independent* and the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, as "Publishers of laws, etc." each received \$482. After Ramsey was elected to the Senate in 1863 the *Press* and the *Independent* each received \$335 for public printing during the next session of Congress. See Department of the Interior, *Annual Register*, 1863, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> John J. Knox to Ramsey, August 21, 23, 1862, Ramsey Papers.

cause of "Indian difficulties — and the loss of the ballot to soldiers."<sup>23</sup>

Whether or not these were the only motives behind the call, the legislature convened on September 9, and the Sioux Uprising overshadowed all other considerations. Indian troubles, however, did not prevent the Republican-dominated body from passing a law which enabled Minnesota soldiers to vote. Ramsey, the Congressional delegation, and Donnelly (not yet a Congressman), all vigorously supported the provisions of the act and wrote President Lincoln requesting that commissioners be allowed to visit the various army camps without interference from officers.<sup>24</sup>

Although the official record does not show it, the Ramsey forces worked tirelessly behind the scenes, trying to induce members of the legislature to elect a new United States Senator during the special session. If this were done, they argued, the next regular session, scheduled to meet in January, 1863, could be postponed at a substantial saving to the taxpayers. The proposal was unsuccessful, however, and Ramsey's hope for a quick election was lost.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ramsey Diary, August 23, 1862. See also Lynwood G. Downs, "The Soldier Vote and Minnesota Politics, 1862-65," in *Minnesota History*, 26:187-210 (September, 1945). Downs points out that to the Democrats and anti-Ramsey Republicans the special session represented a plot on the part of the governor to have himself elected to the Senate.

<sup>24</sup> Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1862, extra session, 13; Ramsey, Wilkinson, Windom, Aldrich, and Donnelly to Lincoln, October 7, 1862, Robert Todd Collection of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, in the Library of Congress; Walter N. Trenerry, "Votes for Minnesota's Civil War Soldiers," in *Minnesota History*, 36:170 (March, 1959). Unfortunately for the historian, no record was kept of the 1862 soldier vote; therefore it is impossible to ascertain its effect. Donnelly, however, had previously stated that the soldier vote would place his election to Congress beyond a doubt. See Donnelly to Kate Donnelly, August 28, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Ramsey Diary, September 24, 25, 26, 27, 1862.

<sup>26</sup> *St. Paul Pioneer*, November 2, 1862; *Press*, November 4, 16, 1862; Ramsey Diary, November 14, 15, 21, December 5, 10, 12, 1862; Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:105.

<sup>27</sup> For an account of the investigation of Ramsey see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:462-470.

The governor received another setback when the legislature took away his power to appoint company and field grade officers in the state militia. The *Pioneer* declared that the object of this action was to prevent him from making appointments that would be helpful in securing the Senatorship. It also accused him of ignoring the law and directing appointments. The legislature was, nevertheless, unable to limit Ramsey's appointive powers for the volunteer regiments; the provisions of the newly passed state law related solely to the organization of the enrolled local militia and were not applicable to the organization of volunteers enlisted in the service of the United States. Thus Ramsey continued to promise and make appointments in regiments as late as December 12, 1862 — a prerogative from which he no doubt benefited during the Senatorial election of the following January.<sup>26</sup>

EVENTS moved swiftly after the close of the extra session. As early as September 10 the contest between Ramsey and Aldrich had inspired a bitter public dispute in the newspapers which spoke for the two factions. On that date, while the Sioux War still raged in the Minnesota Valley, the *Pioneer* asked, in a front-page editorial, "Who Is Responsible?" Its own answer was Ramsey, whom the paper accused of dereliction in his duty to protect the frontier settlers. In an even more bitter vein, it went on to bring up once more a long-standing blot on the governor's political record: the Sioux payment investigation of 1853. It repeated old charges that Ramsey had corruptly cheated the Sioux and been "white-washed" by the investigators. "And now," the editorial concluded, "when his acts have culminated in a Sioux War; now when the chickens from eggs of his own hatching have come home to roost, he meanly attempts to cast the blame upon others."<sup>27</sup>

In a hotly argued defense six days later, the *Press* referred at length to Ramsey's vindication by the Senate following the



1853 investigation, and concluded with the statement that "Cyrus Aldrich, an ex-Land Officer in the State of Illinois, was covered with shame as an exposed and convicted defaulter to the United States Government, in the sum of five thousand dollars, which has never yet been paid." In the following weeks the *Press* repeated this charge, to the accompaniment of varying epithets aimed at the "vipers warmed into life by Federal patronage."<sup>28</sup>

When at length Aldrich filed suit for libel, the *Press* countered with a full-page spread that purported to examine the Congressman's record as receiver of public moneys and disbursing agent in the federal land office at Dickson, Illinois, from March, 1849, to March, 1853. Its main content, however, was merely dunning letters which the treasury department had sent Aldrich over the years, reminding him that the government considered his account unsettled and maintained a claim against him for the sum of \$4,011.45.<sup>29</sup>

This was scarcely proof that Aldrich was "branded with the meanest and most odious offense known to the law." Nevertheless, after the *Press* broadside, Ramsey's future looked brighter. Copies of the paper were distributed to all Senators, Representatives, and cabinet members, as well as to leading journals, and it was felt that Aldrich would be unable to regain his lost stature in time for the senatorial election. The Congressman virtually admitted that his influence in Washington was destroyed, charging bitterly that "Ramsey and his blowers [?] in order to defeat me are laboring to defeat every bill before Congress intended to benefit our State and our people." It was also apparent by this time that the *Pioneer's* attempt to make Ramsey a public scapegoat for the Sioux Uprising had proved a dismal failure.<sup>30</sup>

On November 3, 1862, a new Republican paper, the *St. Paul Daily Union*, appeared. It was dedicated to the interests of the anti-Ramsey group, and its first order of business was the vindication of Aldrich in the matter

of the land office claims. On December 30 it published a number of letters from prominent men testifying to the Congressman's upright character and freedom from guilt as a defaulter. The most enlightening statements came from President Lincoln and Representative Elihu B. Washburne of Illinois. According to them a dispute had arisen in 1853 between the government and a number of Illinois land officers — of whom Aldrich was one — as to the disposition of surplus funds in the land offices. The claims being similar in all cases, it had been agreed that only one should be brought to court, and that the other parties would abide by the decision. The government had brought suit through its district attorney, and the land officer involved in the test case had engaged Lincoln's law firm to represent him. The matter, however, had never come to trial because, according to Lincoln, "the District Attorney was never ready." Thus, as Washburne observed, "to charge criminality upon any of these land officers for doing precisely what the government agreed they might do, all acting in good faith, seems little less than atrocious."<sup>31</sup> For the time, however, the question of legality was lost in the confusion of partisan emotions.

IN NOVEMBER the voters elevated Ignatius Donnelly to the United States House of Representatives, re-elected William Windom to the same body, and returned the Republican majority to the state legislature. During the interim between the election and the convening of the state legislature in January, Ramsey busily mended political

<sup>28</sup> *Press*, September 16, 27, October 4, 8, 22, 24, 1862.

<sup>29</sup> *Press*, November 28, 1862.

<sup>30</sup> *Press*, October 4, 1862; David Heaton to Donnelly, November 28, December 3, 1862; Aldrich to Donnelly, December 28, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Washburne's letter, dated December 12, 1862, and letters from William P. Fessenden, Lyman Trumbull, and Edwin M. Stanton are in the William S. King Papers, owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. Lincoln's letter may be found in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 5:541 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953).

fences, and his supporters were satisfied that his chances for gaining the Senate seat looked bright.<sup>32</sup>

Donnelly, under obligation to both sides, continued to balance carefully on the fence. In late December he seems to have made a cautious suggestion of some kind to Wheelock concerning the awarding of the state printing contract by the next legislature, possibly hinting that a change in the *Press's* attitude toward Aldrich was the price. Wheelock evidently distrusted Donnelly, for his reply was a pompously virtuous letter in which he claimed that his newspaper was the organ of the Republican party and would support all its worthy candidates without fear or favor. He declared that the *Press* opposed Aldrich solely because of his dishonesty and protested that the paper cared "very little for men and everything for principle." It was evident that, in plain words, Ramsey had the blessings of the *Press* and Aldrich did not.<sup>33</sup>

On January 6, 1863, the legislature convened, with the Republicans holding a majority of twenty-nine on joint ballot, which meant that the actual selection of the next Senator would take place in the Republican caucus. On January 12 the Republicans held their first meeting and neither Ramsey nor Aldrich could immediately secure the majority necessary for nomination. The frustrated Aldrich supporters began to look for another man and finally settled on James Smith, Jr., a successful St. Paul lawyer and a member of the state senate. On the twenty-fourth ballot of the evening Ramsey received twenty-three votes, one short of the total necessary for nomination, but the cau-

cus adjourned until the following evening. The one-day recess provided enough time for the Ramsey supporters to bolster their forces, and on the first ballot of the next meeting Ramsey received twenty-six votes to Smith's twenty and gained the nomination. The legislature in joint session on January 14, elected Ramsey Senator. Judge Andrew G. Chatfield, a Democrat who had run unsuccessfully against Windom in the Congressional race, received the votes of the seventeen Democrats in the legislature and Ramsey received those of all the Republicans.<sup>34</sup>

IT HAS BEEN said that there existed in Minnesota a "Ramsey dynasty." If this was the case, it was not true before 1863. Ramsey's election as governor increased his political power throughout the state, but this was only a relative increase in standing. Aldrich and the Congressional delegation proved that in order to maintain political stability, control of the federal patronage was also necessary. Aldrich, in a sense, defeated himself by an indiscriminate use of this power, while Ramsey threatened his own cause by his unwillingness to stand firm for his friends. The role of Lincoln in determining patronage policy worked to Ramsey's disadvantage and was an obstacle that had to be overcome. Fortunately for the governor, the distribution of commissions in volunteer regiments served as an escape valve of sorts through which he could channel disappointed office seekers.

Patronage was not the only deciding factor in the election of a United States Senator. It was important, but James G. Blaine later wrote that the election of Ramsey, Governor Edwin D. Morgan of New York, and Governor William Sprague of Rhode Island to the United States Senate in 1863 was in direct recognition of the valuable service which they, as war governors, had rendered the country.<sup>35</sup>

Ramsey's strength, however, was built on more than his record as a war governor. Political stature, matured by four years as a

<sup>32</sup> Smalley, *Republican Party*, 171; Heaton to Donnelly, December 12, 23, 27, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Wheelock to Donnelly, December 28, 1862, Donnelly Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Harlan P. Hall, *Observations: Being More or Less a History of Political Contests in Minnesota From 1849 to 1904*, 57 (St. Paul, 1904); *Press*, January 13, 14, 15, 1863; Ramsey Diary, January 5 to 14, 1863.

<sup>35</sup> James G. Blaine, *Twenty Years of Congress*, 1:502 (Norwich, Connecticut, 1884).

territorial governor, plus years as head of the Republican party in Minnesota, made his quest for the Senate a reasonable and attainable goal. Added to this political prominence was his economic and social standing in the Minnesota community.

While Ramsey's course to the United States Senate may have seemed relatively unobstructed to the ordinary citizen, beneath the surface of things political there existed a turbulence created by the opportunism of strong-willed men contending for

power. The rich collections of letters and documents left by the contemporaries of that time attest to the intraparty strife of vigorous men who sought influential and important positions in government.

Ramsey was to remain in the United States Senate for twelve years. His election in 1863 helped to determine, in large measure, the political complexion of Minnesota until 1875, when a more successful coalition than that headed by Aldrich defeated his quest for a third term.

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## A Soldier's Christmas -- 1861

DECEMBER, 1861, found the First Minnesota Regiment of Volunteers performing picket duty along the Potomac. They had seen action at Bull Run in July and again at Ball's Bluff in October, but following the second encounter, the recruits had returned to their permanent camp between Poolesville and Edwards' Ferry, Maryland. From this point they patrolled the north bank of the Potomac River for some distance on either side of Edwards' Ferry. Though it was a time of little excitement, the men were not idle, for their newly commissioned colonel, Napoleon J. T. Dana, drilled the regiment relentlessly through the long winter months, helping to perfect the disciplined fighting unit that was to perform so effectively in later campaigns.

For most of the young soldiers — as for Private Samuel Bloomer of Company B — it was the first Christmas in the army. Bloomer came from Stillwater, and he kept a diary of his wartime experiences which is now in the files of the

Minnesota Historical Society. On December 25, 1861, he wrote:

"This Morning dawned very pleasant and the whole day, but it was a very dull Christmas to us. Last night our sutler had a lot of goods come, with all kinds of marks on them. Some were marked Knives and forks, boot blacking, pepper &c. But our *Col* smelt a rat and had the wagon taken up to the guard house, and this morning had the boxes opened and lo and behold they contained a lot of choice Whiskey & Brandy, which to his surprise were taken up to Poolesville to the hospital department, to be used in that institution. during the day 2 or 3 kegs of beer were got and some of the boys began to feel rather light headed. Had no drills, nor even dress parade [.] I suppose the reason was it was Christmas and it dont come but one in a year. I for one wish that we had Christmas every day on the drilling account, not because we had such a good time, for it was the dullest Christmas that ever I spent in all my life and hope I never shall again. Being a soldier is not like being at home on that day. The boys in my mess got a lot of oysters and good fresh milk and made a good Soup of them. But I had to look on and see them 'go in right' . . . good earnest, as I am no oyster eater. I could not stand it to look on, so I pitched in and eat a lot of bread and Molasses, for a substitute of the oysters. 'perhaps that is a poor substitute,' Sergeant Burns . . . will probably leave for Stillwater in a few days."





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