"Young Men for War": The Wide Awakes and Lincoln's 1860 Presidential Campaign

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A band of "sleepy Gotham politicians" gathered in a Manhattan tavern late one evening in 1860. It was a windy Thursday night, and the atmosphere inside the dimly lit establishment was subdued. The bosses ordered ale and settled into a lazy debate about the usual political topics. They cursed the Republican party, analyzed their presidential ticket, and worried about the possibility of secession, all while getting steadily drunker in the cozy tavern.

They first heard the noise around midnight. From uptown came the clash of a marching band followed by the advancing tread of hundreds of boots on the cobblestones of the Bowery. Soon the stench of burning oil filled their nostrils, and the tavern's dark windows began to glow from the outside. Tipsy and curious, the insiders spilled out onto the street to join a throng of dazed New Yorkers. There they watched as large formations of young men, clad in shimmering black capes and soldiers' caps, came stomping down the middle of their island. Each bore a blazing torch, and none said a word. Pushing through the crowd, the sobered politicians shouted, "Who are these Wide Awakes?"[1]

The march that shook New York was one of thousands that poured through America's cities, towns, and villages in 1860, started by a revolutionary new political organization. Stumping for the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, the strange movement electrified the presidential election. Young men from Bangor to San Francisco and from huge Philadelphia clubs to tiny Iowa troupes donned uniforms, lit torches, and "fell in" to pseudomilitary marching companies. They flooded every northern state and trickled into upper South cities like Baltimore, Wheeling, and St. Louis. Launched in March by "five young dry goods clerks" in Hartford, Connecticut, by November the Wide Awakes had developed into a nationwide grassroots movement with hundreds of thousands of members. Many of the movement's supporters—and even some of its vociferous opponents—believed "there never was, in this country, a more effective campaign organization than the Wide Awakes."[2]

Youth and militarism distinguished the Wide Awakes from the hundreds of other clubs milling around nineteenth-century American elections. The organization appealed to white men in their teens, twenties, and thirties, attracting ambitious upstarts sport-

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[1] "The Wide Awake Organization, Their Origin and Progress," *New York Herald,* Sept. 19, 1860, p. 2.

[2] Julius G. Rathbun, "'The Wide Awakes': The Great Political Organization of 1860," *Connecticut Quarterly,* 1 (Oct. 1895), 335; "Wide Awakes," *Chillicothe Scioto Gazette,* Oct. 2, 1860.

ing youthful goatees who were "beginning to feel their true power." Using popular social events, an ethos of competitive fraternity, and even promotional comic books, the Wide Awakes introduced many to political participation and proclaimed themselves the newfound voice of younger voters. Though often remembered as part of the Civil War generation stirred by the conflict, these young men became politically active a year before fighting began. The structured, militant Wide Awakes appealed to a generation profoundly shaken by the partisan instability of the 1850s and offered young northerners a much-needed political identity.[3]

They were also the first major campaign organization to adopt a military motif. Upon enlistment members became soldiers in the Wide Awake army—complete with ranks, uniforms, and duties. The Wide Awakes did not intend to incite actual violence. They chose their symbolism to appeal to the widespread "militia fever" of the era, to glorify aggressive political combat, and to signify the organizational strength and uniformity of the new Republican party. The Wide Awakes' employment of a martial theme helps shine a light on the use of militaristic symbolism for political ends. More than anything else, this study attempts to examine the concrete impact of this seemingly superficial campaign metaphor.[4]

The militarism of the Wide Awakes helps explain how the election of Lincoln sparked the Civil War. Historians have long pondered the missing link between the complex politics of the 1850s and the war. It is difficult to believe that the Civil War could have erupted as a popular conflict—with hundreds of thousands of excited volunteers—unless political debates were transformed into larger cultural motivators. The Wide Awakes enabled that transformation. The movement's dangerous use of militarism for political purposes unintentionally bled into powerful cultural agitation that terrified southerners. Young northerners equipped with uniforms and torches sent an ominous message to those already apprehensive about the Republican party's antisouthern attitudes. While certainly not a cause of the war, the Wide Awakes' presence ratcheted up sectional pressure and invested Lincoln's election with weighty significance. Understanding how the organization worked helps connect the political and military campaigns.

Though observers felt "the future historian" should devote "one of his most glowing chapters" to the movement, few historians have asked, "Who are these Wide Awakes?" No scholar has recently offered an appraisal of the organization, and former Wide Awakes penned the most in-depth analyses of their club over a century ago. Those accounts contained valuable recollections, but the authors remembered their militarism through the prism of the Civil War as a prediction of the approaching conflict. Since then, the Wide Awakes have appeared as little more than campaign color in the classic accounts of the 1860 election by David Potter, Allan Nevins, and Roy Nichols. Works on Lincoln's election may sketch a Wide Awake parade, but none truly examines the movement.[5]

[3] "Wide Awakes," *Jackson Weekly Mississippian,* Sept. 28, 1860.

[4] This is not a study of "Wide Awake ideology." No distinctive system of ideas existed: The Wide Awakes were Republicans, and they shared their diverse party's sense of northern supremacy, antisouthern attitudes, support for an increased role of the federal government in business, and angry opposition to the Buchanan administration's corruption. On the Republican beliefs that drove the Wide Awakes, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party: 1852–1856* (New York, 1987); and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978).

[5] For former members' accounts of the Wide Awakes, see Rathbun, "'Wide Awakes'"; and B. F. Thompson, "The Wide Awakes of 1860," *Magazine of History with Notes and Queries,* 10 (Nov. 1909), 293–96. For recent studies of local Wide Awake organizations that do not attempt to explain the movement or its context, see Glenn C.

The "future historian" has never appeared, and studies of the 1860 election have tended to follow a standard narrative, detailing Lincoln's fight for the Republican nomination, his summer of quiet seclusion in Springfield, and his predictable victory in November. Such accounts affirm Lincoln's humble calm in contrast to the terrible chaos that would consume the rest of his life. Yet if we hope to understand Lincoln's presidency or the coming of the Civil War, we cannot fast-forward through the 1860 campaign. Lincoln's image played a major role, but like most other nineteenth-century presidential candidates, he refused to canvass. Instead, four parties fielded complex campaign machines in a vicious public battle on behalf of their nominees. Scholars focused solely on the lives of great men have not addressed these important partisan mechanisms and cultural forces in detail. The visible, distinctive, and extremely popular Wide Awakes offer a glimpse of the neglected machinery that powered nineteenth-century American democracy.

Ironically, the Wide Awakes appear most prominently in Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin's *Rude Republic*. That controversial work attempts to reassess "the 'fit' between political culture and culture more generally" in nineteenth-century America by arguing that historians have exaggerated the size of the public sphere. Altschuler and Blumin asserted that the private sphere was a significant and growing refuge of the middle class and that political participation was less meaningful than previously imagined. *Rude Republic* argues that the activities of the Wide Awakes and similar political clubs were not barometers of popular interest, but spectacles engineered by a handful of partisans to deceive American voters. Richard Franklin Bensel's recent work on voting in nineteenth-century elections, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-nineteenth Century*, concurs, highlighting campaigners' use of alcohol and violence to coerce sheep-like Americans to participate.[6]

While undoubtedly partisan, the Wide Awakes did not merely prey on the ignorant and the drunk. Instead the movement demonstrates the presence of a middle ground neglected in accounts of nineteenth-century political culture, lying somewhere between the harsh view of *Rude Republic* and the optimism of those who see high voter turnouts as a proof of a golden age of informed democracy. Not won over by inebriated coercion or sober reflection, young men, mesmerized by the Wide Awakes' martial metaphors, generational excitement, and intense competition, joined for organic yet symbolic reasons. Their participation grew from local roots, without the artificial imposition of elite party organizers. In time these young activists pushed skeptical older politicians to accept the novel organization. No club could have been so popular with political novices unless its rallying cries spoke to their existing concerns. The Wide Awakes' hoopla amplified the murmurings of a generation.

Every campaign club must try to foster competition, employ appealing symbols, and engender mass participation. The Wide Awakes surpassed expectations in all three categories. But the movement may have been more effective than it needed to be, striking the chords of competition, symbolism, and participation too loudly. Observers had little reason to believe that the stirring of the Wide Awake generation would end in November

Howland, "Organize! Organize! The Lincoln Wide-Awakes in Vermont," *Vermont History*, 48 (Winter 1980), 28–32; and Floyd Rinhart and Marion Rinhart, "'The Prairies A-Blaze': Iowa Wide-Awakes Carry Torches for Lincoln," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, 77 (Spring 1996), 43–46.

[6] Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2000), 5; Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 217–85.

or that their militarism was not really preparation for violence. The Wide Awakes crossed the line separating a temporary campaign club and a permanent national movement, undermining established political processes. One of the founders later wrote that his friends "builded better than they knew," by creating too powerful a machine.[7] As the movement took on a life of its own, the Wide Awakes' blazing torches inadvertently cast light on the powerful forces that would tear apart the nation.

"Wherever the Fight Is Hottest"

Historical neglect obscures just how "wide awake" America was in 1860. Active in over half the nation and anxiously scrutinized in the rest, the movement penetrated deep into society. So many young men donned shiny Wide Awake uniforms that tailors experienced shortages of the enameled cloth used to make them. Milwaukee oyster houses offered the Wide Awakes special platters of half shells, and a druggist in Maine marketed Dr. Allen's Balsamic Cough Lozenges to cure members of the hoarseness brought on by too much shouting at midnight rallies. Even partisan opponents copied the Republican movement, forming the Douglas Invisibles, Bell-Ringers, and—to anesthetize the Wide Awakes—the Chloroformers. All were based on the Wide Awakes: a political image that swept through northern society, from huge rallies to Maine drugstores and Wisconsin oyster houses.[8]

By early fall, many believed the Republicans boasted over half a million Wide Awake "soldiers." That number is probably too high, though the popular perception is more significant than the real size of the movement. Certainly their parades attracted record crowds. The coordinated rallies in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and Boston in early October drew over 70,000 Wide Awakes and 150,000 spectators. It is impossible to calculate how many actually joined the movement—we have only scattered club rosters and newspaper estimates are unreliable—but the real total was probably closer to 100,000. That number would be the equivalent of about 1 million Wide Awakes in the current population of the United States.[9]

While the numbers are vague, we can easily track the regional distribution of the movement. The strongest region was also the first: central Connecticut gave birth to the movement and enlisted tens of thousands of active young members. A band of clubs stretching from central Illinois to southern Wisconsin is next; it contained about two hundred and fifty companies, with forty-eight separate organizations in Chicago alone. Parts of central New York, southern New Jersey, and southern Maine also housed many active and vocal clubs. Surprisingly, some traditional Republican bastions—Massachusetts, Vermont, and Michigan—had fewer, quieter, and duller companies.[10]

[7] Rathbun, "'Wide Awakes,'" 335.

[8] "The Cost of Equipping Wide-Awakes," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* Nov. 14, 1860, p. 3; "Multiple News Items," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* Oct. 24, 1860; "Medicinal," classified advertisement, *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier,* Sept. 14, 1860; "Political Intelligence," *New York Herald,* Aug. 18, 1860, p. 1.

[9] On the number of Wide Awakes, see Thompson, "Wide Awakes of 1860," 295; and "The Wide Awakes," *Austin Texas State Gazette,* Oct. 27, 1860, p. 1. For estimates of the size of the October rallies, see *New York Herald,* Oct. 4, 1860; *New York Times,* Oct. 2,1860; *Trenton State Gazette,* Oct. 5, 1860; *Daily Cleveland Herald,* Oct. 3, 1860; and *Boston Daily Advertiser,* Oct. 8, 1860.

[10] On Chicago Wide Awake clubs, see "The Republicans in Council," *Chicago Tribune,* Oct. 3, 1860. On Wide Awake clubs near Democratic strongholds, see, for example, "The Late Custom-House Changes—The Albany Wide-Awakes," *New York Times,* July 28, 1860; "Demonstration of the Wide Awakes in Albany," *ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1860; *Trenton State Gazette,* Aug. 8, 1860, p. 2; *ibid.*, Sept. 7, 1860, p. 3; and "Maine and Local Items," *Bangor*

A form letter distributed nationwide by the Hartford club explains this strange patchwork, boasting that "wherever the fight is hottest, there is their post of duty, and there the Wide Awakes are found." Organized for political combat with partisan rivals, the movement flourished in the corners of the North where the Democratic party still prospered. In the November election, the southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge won a larger percentage of the vote in Connecticut than in any other northern state. The other Democratic candidate, Stephen Douglas, won chunks of northern New Jersey, the area around Albany, New York, and almost all of ultra-Democratic downstate Illinois. Republicans in or adjacent to these strongholds formed Wide Awake companies out of a sense of partisan competition, relying on the organization's symbolic militarism "wherever the fight is hottest." In pamphlets, banners, editorials, and speeches, the Wide Awakes made it abundantly clear that they were primarily interested in defeating Democrats in their own districts.[11]

Local political combat in Connecticut's spring gubernatorial election gave rise to the movement. The closely watched contest between the Republican William Buckingham and the Democrat Thomas Seymour was considered "a Presidential election in miniature." Some young textile clerks and rifle makers organized a bodyguard, clad in enameled cloth capes to protect their clothes from leaky oil torches, to escort Republican speakers through the dangerous streets of Democratic Hartford. Soon the new organization's cramped headquarters in the long narrow room above a drugstore teemed with excited young Hartfordites. When the Republicans won the governor's race by less than six hundred votes, observers credited these "Wide Awakes." Young Republicans chose to form the militaristic movement with local party competition—not pressure from their leaders—in mind.[12]

Connecticut's Wide Awakes offered the nation some much-needed political excitement during the confused beginning of the presidential campaign. The recent rift in the Democratic party created two essentially separate sectional contests: one between the northern Democrat Stephen Douglas and the Republican Abraham Lincoln and another between the southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge and the Constitutional Unionist John Bell. Northern Democrats were deeply vulnerable without the strong southern base they usually relied on, but Republicans still feared low turnouts and political malaise. In early July the Republican mastermind Thurlow Weed worried that his overconfident party might "neglect the systematic organization which is essential" to secure victory. Weed knew that the Republicans could not expect Lincoln's easy election; perhaps general complacency might disproportionately harm their newer party, particularly in the conserva-

Daily Whig and Courier, Oct. 22, 1860.

[11] Henry T. Sperry, "Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford," printed form letter, 1860–1861, Connecticut Imprints (Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford); David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861,* ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 439; Congressional Quarterly, *Presidential Elections since 1789* (Washington, 1979), 73; Walter Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1836–1892* (Baltimore, 1955), 246–47.

[12] During the gubernatorial race an article declared that Connecticut's Republicans were finally "wide awake." See "Republican State Convention," *Hartford Daily Courant,* Jan. 26, 1860, p. 2. The name stuck. "Wide awake" was a common expression in the era. In the mid-1850s it referred to both a style of floppy white hat favored by nativists and a minor 1856 Republican campaign organization. Though some founders of the Hartford club wore such hats and had marched for John C. Frémont, the earlier incarnations lacked the militarism, popularity, and youth that made the Wide Awakes of 1860 a distinct and novel movement. On the Connecticut election and the emergence of the Wide Awakes, see Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (2 vols., New York, 1950), II, 236; Richard S. West, *Gideon Welles: Lincoln's Navy Department* (New York, 1943), 82; John Niven, *Gideon Welles: Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy* (New York, 1973), 287; and Rathbun, "'Wide Awakes,'" 329.

tive lower North. The excited popular campaign of the late summer and fall was hardly inevitable. Instead young Republicans throughout the North borrowed the Wide Awake model from Connecticut, helping produce some of the highest turnouts in American history in the process.[13]

The Network

Primed by success in Connecticut and the tense election environment, the Wide Awakes exploded across the nation. One member later called the movement "a spontaneous outburst of the people from one end of the North to the other," but that was merely nostalgia.[14] The Wide Awakes expanded, not in a "spontaneous outburst," but through a deliberate and fascinating network. Traveling along a conduit of new communications technologies and benefiting from existing social structures, Hartford's innovation metastasized throughout the North. The rapid and complex extension does more than demonstrate the particulars of the movement: it allows us to track how an idea spread through an increasingly interconnected society. Like a colored dye introduced into a city's water supply, the fluid extension of the Wide Awake network highlighted key mechanisms along the way.

In May the Republican national convention in Chicago sparked the explosion of the movement. Though often neglected in discussions of the complexities of Lincoln's nomination, the triumphant torchlit parades of the recently organized Chicago Wide Awakes introduced thousands of Republicans to the exciting new movement. Returning from the convention, young partisans immediately organized Wide Awake companies in Madison, Wisconsin; Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio; Newark, New Jersey; Brooklyn, New York; and Bangor, Maine. The network began to mushroom throughout the North, surging across urban centers and college campuses.[15] The movement reached the countryside less quickly, and by midsummer urban Wide Awakes began calling on fellow partisans in their hinterlands to form their own companies. Philadelphia launched its first company in May, but central Pennsylvanians were still organizing clubs in mid-August. Wide Awakes appeared in distant San Francisco months before they reached Vermont from Connecticut. Solidly Republican parts of the rural North could not provide the competition on which the Wide Awakes thrived and hence joined the network only in the final months of the campaign.[16]

Comparing the sluggishness of the Vermont Wide Awakes to the explosive popularity of the movement in neighboring New Hampshire highlights the power of partisan competition. New Hampshire had voted Democratic in every presidential election between 1832 and 1856, while Vermont had never supported a Democrat for president. In 1860

[13] Thurlow Weed, "The Revolution of Parties," *New York Herald,* July 9, 1860.

[14] Thompson, "Wide Awakes of 1860," 295.

[15] On the proliferation of urban Wide Awake clubs after the Chicago convention, see "Lighting the Fires in Wisconsin," *Chicago Tribune,* June 6, 1860; "The Wide Awakes," *Columbus Ohio Statesman,* May 30, 1860, p. 3; "The Wide Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* May 21, 1860; "Wide Awakes," *Trenton State Gazette,* June 4, 1860, p. 3; "Republican Organization for the 14th Ward," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* June 1, 1860; and "Local and Maine Items," *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier,* May 26, 1860. On the Wide Awake companies organized at Yale, Williams, and Dartmouth colleges, see Tracy Peck to Josiah Peck, March 24, 1860, Letters of Tracy Peck (Connecticut Historical Society); *Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette,* June 2, 1860; and *Lowell Daily Citizen and News,* Sept. 7, 1860.

[16] *Chambersburg Valley Spirit,* Sept. 15, 1860; "Wide Awakes," *San Francisco Bulletin,* Aug. 11, 1860; Howland, "Organize! Organize!"

New Hampshire's bitterly anti-Republican newspapers and Democratic rock throwers attracted the competition-driven Wide Awake network, pushing potential members toward the movement well before Vermont's confident Republicans felt moved to organize. One New Hampshire youth a few months shy of voting age joined the Wide Awakes to spite those Democrats he knew would bar him from the voting window in November.[17]

The Wide Awake network also benefited from its social appeal. Each company consisted of about one hundred young men who, joined by strong fraternal bonds, met several evenings each week in their storefront clubhouses. The diary of Jeremiah Wilcox—a twenty-year-old carriage maker in Connecticut—depicts the camaraderie that helped attract members. Wilcox, who usually spent his leisure time fishing, added "torchlite procession nice evening had a very fine time" to his usual diary entry in late spring. Soon he was attending Wide Awake meetings regularly and fishing less. The movement's parades also allowed young men to court the many young women who turned out to view the demonstrations. As one diarist in Ohio noted, "The ladies, bless them, stayed and cheered us with their presence till we were through, and they were as good looking a company of women as one will see." Some Wide Awake captains even used friendly rivalries between companies to motivate their members. Despite all the fraternal bonds, female attention and intra-Wide Awake competition, however, the Wide Awakes maintained a martial seriousness that distinguished them from the rowdy political clubs of the era.[18]

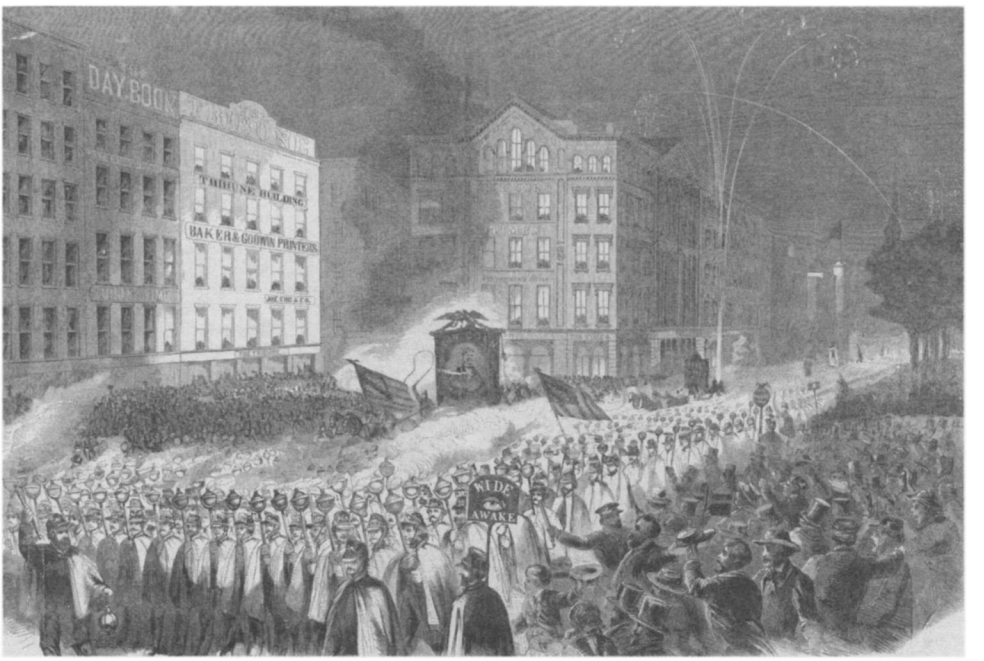
Powered by its political, generational, and social appeal, the Wide Awake network extended via the growing system of partisan newspapers. In the previous decade the nation's publications had doubled to over four thousand, and the expansive movement relied on the burgeoning medium. Wide Awake clubs carefully courted favorable presses and attacked hostile ones. In Chicago and Trenton, they steered torchlight marches past the headquarters of Republican papers to cheer their favorite editors, while a Columbus company hurled "ungentlemanly epithets" at the offices of the Democratic *Columbus Ohio Statesman*. With grave seriousness, one Democratic paper accused the Madison, Wisconsin, Wide Awakes of stealing its editor's hat. More important, the Wide Awakes communicated with their members through friendly publications. Republican papers printed announcements of parades and meetings, and editorials calling for more companies to be created resulted in the formation of new chapters within days of publication. An active and popular newspaper culture provided the highway on which the Wide Awakes traveled. Without it the organization would have spread neither so quickly nor so far.[19]

Though political novices, the original Hartford Wide Awakes helped build the national network. As young Republicans caught wind of the growing movement, they wrote to Hartford asking for advice on forming their own chapters. In response to this deluge

[17] Thompson, "Wide Awakes of 1860," 293.

[18] Jeremiah A. Wilcox Diary, April 3, 1860 (Connecticut Historical Society); Oscar Lawrence Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary: Journals Kept before and during the Civil War,* ed. David Prentice Jackson (Sharon, 1922), 32. For young women's participation in parades as spectators, refreshment servers, or marchers representing allegorical figures, see Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore, 1992). The diary of William H. Seward's fourteen-year-old daughter provides insight into young women's attitude toward Wide Awake demonstrations. See Patricia C. Johnson, "Stumping for Lincoln in 1860: Excerpts from the Diary of Fanny Seward," Sept. 1, 3, 8, Oct. 1, 1860, *University of Rochester Library Bulletin,* 16 (Autumn 1960).

[19] Mark E. Neely, *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 5; "The Wide Awakes," *Chicago Tribune,* June 1, 1860; "Wide Awakes," *Trenton State Gazette,* July 18, 1860; "Swearing Republicans," *Columbus Ohio Statesman,* Aug. 24, 1860; "Local Editor," *Madison Wisconsin Daily Patriot,* Oct. 10, 1860; "The La Crosse Wide-Awakes—A Success," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* Aug. 1, 1860; "City Matters," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News,* Aug. 7, 1860.



The large Wide Awake parade in lower Manhattan was part of a series of demonstrations in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and Boston during the first week of October 1860. Note the deliberate placement of this "surging sea of excited humanity" on Manhattan's "newspaper row," directly in front of the friendly offices of the *New York Tribune* and *New York Times*. *"Grand Procession of Wide-Awakes at New York on the Evening of October 3, 1860,"* Harper's Weekly, *Oct. 13, 1860. Courtesy of Harpweek, LLC.*

of over two thousand letters, the original club distributed circulars detailing its history, constitution, and structure and even sent out samples of the club uniform. James S. Chalker—a twenty-eight-year-old founding member and textile salesman—sold at least twenty thousand Wide Awake uniforms during the campaign.[20] Henry T. Sperry—another founder and an aspiring newspaper editor—penned hundreds of informational circulars, promotional letters, and supportive editorials. The twenty-three-year-old Sperry's publicity campaign propelled him to national prominence. Though too young to have ever voted in a presidential election, Sperry directed the dynamic national network that formed thousands of Wide Awake clubs. Aside from a handful of party insiders, no individual did more to organize Lincoln's 1860 campaign.[21]

The tools that built the Wide Awake machine—partisan competition, social bonds, political newspapers, and youthful activism—were rarely forged by nefarious bosses. Though the deliberate construction of the network challenges the facile image of a "spontaneous outburst" by an undifferentiated mass of Republicans, the individuals who assembled it

[20] Uniforms cost about $2, so James S. Chalker may have grossed $40,000 on the movement. The Wide Awake movement generated huge sums, probably at least a quarter of a million dollars if 100,000 members purchased $2 uniforms and $.75 torches. The estimate does not include the cost of the expensive fuel (coal oil or turpentine) burnt in the movement's torches. Wide Awake sources remain silent on those expenses, though Democrats accused Republican office seekers and state legislatures of secretly funding the movement. "The Wide Awakes," *Middletown Constitution,* Oct. 10, 1860.

[21] Rathbun, "'Wide Awakes,'" 331; Henry T. Sperry, *The Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford, Organized March 3, 1860* (Hartford, 1860), pamphlet, Connecticut Imprints.

This 1860 photograph of the founding Wide Awake club in Hartford, Connecticut, shows the paramilitary theme of the organization. Henry Sperry, the twenty-three-year-old publicist for the movement nationwide, stands on the far left, and James S. Chalker, a textile salesman who marketed Wide Awake uniforms, stands third from the right in the back row. *Reprinted from Julius G. Rathbun, "'The Wide Awakes': The Great Political Organization of 1860,"* Connecticut Quarterly, *1 (Oct. 1895).*

were rarely members of established elites. The young men who directed the movement, such as Henry Sperry, had little or no previous campaign experience or party standing. Popular interest from below, in the form of thousands of unsolicited letters, helped push them into action, and the movement's immense social appeal to young men and women demonstrates an easy fit between the political club and contemporary culture. Caught between the high-pressure system imagined by Altschuler and Blumin and the low-pressure popular "outburst" recalled by nostalgic former members, the Wide Awake storm swept America in the tumultuous summer of 1860.

The Wide Awake Generation

In August 1860 former presidential candidate William H. Seward traveled to the Midwest to stump for Abraham Lincoln, the very man who had defeated his campaign for the Republican nomination. In new hamlets and budding cities from Michigan to Kansas, tumultuous throngs of Wide Awakes greeted Seward's entourage with parades, fireworks, and banquets. Seward noticed more than just the stunning number of Wide Awakes who packed prairie arenas to hear him speak; in their young faces he recognized a grand generational stirring. When fifty companies converged on Detroit to receive him—a rally so large that Wide Awakes made up 10 percent of the city's total population that day—Seward declared, "The reason we didn't get an honest President in 1856, was

A young Iowan Wide Awake in full uniform demonstrates for the 1860 Republican candidates Abraham Lincoln (for president), Hannibal Hamlin (for vice president), and Samuel R. Curtis (for congressman). His stern expression reflects the dire, militaristic seriousness that often replaced exuberant hoopla in the Wide Awake ranks. *Reprinted from "'The Prairies A-Blaze': Iowa Wide-Awakes Carry Torches for Lincoln,"* Iowa Heritage Illustrated, *77 (Spring 1996). Courtesy Floyd and Marion Rinhart Collection, The Ohio State University Libraries.*

because the old men of the last generation were not Wide-Awake, and the young men of this generation hadn't got their eyes open. Now the old men are folding their arms and going to sleep, and the young men throughout the land are Wide Awake." Seward was not alone in noting the age of most Wide Awakes or in heralding the political rise of a generation. The Wide Awakes' youth was commented on by friends and foes again and again throughout 1860. It identifies the essence of the movement and perhaps explains Lincoln's election.[22]

The Republican party enjoyed a close relationship with younger voters. The historian William E. Gienapp argued that in 1860 the Republicans' primary new support came from first-time voters—particularly in the West—too young to participate in earlier elections. The six-year-old Republican party had a "fresh and youthful spirit," unlike the divided and supposedly corrupt Democrats. Gienapp also suggested that "the importance of the Wide-Awakes in strengthening the Republican Party among younger voters should not be overlooked." The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* agreed; in 1860 it described the movement as a "stepping-stone of thousands to the exercise for the first time, of the glori-

[22] "Senator Seward's Reception at Detroit," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* Sept. 5, 1860; "Political Miscellany," *New York Times,* Sept. 4, 1860.

ous elective franchise." The Wide Awakes worked to attract young men to political participation in general and to a lifelong relationship with the Republicans in particular.[23]

How young were the Wide Awakes? The rosters of several companies in Cleveland—a city with typical Wide Awake activity—help provide some valuable if partial demographic clues. The rosters show that three-quarters of the clubs' members were between fifteen and forty years old, and more than one-quarter would have been below voting age in the last presidential election. There were more members under twenty-one than over fifty. More important, an analysis of electoral tickets for 1860 demonstrates that Wide Awakes were considerably younger than politicians. The bulk of men running for local positions were between forty and sixty years old, nearly two decades older than the average Wide Awake. On the tickets examined, only one candidate for office was under thirty, unlike the majority of Cleveland's Wide Awakes. Finally, Wide Awake companies often broadcast their youth, electing men in their twenties and thirties to serve as the public face of the movement.[24]

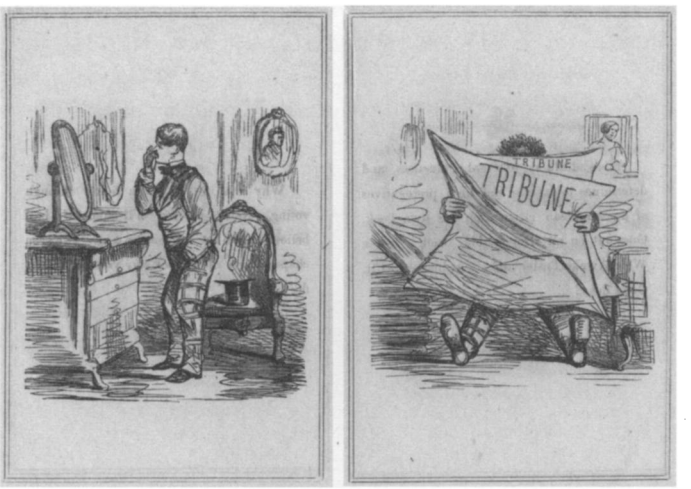
Those young men sometimes irritated older established politicians. Unfamiliar with traditional campaign boundaries, the Wide Awakes showed their political inexperience, youthful exuberance, and devotion to the party by simply appearing at the homes of prominent leaders, expecting late-night speeches. Some obliged those invading their privacy, but many politicians reacted angrily to the sudden crash of midnight brass bands and the glow of torches beneath their windows. Several Republican politicians stormed out in their nightshirts to order the companies off the premises. The pressure that the Wide Awakes put on their party's elders and the palpable annoyance this engendered challenge the image of campaign clubs as creations of interested political bosses. Many drowsy politicians would have rejected that claim.[25]

Established party leaders also looked askance at the Wide Awakes because of their non-elite roots. Though the movement incorporated members from most sections of society, wage laborers and farmers predominated. Some Republican leaders even complained about the absence of "the intelligent classes" in the Wide Awake ranks, which they claimed were made up of "the mechanic, or laborer, or clerk." Census records from Ohio and Connecticut indicate many farmers, factory workers, and carpenters in the Wide Awakes, in addition to some middle-class young men employed as store clerks or railroad ticket agents. The Wide Awakes were diverse, however, and the organization incorporated some bankers, merchants, and lawyers. Occasionally, established young men such as Charles Francis Adams Jr. joined the movement, but they represented a curiosity and were frequently pestered into joining by local Wide Awake companies. Class differ-

[23] William E. Gienapp, "Who Voted for Lincoln?," in *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition,* ed. John L. Thomas (Amherst, 1986), 76; "The Wide Awakes," *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier,* Nov. 6, 1860.

[24] The average age of Wide Awake club members was compiled by correlating the rosters for companies in several Cleveland wards with census information. See "Lincoln Wide Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* May 26, 1860; "Wide-Awakes," *ibid.*, May 29, 1860; and *HeritageQuest Online,* http://persi.heritagequestonline.com. The average age of candidates on electoral tickets was compiled by correlating published lists with census information. See "Republican City Ticket," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* March 31, 1860; "Democratic Electoral Ticket," *Columbus Ohio Statesman,* Sept. 11, 1860; "April Election," *Ripley Bee,* March 22, 1860; and *HeritageQuest Online,* http://persi.heritagequestonline.com.

[25] Charles Sumner, *The Works of Charles Sumner* (15 vols., Boston, 1875–1895), V, 345; "Political Affairs: Governor Seward on the Wing, Our Auburn Correspondence, Aurora, N.Y.," *New York Herald,* Sept. 3, 1860, p. 5; Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz,* vol. II: *1829–1863* (New York, 1907), 194–95.



The four scenes on these facing pages from the promotional pamphlet *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes* demonstrate the organization's deliberate appeal to young voters. They depict, from left to right, young Mr. Pipps examining his new moustache, reading about politics in the Republican *New York Tribune,* getting beaten up by "political antagonists" while in his Wide Awake uniform, and arguing with his conservative Democratic father. *Reprinted from Charles G. Leland,* Pipps Among the Wide Awakes *(New York: Wevill & Chapin Engravers & Printers, 1860). Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.*

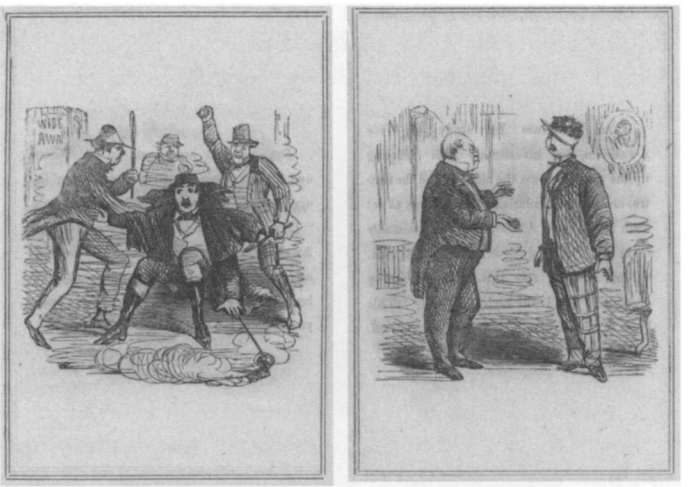
ences, though far less glaring than the obvious age gap, further complicated the relationship between the grassroots movement and elite politicians.[26]

While Republicans eventually developed confidence in "the moral force of such a body of young men," their opponents saw the Wide Awakes' age as a major weakness. Greatly exaggerating their youth, Democrats characterized members as "infant politicians," too young even to vote. Many questioned the masculinity of the young members, calling the Wide Awakes "beardless and precocious youths" and "infants whose mammas didn't know they were out." The frequent attacks on the youthfulness of the movement's members offer a glimpse of the relationship between age, masculinity, and political participation in that era. Denigrating the Wide Awakes' manliness also probably comforted those alarmed by the ominous sight of an army of torch-bearing, uniformed Republicans marching in lockstep.[27]

The illustrated pamphlet *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes* provides a powerful example of the movement's deliberate appeal to young voters. This strange little comic book tells the story of twenty-one-year-old Pipps, who takes his first step toward political participation by joining the Wide Awakes. The pamphlet begins with Pipps admiring his new mous-

[26] "What Should be Done,"*Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* Oct. 11, 1860. Information on Wide Awakes' employment was compiled from "Lincoln Wide Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* May 26, 1860; "Wide Awakes," *ibid.*, May 29, 1860; Rathbun, "'Wide Awakes,'" 328; and census information available at *HeritageQuest Online,* http://persi.heritagequestonline.com. Wide Awake companies often declared prominent figures—such as Abraham Lincoln, Thurlow Weed, and Edwin Morgan—honorary members of their clubs. See "Chicago Wide-Awake Republican Club to Abraham Lincoln (Certificate of membership)," June 1, 1860, series 1, General Correspondence, 1833–1916, Abraham Lincoln Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); *Madison Wisconsin Daily Patriot,* Sept. 12, 1860, p. 3; *Atchison (KS) Weekly Champion and Press,* Sept. 8, 1860, p. 2.

[27] "The Wide Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* Oct. 8, 1860; "Wide Awakes," *Chicago Tribune,* May 7, 1860; *Lowell Daily Citizen and News,* Oct. 13, 1860; "The Wide Awake Organization," *New York Herald,* Sept. 19, 1860.



tache in the mirror and deciding "to cast his virgin vote at the coming election." Though his conservative father tries to talk him out of "wide awaking," Pipps "disdains parental influences and determines to exercise the high prerogatives of an American citizen." After fighting off Democratic rowdies, Pipps casts his first vote for Abraham Lincoln, thereby becoming "a Man of the World and a Politician." Active participation in a political campaign—not marriage or fatherhood—affirms Pipps's maturity and masculinity. The pamphlet details how young men could join the Wide Awake movement to announce their newfound membership in the political sphere, not as gears in a larger machine, but as independent actors using the organization for self-expression.[28]

Pipps's story would not have won young northerners unless it connected to their own lives. Men in their twenties and thirties, convinced that they represented an ascendant generation that would remake American politics, flocked to Wide Awake clubs in response to the political conflicts that shaped their young adulthood. Their older patron, William Seward, articulated that conviction before an audience of cheering Michigan Wide Awakes, declaring:

> None but Republicans will be born in the United States after the year 1860. The first generation of the young men of the country, educated in the Republican faith, has appeared in your presence by a strong and bold demonstrative representation tonight. It is the young men who constitute the Wide Awake force. Ten years ago, and twenty years ago, the Wide Awake force were incapable of being organized for the distraction of the country and the Republican cause.

What had happened in the last few decades to cause young men to coalesce into the Wide Awake generation in 1860?[29]

[28] Charles G. Leland, *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes* (New York, 1860). For advertisements for this pamphlet, see, for example, "Wide Awakes! Attention!," advertisement, *Vanity Fair,* Oct. 27, 1860, p. 219. The ad is for a second edition of the pamphlet, whose very existence suggests the pamphlet's popularity.

[29] "The Excursion to Detroit," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* Sept. 6, 1860; "Mr. Seward to the Wide Awakes," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* Sept.10, 1860. There are problems in speaking of historical generations: the lines between age groups are vague, no event affects just one cohort, and members of a generation never react identically to an event.

Born in the years between the elections of John Quincy Adams in 1824 and William Henry Harrison in 1840, most Wide Awakes were infants during the shift from "corrupt bargain" to the hard cider populism that signaled the democratization of American politics. Unfortunately, these boys came of age during less optimistic times and were shaken by the bitter tensions and overwhelming political malaise of the 1850s. The sectional pressures of the Mexican War, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska conflict, and the caning of Charles Sumner combined to create the political world view of a generation of northerners. They inherited a nation that had just gained five hundred thousand square miles of Mexican territory but had lost its two-party system and some of its most prominent elder statesmen. Many young men were painfully aware of the capacities of their political system, both to conquer abroad and to crumble at home.[30]

Wide Awake promoters often invoked generational anxieties to rally young men. In pamphlets and banners, the movement alluded to late opponents of the Democratic party such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, implying that the deaths of those men required new partisans to continue their good work. Painfully aware of the shortcomings of the previous generations, the Wide Awakes felt they could succeed by picking up where men like Clay left off. Hundreds of thousands of young northerners, from New Jersey stevedores to Ohio college students, came to see local Wide Awake companies as a means to right past wrongs. Roused by more than a decade of disappointments from older politicians, the Wide Awake generation finally "got their eyes open."[31]

"Cold Blooded and Efficient Drill"

In midsummer the *Chicago Tribune* published a letter by a Wide Awake that announced the formation of a club in Henry County, Illinois. The enthusiastic writer reported, "The 'old men are for counsel,' the 'young men for war,' and if you would like to see one hundred young 'wide-awake' soldiers, just call on us." The tension between "counsel" and "war" had little to do with violence; rather, the letter refers to contrasting approaches to electioneering. Counsels and backroom negotiations epitomized the politics of an older generation, while uniforms and midnight drills symbolized the young men's war for the ballot box. Many Republicans took a surprisingly martial approach to the campaign, a move so unprecedented that the panicked *Ausin Texas State Gazette* warned, "The young and daring element of Abolitionism is for the first time enthused with something like a love for military prowess." Why was militarism so appealing to that generation? Did the young men's symbolic war somehow spill over into the real thing?[32]

There were over 3 million white men in their twenties and thirties in the North in 1860; even if 500,000 joined the Wide Awakes, it was a minority response. But portions of age groups sometimes coalesce around formative moments experienced in late adolescence. On the role of young southerners in pushing for secession and driving Confederate nationalism, see Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 96–98; and Peter S. Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

[30] The corrupt bargain was the deal allegedly struck by John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay to give Adams the presidency in the contested election of 1824. Hard cider populism refers to the identification of William Henry Harrison with that beverage of the common man—and the liberal distribution of it to voters—in the election of 1840. On the sense of mission of the generation that came of age in the 1850s and Seward's tour of the Midwest, see the autobiography of a prominent Wide Awake: Charles Francis Adams Jr., *Charles Francis Adams, 1835–1915: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1916).

[31] Sperry, *Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford, Organized March 3, 1860;* "Political Miscellany" *New York Times,* Sept. 4, 1860.

[32] "The Good Work in Henry County," *Chicago Tribune,* June 18, 1860, p. 2; *Austin Texas State Gazette,* Oct. 27, 1860.

The Wide Awakes hardly introduced America to militarism. "Militia fever" had already gripped the nation for over a decade. The combined weight of the victorious war with Mexico, increasing nationalism at home, and the stress schools put on the military history of the Revolution encouraged a civilian obsession with the military. The best work on nineteenth-century militarism, Marcus Cunliffe's *Soldiers and Civilians,* acknowledges the Wide Awakes as part of a fascination with martial organizations that manifested itself in hundreds of pseudomilitary associations. Likewise, political organizers often employed martial language in their behind-the-scenes communications, but the Wide Awakes were the first organization to make public use of militarism as a political identity. "No party," wrote Georgia's *Macon Telegraph,* "has heretofore been so desperate and abandoned" as to organize "armed political clubs." Though militarism was present in other aspects of American culture in the 1850s, its overt incorporation into politics made the Wide Awake campaign truly innovative.[33]

Wide Awake militarism extended far beyond wearing uniforms. Partisan newspapers frequently employed terms like "soldiers," "the army," "arms," and "weapons" to refer to Wide Awakes, the Republican party, torches, and ballots. Members larded their pamphlets with military terminology, and martial metaphors became ubiquitous in politicians' stump speeches. Many of the club's older officers were veterans of the Mexican War and passed their military experience on to their men. Former and future military icons—including Ulysses S. Grant—taught the Wide Awakes textbook infantry drills. While earlier campaigns trumpeted the personal military backgrounds of Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, and Zachary Taylor, the Wide Awakes idealized the militarism, not of Lincoln's brief service, but of the mass of campaigners, offering each partisan a professional military identity.[34]

In light of the club's militarism, the brawls, stabbings, and shootings that often occurred at Wide Awake demonstrations are impossible to ignore. Nonetheless, nineteenth-century political culture was prone to violence, and the November election was relatively peaceful. Within a few months of their founding, the Wide Awakes had largely abandoned their original employment as escorts for Republican speakers to focus almost entirely on nonviolent parades. Although Wide Awake–related violence provides important evidence about the militarism of the movement, it does not indicate that the clubs were more aggressive than other partisan organizations of the period.

Bloodshed occurred mostly in competitive parts of the lower North, and it often differed from region to region. East Coast partisans usually clashed in large melees where they used stones, bricks, and torches as weapons. In many cases rowdies ambushed Wide Awake parades, hurling bricks and screaming, "Kill the damn Wide Awakes." The movement also initiated violence, in one instance attacking a Manhattan fire company and destroying its engine before being chased off by ax-wielding firemen. The New York Wide Awakes, when asked about their frequent brawls, complained that their torches were made of soft pine and splintered after just a few blows to the head. Farther west, the violence involved more weapons. Oscar Lawrence Jackson, a twenty-year-old who lectured to open-air audiences in rural Ohio, recorded an incident in which drunken Democrats tried to shout down his speech. "It came near taking a serious turn," Jackson wrote, "as

[33] Marcus Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Martial Spirit in America, 1775–1865* (New York, 1973), 96; "The Reign of the Clubs," *Macon Telegraph,* Sept. 19, 1860.

[34] For martial metaphors (in a November 1860 speech), see Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner,* V, 345. Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant,* ed. E. B. Long (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 109.

the 'Wide Awakes' were prepared and would have shot and sliced them like dogs if any one of us had been struck." Events took "a serious turn" in the Midwest with frightening frequency. The Democratic candidate for coroner in an Indiana town shot a club member in the shoulder, and an Illinois Wide Awake stabbed the "ring leader of a mob" seven times during a late night brawl.[35]

It is deceptively easy to see a link between the militarism of the movement and those violent episodes, but to do so ignores key aspects of the Wide Awakes' clashes. Despite their imposing image, the clubs' mode of demonstrating made its members more vulnerable to the guerrilla warfare of nineteenth-century political violence. A tightly packed group of Wide Awakes surrounded by large crowds of anonymous spectators made an easy target for a few teenage brick throwers. When violence did occur, Wide Awakes rarely maintained their formation. As it broke up, some individual members charged their opponents while others fled for cover. The Wide Awakes also never displayed weapons, and those who used knives or revolvers brought them individually and hid them beneath their capes. Even the torches, though often used as clubs, proved unreliable. With a few highly publicized exceptions, the Wide Awakes fought like Democrats or Know-Nothings, not as an organized militia.

The Wide Awakes struggled to convince a worried nation that their movement could be both militaristic and peaceful. The captain of a lower Manhattan club informed the *New York Times* that the Wide Awakes were "not only the most numerous, the best disciplined and the most effective political organization this country has ever seen," but also "the best behaved." Lecturers reminded hotheaded members that their martial talk was metaphorical, and election day editorials begged the Wide Awakes to avoid violence at the polls. One writer in St. Louis dismissed fears of Wide Awake violence, joking that "their organization owes itself to some shrewd Yankee, who invented a cheap uniform. . . . There is no warlike intention whatever in the movement." Despite their frequent scrapes, the Wide Awakes self-consciously claimed to have little love of violence.[36]

Why would the movement cultivate a martial image, if not for violent ends? Marcus Cunliffe's examination of nineteenth-century American militarism suggests an answer to that question. Cunliffe argued that militarism was often more performative than functional. Examining the Union soldiers who fled without firing at the first battle of Manassas, Cunliffe concluded that they "*performed* their duty, as they interpreted the verb: they had made a show and now their time was up." Militarism could certainly involve violence, but it could also be used to display discipline and uniformity. The martial spirit was as much a demonstration of organizational capacities as a means of inciting men to kill each other.[37]

Cunliffe's interpretation helps explain the "self-imposed discipline" of the movement. In the words of an Ohio congressional candidate, the Wide Awakes united "the martial bearing of the soldier with the manly port of the free American citizen," reinventing partisanship as "half-military, half-civil—all patriotic, all manly." Successfully projecting

[35] "Political Riot at Troy," *New York Herald,* Oct. 17, 1860; "The Fight between the Wide Awakes and Firemen," *ibid.*, Nov. 5, 1860; Jackson, *Colonel's Diary,* ed. Jackson, 30; "Republican Mass Meeting—Democratic Assault," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* Aug. 27, 1860; "Assault Upon a Republican Meeting," *Chicago Tribune,* Sept. 21, 1860.

[36] "An Attempt to Make Mischief," *New York Times,* Sept. 28, 1860; "Mr. Arnold's Speech on Presenting the Prize Banner," *Chicago Tribune,* Oct. 4, 1860; Sumner, *Works of Charles Sumner,* V, 345; "Letter from St. Louis," *San Francisco Bulletin,* Nov. 6, 1860.

[37] Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians,* 8.

that "bearing," the movement used militarism to declare the organizational strength of its campaign. Members' obsession with their uniforms—they focused on the length of their capes or the color of their caps above most other factors of the campaign—demonstrates the centrality of the seemingly insignificant military symbolism. While other partisan clubs stumbled along in messy romps connoting disorganization and inefficiency, Wide Awake parades followed the drills set out in Maj. William James Hardee's military manual, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*. Wide Awake militarism was never a preparation for physical action, but rather a powerful campaign metaphor linking military iconography with democratic participation.[38]

The movement's organizational militarism explains the puzzling lack of fun involved. While spectators enjoyed the parades, the traditional image of an unruly hoopla campaign rarely applied to the experiences of the Wide Awakes themselves. Many companies forbade "boisterous or disorderly conduct," cigar smoking, and speaking in the ranks. In September *Vanity Fair* published a letter from a former Wide Awake denouncing the movement and claiming that its obsession with drill and rank allowed officers unrepublican power over "soldiers." Many felt that, in addition to complying with the strict regulations, joining the Wide Awakes meant "standing in the mud wearing a heavy cape and carrying a vile-smelling torch on a hot, sultry night." The focus on militarism for organization sapped the movement of much of the joy involved in nineteenth-century politics.[39]

Observers noted the absence of merriment. The diarist George Templeton Strong felt that Wide Awake demonstrations "are elaborate and splendid, but cold and mechanical. One misses the spontaneous hullabaloo and furor of the Harrison campaign." Even New Hampshire's excited Republican papers grudgingly admitted that the organization was "less noisy than some other hilarious movements during political campaigns." The Wide Awakes' stress on martial order, not boisterous fun, contrasts with the popular image of the 1860 presidential contest as a "hurrah campaign." That has been the prevalent view since David Potter's *The Impending Crisis* appeared in 1976, but it ignores the fact that the Wide Awakes offered something other than traditional "fun and excitement." Unlike the wild election of 1840—a campaign practically dripping hard cider—the Wide Awakes' movement presented voters with a sober martial theme. Its peculiar form of entertainment demonstrates the complexity hiding behind such terms as "hurrah campaign."[40]

Though lacking drunken exuberance, the Wide Awakes' striking image enticed hundreds of thousands of members and probably millions of spectators. Challenging the harsh view of historians such as Altschuler and Blumin, the movement proves that more than just free liquor could catch the public's attention. Some element of the Wide Awakes' deadly seriousness powerfully appealed to mass audiences. Why were so many northerners drawn to the "martial bearing" of the Wide Awakes? What cultural button did they push that alerted the public to the organizational power of militarism?

[38] "The Great Demonstration," *Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette,* Oct. 4, 1860; "Messrs. Riddle, Backus and Paine Serenaded," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* Aug. 22, 1860; Sperry, "Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford."

[39] Sperry, *Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford, Organized March 3, 1860;* "Worthy of Imitation—the Connecticut Wide Awakes," *Chicago Tribune,* May 7, 1860; "Letter to the Editor from Dr. Archer of New Jersey," *Vanity Fair,* Sept. 29, 1860, p. 168; "The Campaign in Connecticut," *New York Times,* July 28, 1860.

[40] George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong,* ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (Seattle, 1988), 43; "The Second Demonstration by the Wide-Awake Clubs of Concord," *Concord New Hampshire Statesman,* July 7, 1860; Potter, *Impending Crisis,* ed. Fehrenbacher, 435.

The Wide Awakes' popular militarism grew out of their party's struggle to organize. The Republicans never lacked passionate leadership or fiery ideology; rather, the young movement suffered from organizational weakness. In *The Origins of the Republican Party,* William Gienapp argued that the Republicans offered superior motivation but inferior organization compared to the veteran Democrats' established electioneering techniques. Gienapp quoted a Republican who recalled the 1856 John C. Frémont campaign as "a sort of mob, unorganized, contending with a well drilled and bold enemy. We did wonders because we were enthusiastic and in earnest, but no enthusiasm or earnestness can stand against cold blooded and efficient drill." "Drill" seemed to be the proper way to strengthen the party's image, to turn it from an enthusiastic mob into a uniform military body.[41]

Militarism supplied a simple identity for a party struggling to unite. As a diverse conglomeration of former Whigs, Know-Nothings, Free-Soilers, and Democrats, Republicans shared little besides a belief in northern superiority. While a slave society and minority status joined southerners, and Democrats could hearken back to the memory of Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson, it was extremely unclear what united Republicans or northerners in 1860. Free labor, however significant, was a hard banner to march under, as it was too complex and deep-seated to reduce to campaign symbols. Instead, young Republicans embraced the martial metaphor "from one end of the North to the other." To show their cohesion, Wide Awake companies frequently went on "excursions" to other towns and even other states, marching with fellow northerners who wore the same uniform. Their shared militarism created a superficial but evocative sense of political and sectional unity. As the Democratic party publicly split its seams, the Republicans pulled on a dark Wide Awake cloak to cover the recent stitching holding their new party together.[42]

The generation that joined the Wide Awake campaign shared that martial ardor and fear of disorganization. In a few short years, young Americans had watched their military conquer and their parties crumble. Their officers had radiated victory while their political leaders had oozed malaise. Where the generation's obsession with correcting past mistakes overlapped with a party's need for "cold blooded and efficient drill," the Wide Awakes were born. The movement's three fundamental components—militarism, youth, and party organization—interacted and at times blended, like the overlapping circles in a Venn diagram. At its center lay a strange movement: militant, but antiviolent; young, but fixated on maturity; and partisan, but distant from established leadership.

The "Monster Body Guard" Haunts the South

The Wide Awakes displayed a fourth paradox. Though highly local, the movement had grave national consequences. Intent on battling northern Democrats, few Wide Awakes considered how their militarism appeared below the Mason-Dixon line. Looking north to the network slowly stretching into Maryland, Virginia, and Missouri, many panicked southerners interpreted the movement as confirmation of their fears of northern coercion. Virginians warned that the Wide Awakes "carry rails to break open our doors, torches to

[41] Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party,* 415.

[42] Thompson, "Wide Awakes of 1860," 295. On the Wide Awakes' frequent "excursions," see "Excursion!," *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier,* Aug. 2, 1860; "Excursion Tickets," *Philadelphia North America and United States Gazette,* Sept. 14, 1860; "Visit of the Newark Wide Awakes to Hartford," *Middletown Constitution,* Aug. 1, 1860; "Legislative Acts," *Amherst Farmers' Cabinet,* Sept. 26, 1860; "The Muster," *ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1860; and Rinhart and Rinhart, "'Prairies A-Blaze,'" 48.

fire our dwellings and beneath their long, black capes, the knives to cut our throats." In Congress Senator Louis Wigfall of Texas accused William Seward of ordering "his Wide Awake Praetorians" to "sweep the country I live in with fire and sword." The participation of a handful of black men in a Wide Awake parade in Massachusetts—an event that also infuriated racist northerners in both parties—confirmed the southern narrative of the coming Republican apocalypse.[43]

Most southerners feared the threat that Wide Awakes posed, not to their throats, but to their political process. Many believed that the Republicans were organizing "a vast army under the guise of political clubs, intended to supersede the Constitutional forces of the government." Radicals like William Lowndes Yancey and Henry A. Wise decried the Wide Awakes as a Republican paramilitary corps, "a monster body guard" that planned to inaugurate Abraham Lincoln forcibly. At the center of the anxiety lay the belief that the Wide Awakes—unlike the usual campaign clubs that melted away in mid-November—had grown into a constant Republican auxiliary. A month after the election, the *Dallas Weekly Herald* articulated these concerns in an article titled, "The Wide Awakes Permanent." By crossing the boundaries that limited political clubs to participation between nomination and election, the Wide Awakes threatened to introduce America to a perpetual campaign for office and patronage. This terrifying premonition of a permanent Wide Awake midnight led many southerners to view the movement as a threat to the already precarious political process.[44]

The Wide Awakes failed to appreciate the reasonable alarm of their southern neighbors. Fiery speakers at Wide Awake rallies, such as Congressman Owen Lovejoy, deliberately agitated the already paranoid region. Lovejoy called on the Wide Awakes to invade Virginia and capture Henry Wise, predicting that instead of bearing torches, soon "they will shoulder their muskets." When Wide Awakes did attempt to reassure southerners, they often employed patronizing sarcasm. Connecticut's *Middletown Constitution* mocked William Lowndes Yancey's anxiety, teasing, "What terrible fellows, those Wide Awakes, to have frightened Yancey so!" The Wide Awakes failed to notice the long southward shadow they cast. A song written by a former member in 1863 demonstrates this when it rhymes:

> Our torches flared with turpentine,
> And filled the streets with smoke;
> And we were sure,
> Whate'er might come: Secession was a joke.[45]

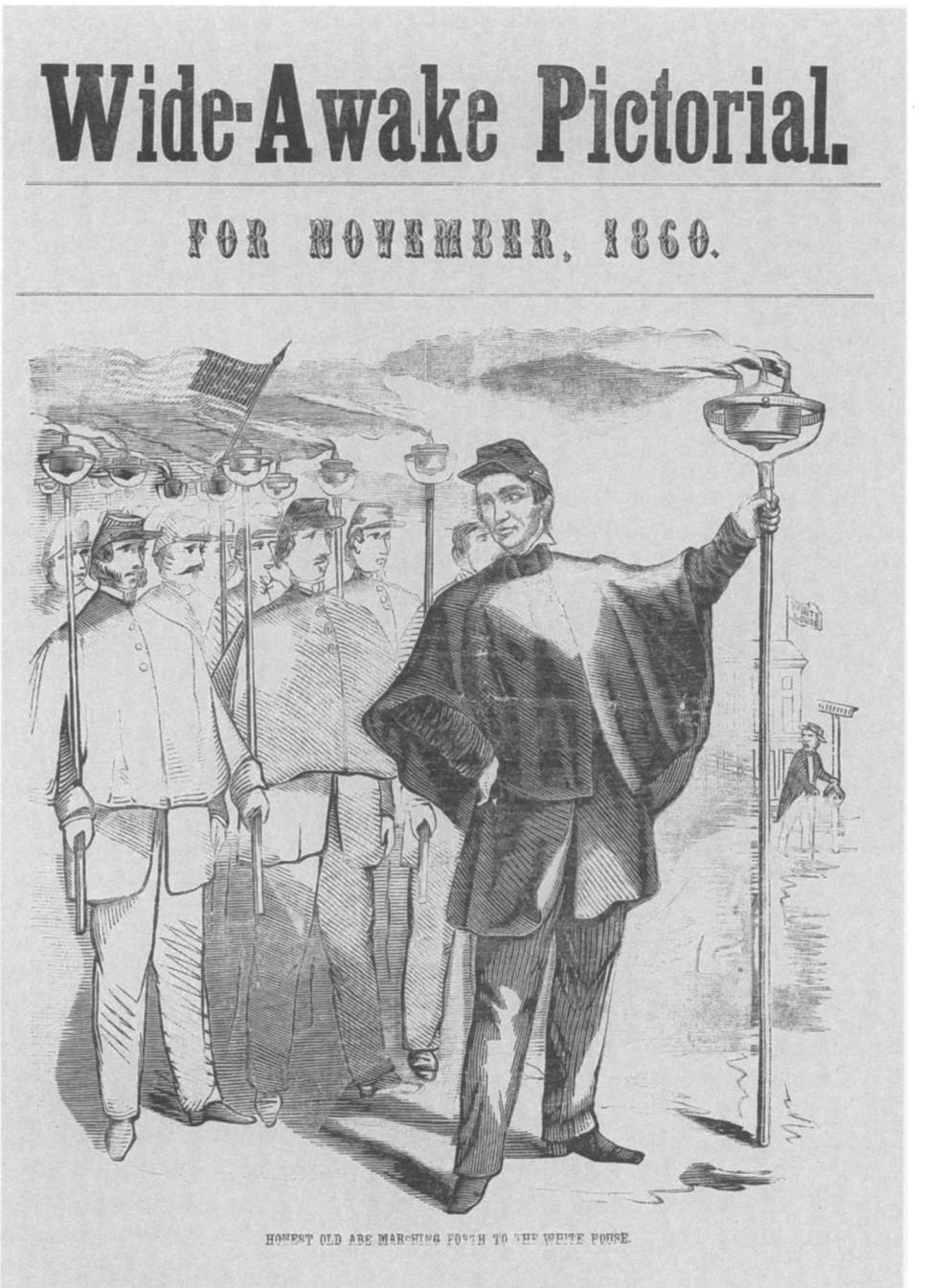
Voting and Fighting

When November 6 came, thousands of plain-clothed Wide Awakes policed the polls. The day was peaceful, and the results predictable. Abraham Lincoln won a weak plural-

[43] "Fear of the Wide Awakes," *Middletown Constitution,* Oct. 17, 1860; "Legislative Acts," *Madison Wisconsin Daily Patriot,* Dec. 13, 1860; "The Last Phase of Black Republicanism," *Macon Weekly Telegraph,* Oct. 10, 1860.

[44] "The Reign of the Clubs," *Macon Weekly Telegraph,* Sept. 19, 1860, p. 1; "The 'Wide Awake' Clubs," *New York Herald,* Aug. 21, 1860; "The Wide Awakes Permanent," *Dallas Weekly Herald,* Dec. 5, 1860.

[45] Owen Lovejoy, *His Brother's Blood: Speeches and Writings, 1838–64,* ed. William F. Moore and Jane Ann Moore (Urbana, 2004), 231; "Speech of Hon. Owen Lovejoy," *Chicago Tribune,* Oct. 18, 1860, p. 2; "The Wide Awakes," *Middletown Constitution,* Oct. 10, 1860; "Two Years Ago: By a Drafted Wide Awake," song sheet, n.d., *Library of Congress: American Memory,* http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/S?ammem/amss:@field(TITLE+@od1(Two+years+ago++[n++p+]+[n++d+])).



This campaign pamphlet, published days before the 1860 elections, shows an extremely young-looking "Honest Old Abe" leading a company of Wide Awakes to the White House. *Reprinted from "Honest Old Abe Marching Forth to the White House," Nov. 1, 1860, p. 1. Courtesy of Harpweek,* LLC.

ity of 39.9 percent of the popular ballot but earned the electoral votes of all the northern and western states, excluding part of New Jersey. Despite their stunning popularity, it is unlikely that the Wide Awakes won the election for the Republicans. Though George Templeton Strong decided to vote for Lincoln after attending a Wide Awake parade, most voters probably responded to the larger forces promoting Republican realignment and Democratic fissure. Even if it politicized thousands of young men who had never before voted, Lincoln probably would have won without the movement.[46]

It is clear, however, that the Wide Awakes fundamentally altered the tone of the campaign. They took a muddled political environment and turned it into one of the most excited elections in American history. Through marches, speeches, editorials, advertisements, cartoons, jokes, and brawls, the Wide Awakes triggered massive popular enthusiasm in the summer and fall of 1860. Democrats and Constitutional Unionists responded with their own clubs, further electrifying the contest. Northerners became so used to the sound of marching companies that when a small earthquake shook Boston in mid-October, many assumed it was simply the Wide Awakes drilling on Boston Common.[47] Most important, the prominent movement highlighted the powerful forces of militarism, youth, and partisan competition that dramatically altered the era. By energizing the tone of the campaign, the Wide Awakes had a major impact on how Americans interpreted Lincoln's victory in the days and weeks between election and secession. By the end of 1860, the nation was wide awake.

Here the story enters that strange vortex between election and war. Yet the Wide Awakes bridge that divide. While some companies disbanded after the election, hundreds of others continued to meet and offered to escort Lincoln down to Washington for his inauguration. They were politely refused, but the mere suggestion stoked southern fears. South Carolina fire-eaters began to organize "Minute Men" militias, not out of empty paranoia, but "as an offset to the Wide Awakes of the North." The creation of the Minute Men is often mentioned as a major stepping-stone on the road to disunion, but few historians note that they were a direct response to the Wide Awakes. The link between secession and the movement is even stronger than previously realized. As South Carolina's leaders debated secession late on the evening of December 20, one speaker referenced the movement. Though endorsing secession, Edward McCrady argued that his state should not "march as the Wide Awakes in the North, by torchlight," but leave the Union "in broad daylight" the next morning. The first Americans to secede did so with the Wide Awake movement on their minds, an emblem of the flawed Union they were fleeing.[48]

Throughout the winter southerners weighing disunion frequently mentioned the movement. On January 9, the *Jackson Weekly Mississippian* warned, "Large bodies of Wide Awakes have been organized with a view to attempt the invasion of South Carolina under the sanction of the Federal flag." Mississippi seceded later that day. Even in the upper South, many fence-sitters balked at the more realistic concern of being trapped in a Union permanently dominated by the militant campaign organization. George Sanders—the Kentucky Democrat later accused of aiding Lincoln's assassins—informed New Yorkers, "The South looks to your military and militant Wide Awakes, to your banners, your

[46] Strong, *Diary of George Templeton Strong,* ed. Nevins and Thomas, 57.

[47] "The Earthquake," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News,* Oct. 8, 1860.

[48] George P. Bissell to Abraham Lincoln, Dec. 30, 1860, Lincoln Papers, available online at American Memory, http://lcweb2.loc.gov/amhome.html; "Political Intelligence," *New York Herald,* Oct. 20, 1860; "State Convention," *Charleston Courier,* Dec. 22, 1860.

speeches, your press, and your votes, and not to what Mr. Lincoln may say or do after his election." Fear of the Wide Awakes—as an invading army, recipients of patronage, or permanent campaigners—was a major factor in many southerners' calculus of disunion.[49]

When the war began, the movement supplied some of the Union's earliest and most eager volunteers. Just three days after the firing on Fort Sumter, thousands of Wide Awakes in Philadelphia and Washington began to train secretly as a paramilitary force. In St. Louis, the Republican congressman Francis Preston Blair Jr. armed companies of German Wide Awakes and ordered them to capture the pro-secession Missouri State Militia based at Camp Jackson. The bloody confrontation that followed left twenty-eight dead and sparked the extremely brutal fighting that engulfed Missouri for the next three years. It is not possible to know what percentage of Wide Awake members fought in the war, but scattered evidence suggests that their participation was remarkably high. Eighty percent of the original Hartford company served, compared to about half of eligible Northerners. All but two of the Wide Awakes quoted in this study fought.[50]

The "young men for war" were surprisingly nearsighted. Though the Wide Awakes were driven by the national experiences of their generation and were participating in a campaign for federal office, they rarely noticed the impact of their political war games. Later, many members would claim that their militarism showed that they had predicted the Civil War, but at the time they barely saw it coming. Instead, the Wide Awakes were a group of young men playing with a very dangerous symbol. Their militarism became a runaway metaphor, crashing through the divide between politics and culture, election and war. The surprising and inadvertent power of the movement proves that, in the words of the *New York Herald*, "the fact is all people are public characters themselves."[51]

Though the consequences of their metaphor were unintentional, the Wide Awakes chose it deliberately. The campaign's militaristic symbolism declared their generation's attitudes toward partisan combat. Throughout their adolescence they watched the Whigs die, the Know-Nothings rise and fall, the Democracy split itself, and a new party, barely six years old, poised to win the presidency. Club members were reared on stark notions of competition in an age of ephemeral organizations. The Wide Awake generation was coming to see politics as a deadly zero-sum game, and military metaphors acknowledged that a party might be able to massacre its rivals. That was what Seward meant when he joked that "none but Republicans will be born in the United States after the year 1860." Wearing shiny black capes and practicing infantry drills had nothing to do with preparing for civil war; instead, the symbolism reflected the hope that the Republican party might finally finish off the northern Democracy. The Wide Awakes' story shows that campaign metaphors are not empty hoopla, but rather display the intimate relationship between citizens and their politics.[52]

[49] "By the Telegraph," *Jackson Weekly Mississippian,* Jan. 9, 1861; "George Sanders on the Sequences of Southern Secession," *Tri-Weekly Charleston Courier,* Nov. 8, 1860.

[50] *Baltimore Sun,* April 15, 1860; Rathbun, "'Wide Awakes,'" 335, 328; Gallagher, *Confederate War,* 29.

[51] "The Prince of Wales," *New York Herald,* Sept. 25, 1860.

[52] "Mr. Seward to the Wide Awakes," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* Sept. 10, 1860.