

## ABSTRACT

Elizabeth C. Barrow. PUSH ON THE COLUMN! A STUDY OF THE WIDE AWAKES DURING THE 1860 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. (Under the direction of Dr. David E. Long) Department of History, August 2005.

This thesis is an examination of the Wide Awakes, a Republican quasi-military campaign club that played an important part in the 1860 presidential election campaign. They have been largely ignored by historians, and when they have been portrayed those depictions were often inaccurate. This thesis will examine how the Wide Awakes differed from other political clubs of the nineteenth century and explore how the Wide Awakes were influential in the campaign to elect Abraham Lincoln. The Wide Awakes combined elements of pre-existing political clubs and military influence with antislavery ideology and youthful zeal to create one of the most structured and well-rounded campaign clubs of the nineteenth century.

Historical interpretations of the Wide Awakes depict them as one-dimensional: boisterous and rowdy banner wavers for the Republican Party in 1860 whose spectacular parades and large membership meant little. Historians have been unable to see past the torchlight processions, grand rallies, unique uniforms, and attention to military-style marching. As a result they have failed to measure the impact that these men had on one of the most important elections in American history. Primary documents, including Wide Awake constitutions, correspondence among members, meeting minutes, and newspapers, reveal a much more substantive and progressive campaign club. Wide Awakes used their torchlight processions and rallies as the medium through which they broadcast their political message.

The organization began as a local club in Hartford and through a combination of good timing and some very savvy political minds grew into a national movement. The Wide Awakes quickly spread all across the North and even attempted to rally in Missouri and Baltimore. They provided a sense of excitement and belonging to hundreds of first-time voters and recent Know-Nothing converts. Their presence helped to spread the Republican message and assured voters they could trust Abraham Lincoln, and their efforts were among the important reasons he was elected the sixteenth President of the United States. This thesis explores the Wide Awake organization by comparing it to other volunteer and campaign clubs of the 1850s, as well as establishing what differentiated the Republican club from other campaign clubs of the nineteenth century. This thesis is the first comprehensive examination of the organization.

PUSH ON THE COLUMN!  
A STUDY OF THE WIDE AWAKES  
DURING THE 1860 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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To my family and friends  
who endured countless stories of the Wide Awakes  
and who supported me nonetheless.

And to my mentor  
whose patience and knowledge guided me through,  
believing in me even when I did not trust myself.

Thank you!

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## INTRODUCTION

*"The future historian, who shall depict the incidents which will make the political revolution of 1860 memorable in our annals, will devote one of his most glowing chapters to the achievements of the Wide Awakes."<sup>1</sup>*

In a country torn apart by the slavery controversy, all eyes were watching the 1860 presidential election. If Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate, was elected, then the Southern states would have the impetus they needed to secede from the Union. The Republicans desperately needed to win the swing states of Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Illinois in the contest for electoral votes. In those few states, a small percentage of the voters could mean the difference between the election of the first Republican president, or an election brokered in the House of Representatives.

At the center of the campaign emerged a Republican campaign club whose widespread influence and quasi-military appearance was quite unlike anything the nation had witnessed in previous campaigns. Historians have recounted in detail the peculiar issues and dynamics of the 1860 election, including the rise of Lincoln and the Republican Party. But, in this particular election campaign, the Wide Awakes, the Republican campaign club, became major newsmakers of the Republican Party. Unfortunately they have been remembered in history for their superficial attributes; the glitz and glamour, the music-makers and slogan chanters, who were omnipresent at virtually every Republican rally, the banner headlines inspired by their parades. Their true importance was rooted deep within the fiber of the party organization, yet no

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from the *New York Tribune* as reprinted in the *Hartford Courant*, 1 November 1860.

political history of the 1860 election thus far has focused serious attention on the Wide Awakes and their contributions to Lincoln's election.

Murat Halstead quickly glossed-over the Wide Awakes in his detailed, eyewitness recollection of the Republican National Convention in Chicago. Lincoln's private secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, only briefly described the Wide Awakes in their detailed account of the 1860 election campaign. To date, the most detailed history of the Wide Awake movement was written by Major Julius G. Rathbun, an officer of the original Wide Awakes.<sup>2</sup> In 1895 Rathbun wrote an article in the *Connecticut Quarterly* responding to a request to tell the history of the original Wide Awakes. The very first line of his article warned the reader that his account was not a political article. Rathbun had specifically been asked to write a history of the organization.<sup>3</sup> The article was informational and did lack political bias. Its absence of political insight into the Wide Awakes suggested they lacked political structure or motivation, or were without significant influence. In that sense, the article lacked substantive depth or historical context. In fact, the Wide Awakes did have structure and political motivation, and exerted meaningful influence. Nevertheless, Rathbun's article has remained the most detailed and complete history of the Wide Awake movement in 1860.

A second history of the Wide Awakes was written a century after the Civil War when J. Doyle DeWitt, a member of the Connecticut Civil War Centennial Commission,

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<sup>2</sup> Murat Halstead, *Three Against Lincoln*, ed. Roger Hesseltine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); John G. Nicolay & John Hay, "Lincoln's Nomination and Election," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 34, no. 5 (Sept., 1887), 658-684; Julius G. Rathbun, "The Wide Awakes: Great Political Organization of 1860," *The Connecticut Quarterly* 1 (October, 1895).

<sup>3</sup> Rathbun, 327.

addressed the Republican phenomenon from a different perspective.<sup>4</sup> In *Lincoln in Hartford*, DeWitt explained the popularity of the Wide Awake movement as a natural phenomenon that grew during Lincoln's New England speaking tour, immediately after Lincoln's spectacularly successful Cooper Union Address on 27 February 1860. According to DeWitt, Lincoln's speech in Hartford, Connecticut, was one of the primary reasons the Wide Awake movement gained momentum. The speech helped to dissipate any opposition Lincoln may have faced in Hartford, and following the talk he was escorted back to his boarding house by the newly formed Hartford Wide Awakes who had met and elected their officers just two days before.<sup>5</sup>

DeWitt's history of the Wide Awake movement paralleled Rathbun's history but described Lincoln's March speeches, and specifically his speech in Hartford, as more important in developing the Wide Awake movement than had been indicated in Rathbun's history. DeWitt argued that Lincoln's speech in Hartford "brought into being the first great political marching organization which provided a great deal of enthusiasm and strength for his presidential campaign."<sup>6</sup> Both histories were accurate; however, Rathbun provided a better overall assessment of the origin of the Wide Awakes.

Both Rathbun's and DeWitt's histories have contributed to our knowledge of the Wide Awakes, but both accounts were written years after the election. Other than Rathbun, original sources about the Wide Awakes written by members of the organization have not been readily available. There are references to a collection of

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<sup>4</sup> J. Doyle DeWitt, *Lincoln in Hartford*, Connecticut Civil War Centennial Commission. Rare Book Collection, Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup> DeWitt, 5 & 11; Rathbun, 328.

<sup>6</sup> DeWitt, 15.

records kept by the Hartford Club – records of Wide Awake meetings, officers, membership totals, and Constitutions – collected in the “Records of the Wide-Awakes of the United States.” These records are mentioned in a letter signed by Wide Awake Corresponding Secretary H. T. Sperry. This letter was sent to all towns and cities interested in organizing a Wide Awake club of their own.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, none of these records have been located and it is doubtful they exist. Perhaps they never existed. Or perhaps the records once existed but have been destroyed or damaged through the years. Possibly the Hartford Wide Awakes intended to keep records but as the organization grew well beyond the state of Connecticut, its attention became focused on campaigning for Lincoln and therefore neglected to preserve a record for posterity. Or perhaps individual clubs and organizations became caught up in the campaign and never sent their information to Hartford. With the war starting soon after the election, nobody took the time to preserve a historical record. Fortunately, newspapers captured the rapidly evolving Wide Awake movement.

The most valuable source for researching the Wide Awakes has been the local Hartford newspaper, the *Courant*. From Cassius Clay’s visit to Hartford on 25 February 1860 through the secession of South Carolina on 20 December 1860, the *Courant* reported the Wide Awakes’ every move. The Wide Awakes became immensely popular (or notorious) across the nation and a majority of newspapers mentioned the Wide Awake movement in some regard. Either a local town was forming a Wide Awake club, or a procession was scheduled nearby, or (in Democratic papers) a Democratic club had been

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<sup>7</sup> H. T. Sperry to [blank], 10 August 1860 in Records 1860-1861 (Wide-Awake Club, Hartford, Connecticut).

formed in response to the popularity of the Wide Awakes. The *Hartford Courant* printed the Wide Awake Constitution while the *Hartford Weekly Times* detailed mounting Democratic opposition. The *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer* and the *New York Times* detailed the most elaborate Wide Awake demonstration of the year which took place in New York City on 3 October 1860. Information regarding the Wide Awakes appeared in newspapers from Richmond, Virginia to Vermont.

Unfortunately, the history of the Wide Awakes has not been as well preserved in memoirs as it was in newspapers. Two significant citizens of Connecticut, Joseph Hawley and Gideon Welles, left behind extensive memoirs but included relatively little information about the Wide Awakes in them. The Connecticut Historical Society is home to the extensive papers of George S. Gilman, president of the original Wide Awakes. Gilman's name appeared on the official Wide Awake certificate and correspondence indicated that Gilman was in contact with other leading Connecticut politicians, including Joseph Hawley. Other collections of Civil War papers provide occasional glimpses of the Wide Awakes.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, a variety of original Wide Awake documents have been located throughout the country . . . a letter here, drill book there . . . like pieces of a puzzle just waiting to be put back together. Each individual document provides a better understanding of the Wide Awake movement and the political goals and passions of its members. One of the most important primary documents located was the original Wide

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph R. Hawley, Papers of Joseph R. Hawley, 1638-1906, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Gideon Welles, Gideon Welles Papers, 1758-1814, Connecticut Historical Society; George Gilman, Gilman Family Papers, 1787-1985, Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society; Personal notebook, 1585-1860 (manuscript).

Awake Constitution drafted in Hartford. This Constitution identified the rules and regulations for Wide Awakes, but also upon closer examination it revealed the founders' political aspirations and intentions for the organization. The preamble dedicated the organization to the Constitution of the United States and also committed its members to formally resisting the extension of slavery into the territories. Articles within the Wide Awake Constitution established that the organization was quasi-military in structure, but its members were forbidden from instigating any acts of violence. Above all, the Wide Awakes were a political organization, and they intended never to lose sight of their main objectives.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, when historians began to write about the Wide Awakes they overwhelmingly chose to concentrate on the quasi-military aspect of the organization. A typical work, like Osborn Oldroyd's *Lincoln's Campaign; or the political revolution of 1860*, followed the basic outline of Rathbun's history and systematically went through the obvious characteristics of the Wide Awakes: the uniforms, swinging torches, drilling in formation, and grand parades. Oldroyd's monograph was a matter-of-fact outline of the 1860 campaign without any real analysis of how or why Lincoln won. He described the Wide Awakes as a "Republican auxiliary, semi-military in character, but political in purpose," but the extent of Oldroyd's examination into the political purpose of the Wide Awakes ended with a discussion of parades and campaign music.<sup>10</sup> Oldroyd failed to

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<sup>9</sup> Wide Awake preamble & Constitution in Records 1860-1861 (Wide-Awake Club, Hartford, Connecticut).

<sup>10</sup> Olson Oldroyd, *Lincoln's Campaign; or the political revolution of 1860* (Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1896), 104-105.

understand or explain the political aspirations of the Wide Awakes and how they were able to assist in Lincoln's victory.

The only exception to the stereotypical depiction of the Wide Awakes was Emerson Fite's *The Presidential Campaign of 1860*, published in 1911.<sup>11</sup> Fite's work came the closest to recognizing the importance of the Wide Awake movement. He published his history of the election campaign fifty-one years after the fact when knowledge and actual firsthand experience of that history was still in existence. Fite was an assistant professor of History at Yale University and had already written the "Social and Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War." Just miles from Hartford, Yale University was near the epicenter of the Wide Awake movement.

The primary focus of *The Presidential Campaign* was to investigate the dynamics of the election of 1860, especially the differences between the Republican and Democratic Parties; however, Fite realized that to completely understand the dynamics of the campaign one must also understand the social and cultural mediums through which the election campaign was conducted. Fite attributed the popularity of the Wide Awake movement to the Republican Party's national nominating convention in Chicago.

Chicago was a bustling new city and was the political backyard of Abraham Lincoln. Large audiences full of enthusiastic citizens participated in parades and vocal appreciations of their respective "favorite sons." But Lincoln and the Illinois delegation had the most enthusiastic participants. Fite argued that it was the remarkable performance of the street demonstrators and the unprecedented enthusiasm of the unique

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<sup>11</sup> Emerson Fite, *The Presidential Campaign of 1860* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1911).

nominating convention that gave rise to the Wide Awakes, the “most unique demonstration of the campaign.”<sup>12</sup> Wide Awakes clubs spread like “wildfires” and almost immediately became a “popular feature of the campaign,” and simultaneously became an effective tool with which to fight the Democratic Party.<sup>13</sup>

Fite did not see the Wide Awakes lacking in political motivation. To the contrary, he reprinted a portion of the original Wide Awake Preamble and Constitution – something no other historian, before or since has done. Fite, however, did not ignore the pomp and circumstance focused on in so many other histories of the Wide Awakes. In fact, he went into much detail about the parades and marching. Fite argued that the Wide Awakes were important because of their ability to play on the psychological fears of the South; fears which stemmed from the quasi-military component of the organization.<sup>14</sup>

Although Fite was the historian to most accurately and completely portray the importance of the Wide Awake movement, his analysis was not without fault. Fite may have recognized the speed with which the Wide Awake movement spread throughout the North, but he did not examine exactly how far the movement spread and why it was important for it to reach the free states of the Union. Perhaps he felt that the geographical diversity of the movement was understood by the readers. Or perhaps he himself did not truly realize the importance of the Wide Awakes as a *national* organization for the Republican Party. Additionally, Fite’s history of political movements leading up to the Wide Awakes in 1860 was weak and did not accurately convey to the reader how the

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<sup>12</sup> Fite, ix-x.

<sup>13</sup> Fite, 225-226.

<sup>14</sup> Fite, 228.

Wide Awakes differed from political street gangs and clubs of the nineteenth century. However, until now Emerson Fite's *The Presidential Campaign of 1860*, has come the closest to being a well rounded history of the Republican political organization.

In 1944 Reinhard Luthin published *The First Lincoln Campaign*, the only comprehensive examination of the election of 1860 since Fite.<sup>15</sup> Luthin's work regarding the election was more informative and comprehensive than previous studies, but made little of the Wide Awake movement. Luthin was more interested in explaining how Lincoln was able to win the election from a logistical view, rather than a comprehensive perspective on all aspects of the campaign. The Wide Awakes had been neglected in other monographs about 1860, and although Luthin recognized their participation in the election campaign, he accorded the Wide Awakes credit for little more than stirring up enthusiasm.

William E. Baringer addressed the subject of organized support groups in political events (like clubs and rallies) as a campaign technique in his master's thesis "Campaign Technique in Illinois – 1860."<sup>16</sup> The primary emphasis of Baringer's work was to prove that the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was not won on the basis of Republican political principles. Baringer argued that without the Wide Awakes and other Republican clubs to organize rallies, protect the ballot boxes from illegal voting, and rally the public's enthusiasm Lincoln might not have received the votes needed to win. Baringer considered the Wide Awakes participation of "fundamental importance in opening the

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<sup>15</sup> Reinhard H. Luthin, *The First Lincoln Campaign* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944).

<sup>16</sup> William Eldon Baringer, "Campaign Technique in Illinois – 1860," *Transactions for the Year 1932* (1932), 203-281.

sluices of enthusiasm.” But here Baringer is guilty of the same fallacy as Luthin . . . underestimating the political message of the Wide Awakes and instead concentrating solely on the brute force of the Wide Awake movement.<sup>17</sup>

Melvin L. Hayes, author of *Mr. Lincoln Runs for President* published in 1960, concentrated on superficial and inaccurate aspects of the Republican campaign club.<sup>18</sup> In the chapter “Wide-Awakes, Wigwams, and Whistle-Stop,” Hayes acknowledged the phenomenon of voluntary participation in political events, but relied solely on newspapers from 1860. Hayes explored the importance of the Wide Awakes in the campaign, yet he referred to them as “Young Republican tub-thumpers,” thereby creating a distorted impression of the organization. Perhaps the Wide Awakes were loud, but their messages were not always abrasive. Hayes also quoted a passage from the *Delawarean* which described Wide Awake initiation ceremonies which included reciting scripted answers to predetermined questions. According to Hayes, the Wide Awake inductee might be asked “What are the chief objectives of the Wide-Awake society?” To which the reply might be “To disturb Democratic meetings, and to furnish conductors for the Underground Railroad.”<sup>19</sup> Other initiation questions prompted the initiate inductee to agree to help slaves and hate all Democrats. At the end of the initiation the inductee was given his cap and cape, and slapped “on the side of the head” and told to be “Wide Awake.”<sup>20</sup> Hayes’s account of the secret initiation rituals of the Wide Awakes was fascinating, but hardly fact. At this time no other account of an initiation ritual exists in

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<sup>17</sup> Baringer, 244, 249, 252, 270-271, 274, 277.

<sup>18</sup> Melvin L. Hayes, *Mr. Lincoln Runs for President* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1960).

<sup>19</sup> Hayes, 139.

<sup>20</sup> Hayes, 140.

any other newspaper, and most certainly not in the *Hartford Courant*. As a journalist and not a historian, Hayes's reliance solely on newspaper articles contributed to his misinterpretation of the Wide Awake organization. Unfortunately, the assumption of Wide Awake participation in secret rituals and other "fraternal" practices continues to be an inaccuracy repeated in more modern and historical texts.

Professor Tyler Anbinder's *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* is an excellent source on the rise of Nativism and the Know-Nothing Party.<sup>21</sup> The Wide Awake movement was not a central focus of *Nativism and Slavery*; however, Anbinder does compare the Wide Awake clubs to the Know Nothing lodges of the 1850s.

The popularity of the 'Wide Awake' political clubs during the election of 1860 also reflected the continuing influence of Know Nothingism. While it was common for political parties to form clubs during presidential campaigns in order to create enthusiasm for the ticket and to aid with local organization, the Wide Awake organizations that supported Lincoln differed from these, and were suspiciously similar to Know Nothing lodges. Like the Know Nothings, Wide Awakes *participated in elaborate initiation rituals*. In fact, probably referring to the vigilance necessary to repulse the encroachments of the Catholic Church, Nativists had often described themselves as 'wide awakes.' The success of the Know Nothings had demonstrated that fraternal organizations attracted members more readily than conventional political clubs, so Republicans utilized the forms of Know Nothingism to arouse enthusiasm for Lincoln's candidacy.<sup>22</sup>

There are several problems in Anbinder's argument. The claim that the Wide Awakes were a fraternal organization, completely different from the other political organizations of 1860, is only partially accurate. The Wide Awakes were different from other political organizations in 1860, but not because they were fraternal. No other political

<sup>21</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Anbinder, 268-269. Italics added.

organization of this election was quasi-military in the wearing of uniforms and marching in military formation, and no other organization garnered as much support for their respective political parties as the Wide Awakes. But that is something very different than what Professor Anbinder described.

Anbinder's most glaring fallacy is his claim that Wide Awakes participated in "elaborate initiation rituals" similar to the Know Nothings. Other than Hayes's wildly inaccurate account, no other records exist to prove this claim. Of the four sources Anbinder cites regarding the Wide Awakes not one alludes to Wide Awakes conducting such "rituals." Wide Awake clubs did exist during the Know-Nothing movement, and nativists used the term "wide awake" to facilitate vigilance, yet the different political clubs have few similarities. Anbinder uses *The Wide Awake Gift: A Know-Nothing Token for 1855* to suggest the correlation between the Know-Nothings and the Wide Awakes.<sup>23</sup> This source is a collection of patriotic speeches and articles which only prove that nativists used the phrase "wide awake" to signify their awareness of elevated immigration to the United States. One entry, a two stanza poem or song mentioned the Wide Awakes by name, but included no mention of secret rituals. In defense of the organization, Emerson Fite described its members as honorable and idealistic. He wrote that "there were regular weekly meetings, and military drill, but no secret meetings or grips or pass words."<sup>24</sup> Anbinder's attempt to connect the Know-Nothings and the Wide Awakes through shared participation in initiation rituals falls short of convincing.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Wide Awake Gift: A Know Nothing Token Edited by "on of 'em,"* (NY: J.C. Derby, 1855).

<sup>24</sup> Fite, 226.

Even if Anbinder had expanded his research he would not have found any conclusive evidence to prove that the Wide Awakes participated in “initiation rituals.” He certainly could not prove any meaningful similarity between the Wide Awakes and the Know-Nothing street gangs except that both were political street clubs of the day. Anbinder used an article from *Vermont History* to describe the Wide Awake activities in Vermont. This article actually disproves his claim that the Republican club was similar to Know-Nothing lodges. Glenn Howland, author of “Organize! Organize! The Lincoln Wide-Awakes in Vermont,” recognized that the club helped to lend “a sense of urgency to the upcoming election.” He suggests that the Wide Awakes encouraged Vermont voters to participate by emphasizing that their vote did make a difference. According to Howland, the Wide Awakes were an inclusive organization which welcomed the participation of social and political outsiders – those with “few means of social integration.”<sup>25</sup> The inclusiveness of the Republican political club was hardly consistent with the practices and principles of Know-Nothingism.

Perhaps there was some Wide-Awake club in 1860 that fit Anbinder’s definition of the Wide Awake movement. However, no existing sources support Anbinder. The Wide Awakes *were* different from other political campaign clubs of the day. The very characteristics of the Wide Awake movement that made them unique were also what led historians such as Tyler Anbinder to misinterpret the intentions and political undertones of the organization. Their vast following and political influence are factors which separated this campaign club from others in 1860 and the nineteenth century. Because

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<sup>25</sup> Glenn C. Howland, “Organize! Organize! The Lincoln Wide-Awakes in Vermont,” *Vermont History* 48 (Winter 1980), 32.

they were so popular there is no way to know for sure that their large membership was inspired solely by political idealism. It is possible, even probable, that the torchlight parades and sensational presentations did encourage some young men to join the Wide Awakes. Anbinder would characterize this attraction as fraternal. However, it only made sense that a person can seek out others who share his beliefs without sacrificing the idealism that motivates him. Even if this does make their association fraternal, it can still be political and idealistic. What Anbinder failed to understand is that the Wide Awakes provided a vehicle for many citizens who had felt largely disfranchised. The parades and marches popular in the nineteenth century became the medium by which young and old alike could voice their opinions. So whether or not individuals joined the Wide Awakes primarily for reasons of idealism, or simply because it was good fun, they were expressing political opinions and shouting a message punctuated by their banners and torchlight processions.

It is unfortunate that an organization as important as the Wide Awakes have been so badly misrepresented throughout history. Their participation in the campaign to elect Abraham Lincoln was nothing less than extraordinary in a time when campaign clubs and torchlight processions had become the staple of every presidential election. It is the purpose of this thesis to explain why the Wide Awakes have been so poorly portrayed in election histories, to describe how they differed from other political clubs, and to explore why they were important to the election of Lincoln.

Would Lincoln have been victorious without the Wide Awakes? Probably. But their participation in Lincoln's election campaign signified the dynamism of the 1860

election campaign, the zeal and idealism of the Republican movement at that moment in American history, and the importance of this election to millions of Americans. The election was a watershed event in the nation's history. It was the direct and immediate cause of secession and led directly to the Civil War. The role and participation of the Wide Awakes deserves more attention than a one page synopsis of marching uniforms and torchlight parades.

## CHAPTER I: GOLDEN AGE OF POLITICS

The place was New York City. The date was October 3, 1860. In one month one of the most momentous presidential elections in the history of the American republic was going to take place. As the day passed into evening, the building atmosphere of excitement and anticipation grew to crescendo as hundreds of thousands of people vied for the best locations along the street. As night enveloped the city, torches came to life and flames illuminated above the heads of the crowds of people. Each torch became the desire for dozens of others and the city was as brilliantly lit, perhaps more so, than it ever had been. It was a special night. Months of preparation and organization went into planning the Grand Procession of Wide Awakes, and it was now only moments away. At 6:00 p.m. sharp a “National Salute” was fired, followed shortly by the signal to begin the procession.<sup>1</sup> In a matter of minutes, the torches were blazing and the men were marching, heads held high, stepping with a “quietness [and] firmness” as they marched with “military precision.”<sup>2</sup> These young men marched through the streets of New York City and the crowd cheered wildly as they watched the greatest parade of any American election campaign in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Accounts of the New York Wide Awake demonstration indicated that the procession was the grandest, most amazing event of its kind in the history of the country.<sup>4</sup> The streets were lined with excited supporters and even some curious opponents. Pockets

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, 3 October 1860.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 4 October 1860.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B, Figure One for a picture of the New York Grand Procession of Wide Awakes.

<sup>4</sup> There was a grand Wide Awake procession in Springfield, Illinois in August 1860, but it did not approach the magnitude or importance of the New York demonstration.

of disaffection were encountered, but the Wide Awakes pressed onward, entertaining the crowd with elaborate circular and zigzag formations. For more than two hours the procession made its way through the streets of New York City. The *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer* estimated that 50,000 Wide Awakes were on hand for the parade, including at least 5,000 from Connecticut.<sup>5</sup> That estimate of participants in the parade was a bit inflated, but even conservative estimates indicated that approximately 12,000 Wide Awakes participated.<sup>6</sup> There was no way to know exactly how many observers “unofficially” joined the procession, but the *New York Times* supposedly took roll call from officers in addition to counting the marchers as they passed the Astor House. According to the *Times*, New York City had the greatest number of marchers with 5,000; Connecticut provided another 1,000, while Washington, D.C., Delaware, and Maine were each represented by small delegations. Boston and Philadelphia Wide Awakes were not in attendance due to similar processions taking place in these cities at the same time.<sup>7</sup> According to the *Times* the actual number of participants was 12,200. With the exception of the Springfield, Illinois, procession in August 1860, most parades were local affairs and had significantly fewer participants and observers. Clearly the New York demonstration was the most extravagant Wide Awake event of 1860.

Every detail of the procession was organized well in advance of the parade. Companies were sent formal invitations, the order of procession was carefully assigned, and each participating company was given exact instructions concerning their time and

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<sup>5</sup> *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 17 & 22 September 1860.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Melder, *Hail to the Candidate: Presidential Campaigns from Banners to Broadcasts* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 106.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, 4 October 1860.

place to assemble. A “Wide-Awake General Committee of the City of New York” was created and worked in conjunction with other independent Wide Awake wards in New York. The General Committee’s order number four confirmed that the establishment of this grand procession of Wide Awakes was intended to be a national occurrence.<sup>8</sup>

The procession was divided into four large units, each led by its own marshal and aides. Each unit was accompanied by several bands (also in uniform) and a wagonload of fireworks that were ignited at pre-determined checkpoints – a precaution against participants firing off “a pyrotechnical display” within the ranks.<sup>9</sup> An editor at the *New York Times* described the firework display as “rocket batteries and Roman candles [that] sent up glittering streams of fire . . . casting sudden and strange tints of red, green, yellow, blue and white effulgence over the male and female faces set and packed in each window, like pictures in a frame.”<sup>10</sup> The four divisions were then further divided into four sub-divisions each, separated in line by twenty feet. Representatives from the original Hartford Wide Awakes were placed in the first unit, first sub-division, third in line, behind the Morgan Light Artillery and 20<sup>th</sup> Ward clubs. It is unclear why these two particular companies were placed at the front of the procession, but it may have been that they were the sponsoring chapters for the parade or because they were meant to present the company of original Wide Awakes. Over 12,000 men marched in perfect unison and provided a night full of magic. They illuminated the night with torches and swinging lanterns under a sky exploding with color. They marched to the beat of Wide Awake

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<sup>8</sup> *New York Tribune*, 1 October 1860.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 4 October 1860; *New York Times*, 3 October 1860.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, 4 October 1860.

bands playing popular campaign music like the *Wide Awake Quickstep*. Small wonder that Wide Awake processions were so popular.

Participants in the procession were encouraged to purchase the “original” Wide Awake uniform and to wear it during the Grand Procession.<sup>11</sup> It was important that as many Wide Awake members as possible resemble the Hartford club. But inevitably, colorful variations appeared within the ranks. J. Hobart Ward, Grand Marshal, wore a “glittering suit of gilt enameled cloth” and carried a wooden baton, a gift from the Hartford Wide Awakes.<sup>12</sup> Marshal Ward’s uniform was to be the most spectacular of the evening, but his aide’s uniforms were also embroidered with light blue or silver, depending upon their rank or title. Officers of the various companies wore uniforms trimmed in blue or red to symbolize their rank and some wore knee length capes, festooned with military buttons. “Colored lanterns with glass shades” also indicated an officer’s rank. Variations in uniforms made the colors of the parade even more spectacular and entertaining. Some participating clubs wore red, green or even gray capes, but all wore a cap and cape.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the marchers, elaborate floats entertained the spectators. Floats were adorned with patriotic symbols such as the split rail and Lincoln’s log cabin that had been developed during the election campaign. Marshal Ward’s carriage was followed by a depiction of the White House and a banner pronouncing “Lincoln and Hamlin at Home on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March.” Other floats incorporated the log cabin and a log and axe. Some

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<sup>11</sup> *New York Tribune*, 22 September 1860.

<sup>12</sup> Marshal Ward was the author of the New York Wide Awake tactic instruction book. This was an illustrated drill book of the various formations and drill procedures.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 3 October 1860.

Wide Awakes carried transparencies with the inscriptions, “Free Homes For Free Men” and “No Interference with Slavery in the States, or with Freedom in the Territories.”<sup>14</sup> This parade, one month prior to the election, in many ways resembled a victory parade.

The Wide Awakes inspired enthusiasm among the masses toward Republican candidates, and convinced them by enthusiastic displays that they actually could win the election. Every time a company of Wide Awakes marched they drew a crowd. Thousands filled the streets of New York to watch the Grand Procession. The excitement surrounding the organization was appealing to first-time voters as well as undecided voters riding the fence between Lincoln and Douglas. The October procession in New York was especially important because it was the start of the final push to November. New York was a state Lincoln had to win in order to win the electoral contest. Bellwether October elections at the state level were about to take place in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, and October results in these states would indicate how the nation was likely to vote in November. The Wide Awakes’ grand campaigning techniques were an effective form of electioneering. The organization generated excitement for the Republicans by using their numbers and influence on new voters to promote the party. Other political campaign clubs of the nineteenth century lacked the numbers or influence of the Republicans in 1860.

The Wide Awakes were a unique organization in a time when campaign clubs, street gangs and fraternal organizations were already commonplace. Americans were

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<sup>14</sup> *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 4 October 1860. Transparencies were ultra-thin sheets of transparent paper embroidered with popular campaign slogans and symbols, which were fastened to the glass of any swinging torch or lantern. Light from the torches illuminated the transparency, making its message visible in the night.

compelled to unite together in what Arthur Schlesinger called “a nation of joiners.”<sup>15</sup>

The practice of uniting together for a common cause dated back to America’s founding fathers; however, a marching political club was unique to 1860.

Prior to 1840 fraternal organizations or secret clubs intrigued more Americans than any other kind of association and early America was rife with opportunities to join. Benjamin Franklin, master inventor, began one of the country’s first secret societies, the Junto. It was a fraternal society for artisans and tradesmen. He also organized the country’s first fire companies. These were voluntary organizations known for their strong brotherhood and also for their fiercely competitive nature, especially in New York City.<sup>16</sup> The Sons of Liberty and the Masons were two other significant fraternal organizations in early American history. The Sons of Liberty were quasi-secrective and formed in the aftermath of the Stamp Act Congress prior to the colonies’ separation from Great Britain. Members of the Sons of Liberty were more radical than other Revolutionary participants and were some of the first colonists to advocate separation from England. They were responsible for strictly enforcing boycotts and bans of English merchandise, at least in New England, and were rumored to be responsible for the infamous Boston Tea Party. The Sons of Liberty formed spontaneously and were political in nature. They were created as an outlet for dissatisfied colonists. The Sons of Liberty were important because they began the concept that an independent, voluntary

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Biography of a Nation of Joiners,” *The American Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (Oct., 1944), 1-25.

<sup>16</sup> Schlesinger, 3.

organization could make a difference.<sup>17</sup> In many ways they were the predecessors to the Wide Awakes.

In the 1820s America became fascinated with a different type of fraternal organization, the Masons, a gentleman's club with its origins in England. Americans were intrigued with their "secret rituals, code words, and signals, and . . . the appeal of grandiose titles for [Masonic] officers." The organization's ambiguous nature was equally appealing.<sup>18</sup> Members of Masonic lodges were included by invitation only making it the first exclusive organization in the history of American clubs. The Know-Nothings in 1850 adapted their elaborate initiation rituals and extreme exclusivity from the Masons.

In the nineteenth century the most popular organizations were political campaign clubs. These clubs were only one aspect of the campaign process, but political parties realized the popularity and potential these clubs represented for their candidates. Prior to 1840 election campaigns were relatively dull and uninteresting; there was no spark to excite the voters. The exception was Andrew Jackson's 1828 campaign. Infuriated by what he and his supporters deemed the "Corrupt Bargain" in 1824, Jackson was determined to win the presidency in 1828.<sup>19</sup> This campaign introduced the art of "mudslinging" and the uglier side of political campaigning that has become so prevalent in twentieth and twenty-first century politics. Jackson, candidate of the Democratic

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<sup>17</sup> Schlesinger, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 198; Schlesinger, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson lost the presidency in the House of Representatives in 1824 due to a bargain Henry Clay made with John Quincy Adams in exchange for Clay obtaining the votes Adams needed to take the presidency away from Jackson. Jackson had received the most electoral votes of any candidate, but failed to obtain the majority.

Party, was portrayed as the “common man” running against the pompous aristocrat John Quincy Adams. Jackson was presented to the populace as the war hero who had won the Battle of New Orleans and a man who would protect the interests of the average man. The 1828 election was not memorable for debates on political issues; instead the campaign became a testosterone-driven contest to see who could dish out the most unflattering dirt on his opponent.<sup>20</sup>

Jackson’s victory in 1828 was a direct result of the Democratic Party’s ability to attract and draw in eligible voters. He was the first President to be given a nickname – “Old Hickory” or “Old Hero.”<sup>21</sup> Campaign promoters for Jackson exploited his popularity and his nickname by creating “Hickory Clubs” and organizing pole raisings in his honor.<sup>22</sup> Hickory Clubs were the first campaign clubs created by a political party and were strictly used as an electioneering technique. They were not as influential in this campaign as other campaign clubs would be in future elections. For the first time there were mass produced campaign items, such as snuff boxes, pitchers, mugs, buttons and other everyday items that were marketed and promoted as symbols or icons of a particular candidate. Jackson’s picture was etched onto these items to remind the masses that “Old Hickory” was the candidate of the common man. While these items were popular, they were mostly created after the election and served more as commemorative memorabilia than campaign promotional material. Nevertheless, these items became a

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<sup>20</sup> Donald B. Cole, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1993), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Cole, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Cole, 17. Pole raisings were a popular form of campaigning in the nineteenth century whereby one party would erect a large pole cut from a tree, usually with their candidate’s banner attached to the top.

part of mass political culture that developed in the 1830s and in each subsequent presidential campaign would be used to influence voters.<sup>23</sup>

Jackson's 1828 campaign ushered in a new day in American political campaigning. For the first time a President was given a nickname based upon his character and/or history . . . or what the party wanted the public to believe was his character and/or history. For the first time campaign promoters used non-traditional techniques to capture the attention of an untapped reservoir of votes – the working class citizen previously denied enfranchisement due to strict property requirements. This new technique of electioneering worked, and Jackson won by a landslide.<sup>24</sup> Campaign promoters realized that the key to winning elections was connecting with the voters.

The 1828 campaign changed the way election campaigns were conducted. More voters may have been eligible to vote, but voter participation was still only slightly greater than fifty percent. Jackson's reelection in 1832 and Martin Van Buren's election in 1836 were anticlimactic by comparison.<sup>25</sup> Jackson rode the wave of Democratic popularity in 1832 and subsequently handpicked Van Buren to ride his coattails into the presidency in 1836. These two elections lacked excitement and pizazz and failed to entertain voter interest. Eligible voters were more likely to get out and vote when they were energized by the campaign.<sup>26</sup> In 1840 the Whig Party turned the tables on the Democrats and successfully implemented the same campaign techniques that had elected

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<sup>23</sup> Roger A. Fischer, *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns, 1828-1984* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 1 & 24.

<sup>24</sup> Altschuler, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Altschuler, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Altschuler, 36-37.

Jackson to elect William Henry Harrison. And the election of 1840 became the most elaborate and exciting political campaign up to that time in United States history.

In 1840 William Henry Harrison defeated Martin Van Buren to become the ninth President of the United States. Harrison won not because of superior oratorical skills or a better political platform. In fact, the Whig Party did not even have a party platform and at no point during the election did Harrison ever speak about pertinent political issues of the day. There was no discussion of the current state of the economy following the Panic of 1837. There was no discussion of the institution of slavery and its possible expansion following Texas's independence from Mexico. Yet voters in 1840 turned out in greater numbers than they ever had.

The key to Whig success in 1840 was the promotion of Harrison, a military hero, as the link to the “common man;” a claim which Van Buren could no longer make. The Whig Party was promoting a war hero with no political background by keeping voters entertained with anything but political issues. Harrison promoters refined the same techniques that Jackson’s supporters used in 1828. Harrison was portrayed as the “log cabin” and “hard cider” candidate, and his famous campaign slogan, “Tippecanoe and Tyler too!” was the centerpiece of the Whig campaign.<sup>27</sup> Citizens felt like they knew Harrison on a personal level and that they could relate directly to the candidate himself. The election of 1840 warranted so much attention and popularity because for the first time a candidate’s campaign felt like it was being run by the will of the people. The theatrics motivated citizens to vote, and they did so in record numbers.

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<sup>27</sup> Altschuler, 35.

The large voter turnout was an indication that citizens of the nineteenth century believed that given the “right representation” a common citizen could make a difference in politics. According to Ronald Formisano, “the 1840 campaign was made possible by a political innocence that would never be greater.”<sup>28</sup> Roger Fischer accurately wrote that, “with the rallies, processions, songfests, cabin-raising, ball-rollings, and other participatory rites that comprised the Harrison campaign, the politics of popular entertainment truly came of age in the United States.”<sup>29</sup> The political campaigning of the 1840 election became popular because it played to the emotions and interests of the public and for the first time hundreds of thousands of Americans found themselves “in a participatory role.”<sup>30</sup>

Participating in political events created a new form of excitement in nineteenth century politics. Many men, women, and children participated from the sidelines, while others became involved in campaign clubs. The Whig Party created Tippecanoe Clubs, similar to Hickory Clubs in 1828, as their promotional tool. Hickory Clubs existed in name only. They were not active promoters of the Democratic Party. Tippecanoe Clubs, however, were designed to play a major role in Harrison’s election campaign. Each club was supposed to elect members to a Vigilance Committee and publish the list of members in the local paper. Vigilance Committees consisted of seventy-six men (as in the Spirit of ’76) who represented the core of the club. Each club was then responsible for organizing

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<sup>28</sup> Formisano, 266 & 267.

<sup>29</sup> Fischer, 44-45.

<sup>30</sup> Fischer, 29.

local political activities such as barbeques and rallies, and ultimately for obtaining votes for Harrison.<sup>31</sup>

Harrison's campaign became known as the "log-cabin extravaganza." Political rallies in 1840 became two to three day elaborate affairs consisting of parades, cabin-raisings, and lots of music. Each rally resembled a miniature Fourth of July celebration. Baltimore and Nashville hosted rallies attended by more than 20,000 participants.<sup>32</sup> Parades featured torchlight processions with elaborate banners and transparencies. Harrison's extraordinary campaign addressed "a yearning for mass entertainment and spectacle later provided by spectator sports and show business."<sup>33</sup> But just as quickly as the rallies and Tippecanoe Clubs entered the political spotlight, they faded away in post-election letdown. The Whig Party created Tippecanoe Clubs to ignite enthusiasm, which they accomplished, but as election day neared the role of the clubs faded, having achieved "good editorial propaganda."<sup>34</sup>

The election of 1840 was important not just for the new excitement it brought to the political scene, but because the leading participants of the Whig Party became the masterminds behind a new electioneering technique that proved remarkably simple and successful. In 1848 the Whig Party successfully elected its candidate, General Zachary Taylor, hero from the Mexican War, by employing many of the same techniques. But the election of 1848 was nowhere nearly as exciting as 1840. Taylor was the last great triumph of the Whig Party. As the Republican Party gained momentum in the 1850s, the

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<sup>31</sup> Altschuler, 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> Fischer, 31 & 44-45; Melder, 81.

<sup>33</sup> Melder, 88-89.

<sup>34</sup> Altschuler, 28-29.

Whig Party dissipated and many Whigs joined the Republicans.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the Whigs, the Republicans combined popular campaign techniques with strong political messages. John C. Fremont, Republican candidate in 1856, was unsuccessful, but participants in his Fremont Clubs remained politically active and ready for a fight in 1860.<sup>36</sup>

Elections such as 1840 and 1860 stand out in history because of the way the nation responded to them. Every aspect of daily life in the United States was touched in some way by both of these campaigns. Politics had become a popular pastime in the nineteenth century, but the large campaign rallies and torchlight parades really only emerged every four years – for presidential elections, with perhaps the exception of the Lincoln/Douglas 1858 senate race in Illinois. Torchlight parades that existed in off-election years were not necessarily used for political purposes. Grand displays like 1840 and 1860 were reserved primarily for national elections. The lapses in enthusiasm had less to do with political defeat or victory and more to do with campaign overload. Presidential campaigns lasted from the spring through November and sometimes through a president's inauguration in March. Therefore, it was only natural that campaign clubs and political enthusiasm take a sabbatical to recharge their batteries.<sup>37</sup> But no matter the frequency or predictability of campaign clubs in these quadrennial events, nothing compared to the spectacular presence of the Wide Awakes in the campaign to elect Abraham Lincoln.

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<sup>35</sup> Fischer, 67.

<sup>36</sup> Julius G. Rathbun, "The Wide Awakes. The Great Political Organization of 1860," *The Connecticut Quarterly* 1 (Oct., 1895), 327.

<sup>37</sup> Altschuler, 61.

Abraham Lincoln emerged from the Republican national nominating convention in Chicago as the Republican candidate for president. Republicans across the free states began organizing for the campaign using old Whig campaign techniques of 1840 and 1848 to promote Lincoln as the “rail-splitter” candidate (a symbolic reference created at the Decatur, Illinois, convention). The rail-splitter ideology saturated the nation – the symbolic reference to Lincoln as the epitome of the “American Dream.” Rail Mauler campaign clubs formed and floats in parades used the symbol of the split rail to constantly remind everyone of Lincoln’s roots.<sup>38</sup> The image of Lincoln as the “rail-splitter” did wonders for his popularity. According to Fischer, the rail splitter ideology “developed into perhaps the most compelling of all American political icons, helping to transform a relative unknown with little popular appeal into a rather attractive candidate in his own right.”<sup>39</sup> Lincoln’s popularity as a frontier man and rail splitter and the numerous parades and rallies in his honor were countered by his opponent’s attempts to promote similar campaign techniques. But nothing done by his opponents approached the popular appeal of the rail splitter imagery.

The election of 1860 rivaled and even surpassed the 1840 election in terms of theatrical presentation, voter turnout, and overall enthusiasm. Everything that existed in previous elections was magnified dramatically in 1860. Parades were bigger and more spectacular. Campaign propaganda was more readily available. And campaign clubs took a more active role in the campaign process. The Wide Awakes emerged as the first quasi-military campaign club, independent of the Republican Party. The founders of the

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Plummer, “Lincoln and the Rail-Splitter Election,” *Lincoln Herald* 102, no. 3 (1999), 114.

<sup>39</sup> Fischer, 83.

Wide Awakes were Republicans, but the Party did not create the organization. It was created by individuals in Connecticut to help Republican candidates in that state. The Wide Awakes began as a grassroots organization in March 1860, and by November they had become the largest, most successful campaign club in any presidential election.

In late February 1860, just about the time Lincoln was giving his Cooper Union Address, Cassius Clay of Kentucky was scheduled to speak at a Republican convention in Hartford, Connecticut. Clay was to be escorted to and from his boarding house by an elaborate torchlight procession. This procession was not designed to be different from other torchlight processions conducted since 1840. However, it was during this “ordinary” procession that something extraordinary occurred. Swinging lanterns used in these processions were notorious for dripping oil and soiling the clothes of the men who carried them. Therefore, several young men eager to participate in Clay’s procession made a quick stop by the local dry goods store where they improvised a cape and hat cover from “squares of black cambric” and then set off for the procession. These makeshift capes were practical in nature but not aesthetically appealing. However, the oil cloth capes caused the young men to stand out in the crowd, drawing the attention of the Grand Marshall of the parade, George Bissell.<sup>40</sup>

George Bissell had been a participant in the Fremont campaign in 1856 and was an ardent Republican. In Hartford, the first Republican campaign had sparked heated debates and was a “hotly contested” and “bitter campaign.” Bissell immersed himself in the politics and had participated in numerous torchlight processions for the “Fremont and

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<sup>40</sup> Rathbun, 328; J. Doyle DeWitt, *Lincoln in Hartford* (Connecticut Civil War Centennial Commission, Rare Book Collection, Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana), 13.

“Jessie” campaign. As the Grand Marshall of the 1860 procession, Bissell noticed the strange outfits worn by Daniel G. Francis (known as D.G.), his brother James, and three other young men and promptly placed them at the front of the line. Their presence attracted more attention to the procession and as a result it was decided that a formal marching club should be organized. The new club formally adopted the cape and cap as the uniform of choice but sought out better torches.<sup>41</sup> Bissell deserves credit for setting into motion the most popular political organization of the nineteenth century.

One week after the procession, on 3 March 1860, thirty-six young men from Hartford met in a small room off Main Street to organize a political marching club. These men would forever be known as the “original thirty-six.” As a marching organization, members were organized into companies and a captain was elected to oversee all responsibilities relating to this particular club. James S. Chalker was elected the first captain of the Wide Awakes. A committee was then organized to “transact the business of the club,” including the election of a secretary and treasurer. The final order of business that evening was to decide upon a name for the marching club and it was decided that they should adopt the name “Republican Wide Awakes” after an advertisement in the *Hartford Courant*. Eventually it was shortened to the “Wide Awakes.” Within a month they had grown to 300 members, prompting the appointment of a second captain for a second company under the command of Julius G. Rathbun.<sup>42</sup>

Originally, the Wide Awakes were designed to be a subsidiary organization under the larger umbrella of the Young Men’s Republican Union (YMRU), which had been in

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<sup>41</sup> Rathbun, 327-328; DeWitt, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Rathbun, 328-329 & 331; DeWitt, 13.

existence almost as many years as the Republican Party. The YMRU in New York was in part responsible for organizing Lincoln's Cooper Union Address in February and were already in existence in Hartford prior to 3 March. It is most likely that it was a YMRU meeting on 2 March, as described in the *Hartford Courant*, which first prompted the citizens of Hartford to be "Wide Awake," thereby influencing the name of the new marching club. Many who eventually joined the Wide Awakes, and several of the original thirty-six, were already members of the YMRU. George S. Gilman, president of the Hartford Wide Awakes, and Julius Rathbun, captain of the second company of Hartford Wide Awakes, were members of both. Rathbun wrote in his history of the Wide Awake movement that they were supposed to work directly with the Republican Club of Hartford. Henry Thompson Sperry (known as H.T.), secretary of the YMRU in Hartford, became the Corresponding Secretary for the Wide Awakes. However, as soon as the popularity of the Wide Awake movement began to spread outside Connecticut, the Wide Awakes quickly overshadowed the Young Men's Republican Union.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to establish the difference between the Young Men's Republican Union and the Wide Awakes, for although both were partisan advocates of the Republican Party they were drastically different in design. The YMRU began in 1856 during the first presidential election in which a Republican candidate appeared and they were also in existence during the 1864 election. The Wide Awakes existed only during the 1860 election campaign despite brief and largely unsuccessful attempts to reunite following the Civil War. The YMRU developed from the "Greeley-Bryant" faction of

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<sup>43</sup> Rathbun, 330-331.

the Republican Party in New York and was known as the “Union” prior to 1860. Primary responsibility for the Union was to maintain political enthusiasm throughout the year, not only at election time. It was members of the YMRU who broke away and formed Fremont Clubs in 1856, as well as branching out from New York to campaign in other states. In 1856 the YMRU was responsible for circulating “seven million pages of campaign documents,” but in 1860 they would only circulate four million pages, consisting mostly of notes from Lincoln’s Cooper Union Address. In 1860 members of the YMRU helped create the New York Wide Awakes.<sup>44</sup>

Following Lincoln’s election the YMRU sent two regiments off to war. The organization would continue to support the Republican Party during the nomination process in Baltimore, Maryland during the 1864 national nominating convention.<sup>45</sup> In this regard, the YMRU had longer tenure than the Wide Awakes. Members of the Wide Awakes did march off to war, but it is unclear as to whether or not the marching club organized a regiment or company consisting completely of Wide Awakes. Additionally, the YMRU existed before and after the election of 1860, thus outliving the Wide Awakes by at least eight years. However, with the exception of organizing the event at which Lincoln gave his historic speech in New York City, the YMRU did not stand out in the campaign to elect Abraham Lincoln. The 1860 campaign has been compared to the 1840 election in terms of grand parades and creating political enthusiasm to mobilize voters,

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<sup>44</sup> Charles T. Rodgers, et. al. to Lincoln, 26 September 1864. Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>45</sup> Rodgers to Lincoln, 26 September 1864.

and the Wide Awakes were largely responsible for this. The Young Men's Republican Union compiled no such record.

Part of the novelty of the Wide Awakes was their uniform. They were the first campaign club to officially adopt a uniform. The Hartford Wide Awakes started out with modest and simple capes and by the election in November Wide Awakes from all across the North dazzled crowds with their elaborate uniforms that had evolved from simple cambric cloth. Typically, Wide Awake clubs throughout the North and Northwest retained the traditional black cape and cap as indicated by the official records of the Hartford Wide Awakes. However, there were variations on the original outfit. As mentioned in the Grand Procession of Wide Awakes, color, or lack thereof, was used along the trim of the cape and in lantern shades to signify rank. Privates traditionally wore all black and carried swinging lanterns while officer's capes were longer and trimmed in red or blue. Typically a captain's cape was trimmed in red, lieutenants in blue, and sergeants in white. Officers carried handheld lanterns of similar color to their cape.<sup>46</sup>

But even more spectacular than the uniforms was the constant marching, drilling, and attention to military detail that set the Wide Awakes even further apart from other campaign clubs. The fact that the organization was a marching club caused great anxiety among many anti-Republicans who were concerned that the Wide Awakes were a new form of militia in disguise. In the *New York Times* on 4 October 1860, following the

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<sup>46</sup> John Meredith Read, Jr., Circular regarding uniform and the organization of the club, Albany, NY 186\_. An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Grand Procession of Wide Awakes, an observer watching the procession was overheard to say:

the Wide Awakes [were] an organization designed to coerce the South into obedience and quell the first rising symptom of rebellion. They were burning cotton upon the shrine of Republicanism, lighting the path of Lincoln with the flames of the great Southern staple, and this [the observer] very properly viewed as a decided instance of insult added to injury.<sup>47</sup>

The theory was that the Republicans only needed to insert rifles for the torches and the Union had a ready-made army. Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin recognized young men's attraction to and concern for this new quasi-military organization as part of the "militia fever" that had been around since the 1850s.<sup>48</sup>

The Wide Awakes continuously drilled in preparation for parades and rallies and even adopted an official drill book for instructing future clubs. The original Hartford Wide Awakes' used *Hardee's Tactics* as their official drill book and recommended other companies use this manual as well. Drill books from both the New York City Wide Awakes and the Cincinnati Wide Awakes, which were original creations, have been located. The New York tactics book was more detailed than the Cincinnati drill book, but nevertheless, both sets of instructions included the basic information about how to form a company, practice basic marching maneuvers and complex maneuvers (like the rail-splitter maneuver),<sup>49</sup> position and control one's torch (similar to rifle moves in

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<sup>47</sup> *New York Times*, 4 October 1860.

<sup>48</sup> Altschuler, 63.

<sup>49</sup> The Rail Fence maneuver consisted of the company in a flank movement from one side of the street to the other and back again in a zigzag style movement. The result was supposed to look like a rail-fence. J. H. Hobart Ward, *Tactics of the Wide Awakes of New York* (New York: Gavit & Co., 1860), 12.

armies), and finally, how to properly give the Wide Awake cheer.<sup>50</sup> The striking similarity (and specific differences) between the two drill books indicated that while the individual organizations may have had guidelines from Hartford, each organization was certainly at liberty to draft its own instructions.

The uniforms and drilling of the Wide Awakes served a greater purpose. The Wide Awakes, like any campaign club, needed to excite the masses and motivate voting on election day. Editors of the *Hartford Courant* reminded members of the Wide Awakes that they were organized “not merely to throw a flood of brilliancy over the preliminary stages of the fight, *but mainly to make sure the victory upon the trial day.*”<sup>51</sup>

The key to winning the election of 1860 was to mobilize the greatest number of voters in the states Lincoln needed to win, namely the free states that went to James Buchanan in 1856. Part of the success of the Republican Party was the support it received from citizens intrigued and entertained by the Wide Awakes. Abraham Lincoln was known throughout the campaign as the rail splitter candidate and the symbolism was not lost on the Wide Awakes (e.g.: the fence-rail maneuver). Unfortunately, it is precisely because the Wide Awakes became so popular for their uniforms and marching that their larger purpose throughout the election campaign has been overlooked. The Wide Awakes were above all else a political organization dedicated to the election of Republican candidates on both the local and the national level. The importance of being

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<sup>50</sup> A Drill for the use of the Cincinnati Wide-Awakes. Kroch Library Rare Books & Manuscripts (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY); Ward, *Tactics of the Wide Awakes of New York*.

<sup>51</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 1 November 1860.

“wide awake” meant so much more than participating in a rally such as the Grand Procession of Wide Awakes.

## CHAPTER II: WIDE AWAKE AND READY FOR ACTION!

What exactly did it mean to be “wide awake”? Who were the Wide Awakes and what caused them join this movement? By 1860 the phrase “to be wide awake” had been widely used in the United States. It had become so common in nineteenth century vocabulary that to be “awake” could mean awareness as to any number of political, cultural, or economic concerns. Yet, in the last decade prior to the American Civil War, two very different political parties had political clubs that went by the name Wide Awake. The clubs, like the parties, were fundamentally different from each other. One was a nativist street gang associated with the Know-Nothing movement while the other was a popular quasi-military campaign club associated with the Republicans. The Republican Wide Awakes epitomized what it meant to be “wide awake” – what it meant to be fully aware of a situation and proactively addressing it. The 1860 election was unique, as were the 1860 Wide Awakes.

How exactly the term “wide awake” was first used cannot be traced back to a specific date or time. It may never be known who exactly coined the phrase or for what reason. But it is entirely possible that the term “wide awake” dates back to the First Great Awakening. It is at this point in American history that colonists were “converted” back to the path of righteousness by animated and emotional orators like Jonathan Edwards. According to Edwards, American colonists had been led astray during the Enlightenment, but if they quickly realized the error of their ways the “sinners” retained a small glimmer of hope that they could be saved. Edwards used his most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” as the catalyst that “awakened” one’s mind and

soul. Typically, awakening was preceded by an act of religious conversion.<sup>1</sup> Conversions usually required a public act of humiliation which often reduced an individual to violent bouts of shaking. After the conversion was complete the “saved” reentered the world more aware and ready to pass the message of their conversion along to others in search of salvation. The dominating theme of Edwards’s “path to salvation” was to “simply go with the flow – simply join the many from the surrounding towns who [were] flocking to Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Religious conversions in America were the first reported instances of group conformity under the pretext of a larger issue. People joined Edwards by flocking to their churches because they honestly believed that this was the path to salvation. Edwards had a way of mesmerizing people to the point that they followed him almost without question. He used religion to motivate people in much the same way politicians used rallies, parades, and grand campaign schemes to motivate voters in the nineteenth century. Edwards’s message of “going with the flow” and joining neighboring towns foreshadowed political movements of the mid-1800s and especially the Wide Awake movement of 1860.

One by one, Northern towns bonded together as they each formed Republican marching clubs and participated together in rallies and parades. Each club retained the individuality of the town from which they were created, but collectively each club united together under the umbrella of Republicanism. Joining the Wide Awakes symbolized a

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards in Edward J. Gallagher, “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God: Some Unfinished Business,” *The New England Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (Jun., 2000), 217.

<sup>2</sup> Gallagher, “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God,” 219.

sort of political awakening for those involved. Participating in a Republican club in 1860 was a public commitment to the Republican cause and signified awareness of the opposition parties.

Before becoming the name of the best-known Republican marching organization, “wide awake” had been used for many different reasons. There was no uniform definition as to what it meant or who could use it . . . just about anyone could be “wide awake” to anything. However, taken within each individual context, the term referred to the act of opening one’s eyes both literally and figuratively. When someone announced that they were “wide awake” they were proclaiming their awareness to their surroundings and the actions of others. The two instances when the term took on a life of its own was during the 1850s Know-Nothing movement and during the 1860 presidential election. Know-Nothings were “awake” to the evils of immigration while Republicans were “awake” to the evils of slavery and the Democracy.

It would be next to impossible to examine every possible use and meaning of the term “wide awake,” but it is important to examine a few variations. The earliest recognition of a political awakening dated back to William Henry Harrison’s presidential campaign. In March 1840 Harrison held a rally in Hartford, Connecticut, where participants carried elaborate banners. One banner in particular read, “Old Milford, they call her ‘Sleepy Hollow’ – She’s Wide Awake for Harrison and Reform.”<sup>3</sup> This banner was the first known reference to a town being “awake” and ready for action. In 1840 this

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<sup>3</sup> Roger A. Fischer, *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns, 1828-1984*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 31-32.

was a new concept, but by 1860 towns announced their “awakening” and commitment to one political party or another more frequently.

During this tumultuous decade in American history a major initiative was undertaken to protect the country from foreign invasion – not a military invasion, but an invasion of immigrants. As immigrants from Europe, primarily Irish, became more settled in America they began to set up Roman Catholic churches and private schools, and to run for political office. To the most ardent Americans it appeared as if those who had lived only a fraction of their lives on United States soil were close to running the country. The anti-Irish movement that resulted was nativist in nature and its vehement reaction to almost everything foreign scarred many of the politicians who joined their ranks. The nativists felt the nation was asleep to the danger posed by these immigrants and had lazily allowed itself to fall into the clutches of immigrant politicians.

Therefore, the nativists undertook a campaign to awaken and reclaim the country. This message was echoed in the newspapers, literary documents, and songs of the day with a cry to be vigilant and “wide awake.” Nativists would even form secret societies, known as the Know-Nothings, which eventually resulted in a political party of the same name and an underground street gang known by some as the Wide Awakes. Although this organization of Wide Awakes had the same name as the 1860 Republican organization, the two were as different as apples and oranges. Nevertheless, during the 1850s citizens of America were increasingly “wide awake” to the perceived threat of non-American influence in politics, government, and everyday life.

In 1860 Americans had a completely different reason to be “wide awake.” Slavery had so completely divided the country north and south that the nation was practically severed in two. The Democratic Party was approaching its final division, and the Republican Party had emerged in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, surpassing the American Party to contend for the presidency in 1860. The Republican Party was the first anti-slavery party with a meaningful chance to elect a president. For the Republicans, the major concern during this campaign was the Democratic Party and the expansion of slavery into the territories. As a purely sectional party Republicans urged Americans to be aware of what it would mean for a Democratic president to take office.

However, it was not until the formation of the Hartford Wide Awakes in March that the term “wide awake” became completely synonymous with the Republican Party. Prior to this time the term had been used by Garrison in 1840, and the Know-Nothings in the 1850s; all three political parties running for office in 1860 would use it. The phrase itself was no longer unique. It would take the novelty of a political marching organization to give new life and meaning to the term that came to mean so much in American history.

Abraham Lincoln was no stranger to the concept of being “wide awake.” In April 1858 Lincoln composed a letter to Thomas A. Marshall of Illinois in preparation for the Illinois senate race against Democrat Stephen A. Douglas. In this letter Lincoln acknowledged the split in the Democratic Party and expressed a desire to select the right candidate to oppose Douglas. Lincoln warned that “the adversary has his eye upon that

district, and will beat us, unless we also are *wide awake.*<sup>4</sup> Lincoln cautioned the Illinois delegates to be vigilant and to attack the Democrats on their vulnerable points, or the senate seat would be lost. Little did he know that almost exactly two years later a political club by the same name would assist in his presidential election campaign. Despite a series of heated debates throughout Illinois, Lincoln and the Republicans lost the senate seat to Douglas. But in losing, Lincoln emerged a winner because the race thrust him into the Republican Party limelight and began his ascent to the White House.

Meanwhile, the entire country was flooded with the frequent use of the colloquial “wide awake” to refer to the most mundane things. Men were targeted to purchase Wide Awake cigars advertised to be “as popular as the lively club whose name it bears.” Women were targeted by department stores advertising that they were “Wide Awake – to the wants of the Ladies!” and therefore sold only the best stockings and silk dresses.<sup>5</sup> Manufactures and companies riding the coattails of the popular movement in an attempt to make a name for themselves also exploited the Wide Awake phenomenon. The most popular advertisements were for lantern oil, torches and lanterns, and fireworks.<sup>6</sup> By the summer of 1860 it was virtually impossible to travel anywhere in the United States and not hear “wide awake” in some form or fashion. For the most part, these were references to Republican supporters and anti-slavery, but occasionally Democratic towns announced their “awakening” to the encroachment of the Republican candidates. If a town was not personally announcing its awakening, then the local newspaper was commenting on the

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Lincoln to Thomas A. Marshall, 23 April 1858. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Italics added.

<sup>5</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 27 & 29 March 1860.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Tribune*, 22 & 24 September 1860.

actions of the Wide Awakes in the North. The most common southern paranoia concerned the apparent ease with which the Wide Awakes could transition into a ready-made Republican army.<sup>7</sup> It is very unlikely that any inhabitant of the United States was not aware of whom the Wide Awakes were or what their purpose was. And it is precisely because the Republican marching club became so popular and because everyone recognized its name, that it overcame the colloquial use of its name and cemented its place in history.

The only other time in history when a single phrase meant as much as it did during the 1860 election season was during the 1850s when the nativist movement captured the attention of the nation and forced Americans to face the realization of a country inundated with European immigrants. What emerged was the Know-Nothing Party, formed from an underground political movement to rid politics of foreigners and to “Americanize America.” The Know-Nothing movement emerged from the popular fraternal organization known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB).<sup>8</sup> At a New York meeting the Grand Council of the OSSB was elected and established “a hierarchy of subordinate state and local councils; they fixed a secret ritual . . . adopted a pledge . . . to keep all information about the Order secret, and when questioned to say ‘I know nothing’.”<sup>9</sup> Much of what would later become the ritualistic components of the Know-Nothings – the secret passwords, handshakes and elaborate initiation rituals – had been adopted from earlier fraternal organizations such as the Order of United

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<sup>7</sup> *Hartford Weekly Times*, 10 March 1860; *New Jersey Gazette and Republican*, 19 October 1860.

<sup>8</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>9</sup> David Morris Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976), 248.

Americans.<sup>10</sup> These secret societies helped to fill a void left in the lives of everyday Americans. Members cared for each other like brothers, took care of each other's families like they were their own, and essentially provided a sense of belonging to people who otherwise might have felt left out of society.<sup>11</sup> But only if one's family lineage was purely native-born American.

The Know-Nothings were able to capitalize on this sense of bonding and brotherhood in the secret societies and convert it into a powerful political movement. The Know-Nothing phenomenon caught on so quickly that their lodges mushroomed overnight, almost instantaneously creating the perfect political network. As a political entity, the Know-Nothings used the local lodges to elect party approved candidates during meetings that were cloaked in secrecy, and to place in office true American politicians who would uphold the by-laws of the party.<sup>12</sup> The formal name of the Know-Nothing Party was the American Party. The Know-Nothings believed in a relatively broad spectrum of ideas, but at the center of it all was a strong anti-Catholic ideology. First and foremost, they believed that America should be Protestant and not Catholic because Catholicism dictated conformity and was an “autocratic” religion. Protestants felt that Catholic politicians had achieved success “disproportionate to their numbers” and therefore accused Catholics of selling fraudulent votes. Additionally, Northern Know-Nothings advocated “legal limitations on both the extension of slavery and liquor

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<sup>10</sup> John R. Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Movement*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Baker, *Ambivalent Americans: The Know-Nothing Party in Maryland* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Mulkern, 62; Potter, 250.

consumption.”<sup>13</sup> It was these ideologies that members in free states vowed to uphold with all of their being. Southern Know-Nothings did not support slavery limitations and eventually separated from the Northern section and created the South American Party.

The Know-Nothings were popular not only for what they hoped to accomplish but also because of what they could provide to their members. People were attracted by the anonymity that was practiced by the organization. Joshua Giddings commented that the Know-Nothings were “a screen – a dark wall – behind which members of old political organizations could escape unseen from party shackles, and take a position according to the dictates of judgment and conscience.”<sup>14</sup> Anonymity was essential considering the radical ideologies practiced by the organization. The extremely wealthy were less likely to join because affiliation in the organization could be detrimental to one’s career. Most members were young men, some with strong political passions. The fraternal aspects of the organization – passwords, secret handshakes and initiation rituals, attracted others.<sup>15</sup>

As the Know-Nothing Party became more politically active so too did the political clubs and secret societies related to the party. Several organizations evolved into street gangs at a time in American history when it was not unusual to have fraternal organizations behaving in a manner best described as political thugs and bullies. Some organizations, like the Order of United Americans, were nativist in ideology but remained passive in nature. But more often than not these orders relied on other, more overt and sometimes violent techniques to drive home a point. Political violence in the 1850s

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<sup>13</sup> Anbinder, 104-106.

<sup>14</sup> Anbinder, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Anbinder, 23-24, 34, 38-40.

featured fire companies fighting each other over jurisdiction in volatile cities such as Baltimore, Maryland. Rioting usually broke out at most fires, undoubtedly to the detriment of the burning building. Over time, these dueling fire companies shifted into political clubs as they became associated with the Democratic and Whig Parties. By the late 1850s the Know-Nothings had evolved into an organization with some of the most violent clubs; known variously as the Pug Uglies, Rip Raps, and Blood Tubs. These clubs used cannons to guard voting polls, tore up ballots, and used brute force to coerce foreigners away from the polls.<sup>16</sup> Democrats were the first to point out that Know-Nothing victories often were the result of “the stamp of violence and the tag of lawlessness” by employing practices that were all too common in antebellum politics.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most notorious fraternal organizations associated with the Know-Nothing movement was the Order of the American Star (OAS), otherwise referred to as the Wide Awakes. According to the *National Era* the OAS originated in New York City in 1853 founded by a man known only as Patten, and the order “was better known as the Wide Awakes.”<sup>18</sup> Its members were described as being under the age of twenty-one. These young men were clothed in extravagant outfits, white hats, and uniforms with a gold star emblem engraved with the letter “A”. Members were also known to carry a vast array of weapons.<sup>19</sup> Although OAS activity was kept largely underground, at least until election day, the order’s infamously violent methods of obtaining Know-Nothing votes

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<sup>16</sup> Baker, 121-123.

<sup>17</sup> Baker, 124.

<sup>18</sup> “Our Secret Political Societies,” *New York Tribune* in *The National Era*, Washington, D.C. 21 June 1855.

<sup>19</sup> Carleton Beals, *Brass-Knuckle Crusade: The great Know-Nothing Conspiracy, 1820-1860* (NY: Hastings House Publishers, 1960), 17-21; *The National Era*, 21 June 1855.

was a contributing factor to the forced assimilation of the OAS into another organization known as the Order of Free and Accepted Americans (OFAA). This assimilation was instigated from within the Know-Nothing movement. The OFAA was described as “teenage ruffians, nicknamed the ‘Wide Awakes,’ unable to gain status or quick preferment in the existing societies.”<sup>20</sup> Youngsters involved in the OFAA/Wide Awakes were notorious for starting street brawls with the Irish. By 1855 the Know-Nothing Wide Awakes and other secret societies were being reorganized by other Orders to shed some of their more terrorist-like qualities in favor of a less violent political agenda. The OFAA was encouraged by other chapters of the Know-Nothing movement to allow older members into their ranks and to pursue a more lawful approach to achieving victory at the ballot box.<sup>21</sup> Dissension between Know-Nothing chapters inhibited the organization’s ability to maintain a successful campaign club like the Republican Wide Awakes in 1860.

Carleton Beals, author of *Brass-Knuckle Crusade: the Great Know-Nothing Conspiracy*, outlined the history of the Know-Nothing movement by concentrating on the “gangs” most closely associated with the political party. However, Professor Tyler Anbinder, author of *Nativism and Slavery*, discredits Beals’s work as “a sensationalistic tome that betrays little understanding of the organization.”<sup>22</sup> Whether or not Beals’s analysis of the Know-Nothing movement meets Anbinder’s criteria of a worthwhile historical work is not important. Beals may have portrayed the Know-Nothing

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<sup>20</sup> Beals, 142-143.

<sup>21</sup> Beals, 244.

<sup>22</sup> Anbinder, 300.

movement in a sensationalistic fashion, but in the 1850s the Wide Awakes did exist and probably were as much of a terrorist street gang as he indicated. Evidence of the Wide Awakes and their less than pristine actions were captured by political songsters of the day. William C. Marlon, who wrote *Wide Awake Jordan*, identified the Wide Awakes as wearing white hats:

Oh! The wide awakes and white hats, am getting all the go,  
And the wide awakes will wear them according,  
In spite of all the micks, you can raise to fight with sticks,  
For they'll drive them to the other side of Jordan.

The song also suggested the Wide Awakes' violent nature, references which largely validated the musings of Carleton Beals.

No popery – that's a go, and the wide awakes will show  
That they can sing it out according,  
If you want your head broke, just harrah for the pope,  
And they'll knock you to the other side of Jordan.<sup>23</sup>

The date of the song is unknown, but it can be reasonably assumed that it was probably composed sometime around 1855.

Another reference to the Know-Nothing Wide Awakes appeared in *Paddy's Fight with the Know-Nothings* which addressed Irish immigrants in battle with the “fellows that KNOW-BODY KNOWS”.

Wid' sprigs of shelalah so bravely we fought,  
We'd belt them like blazes, so all of thought;  
But the hard-fisted Yankees they bate us so swate,  
That all of us Irishmen had to retrace.  
Now I tell you one thing an' that you may note –  
I'll keep far away from the place where they vote;  
For I'll tell ye'se the truth, and it's no mistake –

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<sup>23</sup> William C. Marlon, *Wide Awake Jordan*, (New York: J. Andrews, [n. d.]). America Songs and Ballads, Series 4, Volume 4 in American Songs and Ballads, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [Digital ID: sb40575b]. See Appendix C.

We found the Knownothings were all WIDE AWAKE.<sup>24</sup>

Here Robinson referred to the cultural clash between the Know-Nothings who were “wide awake” and the Irish attempting to vote. It is important to remember that political gangs like the OAS and the Know-Nothing Wide Awakes were only components of the Know-Nothing movement – they were not *the* Know-Nothing movement.

Throughout the 1850s Americans were saturated with patriotic rhetoric pushed by the Know-Nothings. Most commonly, they used the phrase “wide awake” in literature to refer to the strongly anti-Catholic aspect within the organization. A popular publication of the day was a diatribe by L. W. Granger, published in Detroit, about the Roman Catholic Church and the evils of Romanism. The title was *Romanism: Its Aims and Tendencies – the Sentiments of a ‘Know-Nothing,’* but the headline above the title attracted much attention with the words “Wide-Awake!” in big bold letters.<sup>25</sup> The publication was a plea to native-born Americans in Detroit to understand the implications of what life under Romanism would mean for America. Evidently, citizens of Detroit were not as awake and aware as citizens of larger cities, such as New York and Philadelphia.<sup>26</sup> The entire tirade was a promotional piece for the Know-Nothing movement and the movement’s actions against the foul foreigners. Granger also concentrated on the necessity of protecting the ballot box. He commented: “it must rejoice the heart of every true American to witness the many demonstrations now being

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<sup>24</sup> Tom Robinson, *Paddy's Fight with the Know-Nothings*, (New York: J. Andrews, [n.d.]). American Songs and Ballads, Rare Book Room and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [Digital ID: sb30402b]. See Appendix C.

<sup>25</sup> L. W. Granger, *Romanism: Its Aims and Tendencies – The Sentiments of a ‘Know-Nothing’*, (Detroit: The Proprietor, 1854).

<sup>26</sup> Granger, 39-40.

made in different portions of the country, *to maintain their rights at all hazards.*<sup>27</sup> It can only be deduced that Granger's encrypted message referred to the Know-Nothing movement and several of the organization's fraternal clubs notorious for their protection of ballot boxes.

The Wide Awakes were also written about in the compilation work, *The Wide Awake Gift: A Know-Nothing Token*, published in 1855. It included a conglomeration of patriotic essays, speeches, and poems. Authors of the various works are unknown, but the editor is designated to be "on of 'em," assuming that to be a Know-Nothing.<sup>28</sup> The purpose of this publication was to provide Americans with a collection of patriotic readings, perhaps intended as a propaganda tool. The Wide Awakes were only referred to once in a poem of the same name. It was practically a plea for the everyday man to awaken from his apathetic slumber and make a life for himself. . . for those who were lazy and only dreamed of living life would never live it to their full potential.<sup>29</sup>

Americans, whether born in this country or recent immigrants, could easily identify with the term "wide awake" – but in each case the words took on a completely different connotation. Individuals attached themselves to the Know-Nothing Wide Awake organization in much the same way as their successors would in 1860, but in the 1850s the Wide Awakes carried the unofficial stigma of being a political street gang. Physical force and intimidation became characteristics of these Wide Awakes. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that historians have been inclined to characterize the

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<sup>27</sup> Granger, 41. Italics added.

<sup>28</sup> *The Wide Awake Gift: A Know-Nothing Token*, edited by one of 'em (NY: J.C. Derby, 1855).

<sup>29</sup> *The Wide Awake Gift*, 97.

Wide Awakes of 1860 as violent youths, because they were characterized as such less than a decade before. Given the overtly quasi-military appearance of the Republican Wide Awake organization, it is easy to see how they could be misinterpreted. But, characterizing the two different variations of Wide Awakes without distinguishing between them is a major mistake some historians have made. The actions and purpose of the 1860 Wide Awakes were neither defined nor inspired by the actions of previous Wide Awakes.

It appears as if the heyday of the Know-Nothing Wide Awakes was limited to the years 1853-1855. More than likely this was directly related to the political instability of the 1850s. The Whig Party had all but faded into history following the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and in its place the American Party and the Republican Party were jockeying for supremacy as the second party in American politics. It appeared, at one point, as if the American Party was in a position to win the presidency in 1856 or at least to thwart any chances the Republicans had of replacing the Whigs. But sectional tensions over the institution of slavery divided the American Party thus creating the North American Party and the South American Party. The Republican Party remained strong as a purely sectional party united as an anti-slavery organization. As fate would have it, North American members were able to put aside their anti-Catholicism and temperance ideologies. Though it may have been lukewarm, they agreed to accept the primacy of the anti-slavery ideology of the Republican Party in order to fuse with the Republicans. The combination of the two was not strong enough to defeat the Democracy in 1856, but a

steady influx of new Republican voters would render the party competitive in 1860.<sup>30</sup> By the time assimilation of the North Americans into the Republican Party in 1856 was complete, there was no evidence of activity by the OFAA Wide Awakes in the new party. In 1856, Republicans formed Fremont Clubs to rally support for John C. Fremont, but their participation in the campaign was weak at best. Despite losing the presidency, the Republicans actually gained momentum leading to the next presidential contest.

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<sup>30</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 258.

## CHAPTER III: PUSH ON THE COLUMN!

*“But the multitudinous clubs which have infused such energy into this contest should remember that they were organized not merely to throw a flood of brilliancy over the preliminary stages of the fight, but mainly to make sure the victory upon the trial day.”<sup>1</sup>*

It was November 6, 1860. For weeks northern towns had been abuzz with excitement. Newspapers had been advertising torchlight parades or political rallies with increasing frequency. Thousands of torches and swinging lanterns illuminated night skies. Marching clubs had expended a great deal of energy marching and drilling in anticipation of this very day. On 6 November, the same men who had dazzled and entertained the night before now directed their attention toward policing the polling places. In towns and cities across the North, Wide Awakes took off their tunics and became poll-watchers. These men were young, they were Republican, and they were “wide awake.” Even sleepy little towns in remote areas far from the beaten path knew of the Wide Awakes and their campaign to elect Abraham Lincoln. The Wide Awakes had easily become the most recognizable and influential political club in the country. In a matter of months, a spontaneously created subsidiary political club had emerged as the biggest and brightest national campaign club of the 1860 election.

Originating in Hartford, Connecticut, the Wide Awakes took shape in an area known for its political awareness. Antebellum Connecticut had been a political hotbed with a significant Know-Nothing representation prior to the emergence of the Republican Party in that state. The nativist movement in Connecticut influenced state politics

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Tribune* as reprinted in the *Hartford Courant* 1 November 1860.

through the 1860 election, despite Know-Nothing decline beginning in 1856.<sup>2</sup> However, according to William Gienapp, the Know-Nothing and North American Parties had more pull in Connecticut in 1856 than did the Republicans.<sup>3</sup> Geographically the Republican Party was stronger in Hartford and counties in western Connecticut in 1856 because these counties had more Roman Catholic churches and were not as overwhelmingly nativist as counties further east. Religious participation in western Connecticut was largely Episcopal and Roman Catholic while Congregationalism to Baptists and Methodists dominated religion in the east.<sup>4</sup> Western Connecticut featured broader religious diversity that likely explained the more prominent establishment of the Republican Party there. Counties with a larger nativist majority held stronger ties to the American Party – ties to anti-Catholicism, anti-immigration, and temperance – which would ultimately “inhibit the growth of the Republican party” as it attempted to establish itself as an antislavery party.<sup>5</sup>

Connecticut’s nativist population, however, became essential to the Republican Party if Lincoln and Hamlin were going to win Connecticut. In other states like Illinois, they were going to need a substantial portion of the former Know-Nothing vote as well. In 1860 it was absolutely essential for the Republican Party to obtain the votes of former Know-Nothings who had not already assimilated into the Republican ranks. Without these votes the national election would likely go to the House of Representatives. In

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<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Parmet, “The Know-Nothings in Connecticut,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1966), 336.

<sup>3</sup> William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 384.

<sup>4</sup> Parmet, 154, 159-160.

<sup>5</sup> Michael F. Holt, “Making and Mobilizing the Republican Party,” in *The Birth of the Grand Old Party: The Republicans’ First Generation*, ed. Robert F. Engs & Randall M. Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 37.

Connecticut the Republicans used a mix of anti-Catholic and anti-foreign rhetoric, with their well-established antislavery message, to bring needed votes into their camp. It worked very effectively. According to Michael Holt, in 1856 over 67 percent of Fremont's votes in Connecticut came from former Know-Nothings.<sup>6</sup> But four years later, the key was to find a political combination that alienated neither these nativists, nor recent immigrants residing in important states such as Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana. The biggest challenge the Republican Party faced in these states was to counteract the convincing arguments by Democratic and Know-Nothing camps that the Republicans were pushing for secession and disunion.<sup>7</sup>

The Republicans needed to gain all the anti-Democratic support they could muster. The *Dred Scott* decision, Lecompton constitution, and the shortcomings of Buchanan's administration helped boost the Republican Party's strength in northern states. Even the formation of the Constitutional Union Party as an alternative anti-Democratic party did not undermine the Republicans.<sup>8</sup> According to Michael Holt, the emergence of the Constitutional Union Party and its candidate John Bell was enough of a threat to push the Republicans to activate a four-part plan to avoid losing Know-Nothing votes. The plan included wooing young voters as well as Protestant Germans, revising Republican platform planks to include more than just antislavery rhetoric, and nominating Abraham Lincoln, the only man capable of carrying the states of Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 50-52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 55-57.

The first of the four Republican goals was to mobilize young voters “who had no prior loyalty to conservative Whiggery and seemed little inclined to warm to an ‘Old Fogey’ Constitutional Union ticket of John Bell and Edward Everett.”<sup>10</sup> According to Holt, the Republicans created the Wide Awakes to assist in this endeavor. Holt describes the Wide Awakes as “local political clubs, originally organized by the Know-Nothing movement in the mid-1850s but converted to the Republican party by 1860, that raised campaign hoopla and enthusiasm through torchlight parades and mass meetings” and consisted mostly of “young men and teenagers.”<sup>11</sup> Evidence proves that Know-Nothing Wide Awakes and Republican Wide Awakes were not identical in spite of the participation of some former Know-Nothings in the Republican club. The Republican Wide Awakes were not created for the sole purpose of attracting young voters. That outcome was a side effect of the organization. The Wide Awakes were created on 3 March 1860 and it is well-documented that the original thirty-six members took it upon themselves to meet and organize the club. Their purpose was clearly stated and focused on promoting the Republican Party. On 30 April 1860 George Gilman, Republican attaché in Connecticut, received a letter from the Republican Executive Congressional Committee in Washington, D.C., requesting that Gilman assist in organizing clubs in his state. Senator Preston King, chairman of the Republican Congressional Committee, instructed that these clubs identify the political affiliation of each person of voting age in their respective districts. King also encouraged each club to “purchase documents” and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 56.

speeches to be distributed throughout the state.<sup>12</sup> The Wide Awakes were formed almost two months prior to this letter and had been spreading the Republican message and “mobilizing voters” even without purchasing prepared speeches and documents. Therefore, the Wide Awakes were not created explicitly by the Republican Party to mobilize new voters. Still, Wide Awake ranks were filled with young men eager to participate in the campaign. The Republicans did not need to engage in special efforts to recruit many first-time voters because they were drawn to it as a natural result of Republican ideology.

In Connecticut, it is possible to draw correlations between participants in the Know-Nothing movement and the Wide Awakes despite ideological differences between the two organizations. Both primarily consisted of young men making their living by simple means. Leaders of the Know-Nothing movement were generally not educated men. Most were farmers. Although not highly educated they often played key leadership roles in their communities. According to Robert Parmet, author of *The Know-Nothings in Connecticut*, nativists were likely to be the founders and officers of their local churches.<sup>13</sup> The leader of the Know-Nothings in Connecticut was Nehemiah D. Sperry (known as N.D.) of New Haven. He was only twenty-seven in 1855, but proved to be a successful leader of the nativist movement. He was a postmaster for New Haven and eventually became a congressman.<sup>14</sup> His first cousin, Henry Thompson Sperry (known as H.T.), became the Corresponding Secretary for the Hartford Wide Awakes at the tender age of

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<sup>12</sup> Preston King, letter to George S. Gilman, 30 April 1860. Gilman Family Papers.

<sup>13</sup> Parmet, 156, 167.

<sup>14</sup> Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 385; Parmet, 150-151.

twenty-three. H. T. Sperry would later become part owner of the *Hartford Post*. Though little is known of his political background, we do know that N. D. was active in the Know-Nothings up until 1860. He was recorded to have converted to the Republican Party sometime before the Connecticut state convention on 25 February 1860 when he served as a “delegate from New Haven” and active member. N. D. petitioned his new party for additional campaign funding but there was controversy surrounding his involvement. He was accused of using Republican resources to reinstate the Know-Nothing Party. Wait N. Hawley alleged that Sperry conspired to undermine the Republican Party by purposely omitting the word “Republican” from a Lincoln-Hamlin advertisement for the Connecticut state convention.<sup>15</sup> Since Sperry was the head of the state committee blame rested squarely on his shoulders. He was eventually exonerated, the omission proving to be a simple oversight. In defense of Sperry, James F. Babcock was quoted as saying “that there was ‘no more earnest and faithful supporter of Lincoln and Hamlin and of the Republican principles in the state of Connecticut.’”<sup>16</sup> N. D. Sperry personified the type of young men the Republican Party was hoping to gain in 1860.

In Connecticut men like the Sperrys, George Bissell, and Julius Rathbun took the concept of a Republican political club and created what proved to be a vital part of the Republican campaign in 1860. This new political club quickly spread to become a national organization. From March through November the city of Hartford, the state of Connecticut, and the entire nation became enthralled with the Wide Awakes. They were the biggest phenomenon of the 1860 campaign – and it all began in a small room above a

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<sup>15</sup> Parmet, 332, 326, 330-331.

<sup>16</sup> James Babcock quoted in *Palladium* 16 August 1860 in Parmet, 332.

drug store. Within a matter of weeks the organization became inundated with thousands of young men eager to join and anxious to participate. Some had previous political experience, but most did not. George Bissell, grand marshal of the parade for Cassius Clay, had been instrumental in Connecticut's Republican campaign in 1856 and was only thirty-one years old. Others like Joseph Hawley, former editor of the *Hartford Press*, was part of a Republican club organized in Hartford in January 1860. He would later serve as commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Volunteers and eventually as a United States Senator from Connecticut.<sup>17</sup> Whatever their previous participation in Republican events had been, these men were forever known as Wide Awakes – the headstrong supporters of Abraham Lincoln and ultimate believers in the ideology of the Republican Party. Their commitment, and the commitment of so many others from across the North, helped solidify this organization and established its place in history.

In the eight months between the organization of the Hartford club and the election of Lincoln in November, hundreds of political clubs formed under the name Wide Awake. The Wide Awakes also influenced many satellite groups with names like Rail Maulers, Rail Splitters, Abe's Boys, Lincoln's Wide Awakes and others. According to Julius Rathbun, officer in the original Hartford Wide Awakes, there were over 400 Wide Awake clubs by August and over 500,000 men in Wide Awake uniform by November.<sup>18</sup> It is impossible to estimate exactly how large the Wide Awake organization became because complete documentation remains largely non-existent. Individual clubs

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<sup>17</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 21 January 1860.

<sup>18</sup> Julius G. Rathbun, "The Wide Awakes: The Great Political Organization of 1860," *The Connecticut Quarterly* 1 (Oct., 1895), 333.

announced membership numbers in their local newspapers (which may or may not have been accurate) and may have attempted to send these membership rosters to Hartford for the “Records of the Wide Awakes of the United States.” Unfortunately substantial data reflecting this information is unavailable. Rathbun’s claim that there were 500,000 members by November seems possible based on the *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*’s estimate that by 17 September 1860 there were 400,000 members with the number expected to increase by 100 a week.<sup>19</sup> A conservative estimate of Wide Awakes was estimated as 200,000 to 400,000 members. B. F. Thompson, a New Hampshire Wide Awake, wrote that two million Wide Awakes marched off to war.<sup>20</sup> While this last number is a bit farfetched, the Republican club did gain immense popularity. It became so popular that Southern newspapers ran articles accusing Republicans, and Lincoln, of organizing the club solely to create an army ready to be mobilized to intimidate the South.<sup>21</sup>

In the eyes of those opposed to the Republicans, the Wide Awakes probably did appear to be organizing for some greater purpose than mere participation in the campaign. Wilcomb Washburn, former curator of the Smithsonian, argued that it was the “paramilitary appearance” of the marching club, which foreshadowed the “consequences of a Lincoln victory.”<sup>22</sup> At the time, many southerners would have echoed Washburn’s claim. Hundreds of men dressed in uniform and engaging in marching maneuvers caused

<sup>19</sup> *New York Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 17 September 1860.

<sup>20</sup> B.F. Thompson, “The Wide Awakes of 1860,” *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries* 10, no. 5 (Nov., 1909), 295; Floyd & Marion Rinhart, “The Prairies A-Blaze: Iowa Wide Awakes Carry Torches for Lincoln,” *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 77 (Spring, 1996), 43.

<sup>21</sup> *New Jersey Gazette and Republican*, 19 October 1860.

<sup>22</sup> Wilcomb E. Washburn, “Great Autumnal Madness: Political Symbolism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* XLIX, no. 4 (Dec., 1963), 427.

apprehension among many southerners who feared the existence of an army waiting in the wings to invade southern states. Accounts of this paranoia made their way into northern newspapers. The *New Jersey Gazette and Republican* reprinted excerpts of an article from the *Richmond Enquirer*:

Is there no significance in these things? Our Northern friends are men of action, not of words; they organize, drill, march and file while we speak and talk – they do privately and by voluntary associations what we debate in deliberative bodies, and unhesitatingly, if at all, by legislative action. Their organizations are not yet armed, it is true, at least not that outsiders were aware of, but they are drilled, uniformed, and provided with rails, overcoats and torches, ready for marching.<sup>23</sup>

This article could have been a response to the October elections and the inevitability of Lincoln's victory. Or it could have been a response to articles like the one in the *Hartford Courant* on 7 March 1860, which announced proudly that "The 'Wide Awakes' are Republicans, and have enlisted for the war."<sup>24</sup> The *Courant*, however, was speaking of a political war against the Democracy (as the Democratic Party was often called). Nevertheless, Democratic response to the Wide Awakes was characterized by open hostilities and anxiousness.

So why were the Wide Awakes so popular? Even though members were often required to provide their own uniforms and lanterns and in some instances were required to pay a membership fee,<sup>25</sup> the popularity of the Wide Awakes skyrocketed because this organization combined elements of pre-existing political clubs and fraternal organizations with antislavery ideology and youthful zeal to create one of the most structured, well-rounded campaign organizations of the nineteenth century. A strict compliance to

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<sup>23</sup> *New Jersey Gazette and Republican*, 19 October 1860.

<sup>24</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 7 March 1860.

<sup>25</sup> Hartford Wide Awake Constitution in Records, 1860-1861 (Wide-Awake Club, Hartford, Connecticut).

Republican ideologies appealed both antislavery supporters and nativist farmers from Pennsylvania. Their quasi-military appearance and dedication to military-style drilling appealed to those fascinated by parades and close-order drill. Grand torchlight parades and rallies were focal points in the Wide Awakes' campaign strategy and attracted some participants who were less interested in the political issues and came more for the fun and excitement of the campaign. Whatever drew one to the Wide Awakes, there was a pride of belonging to the organization – it was, after all, the biggest and best of its kind in their lifetime.

The inclusiveness of the Wide Awakes set them apart from the Know-Nothings and other political organizations. The Republicans made it a part of their Constitution to accept any and all individuals who wished to join. The only stipulation was that potential members believe the Republican principles (a requirement that could hardly be enforced) and in some clubs sign their name to the Constitution.<sup>26</sup> Written in the first draft of the Wide Awake Constitution was the resolution that:

vindicators of purely republican principles, extend a cordial invitation to all persons to join their numbers; and believing that the general influence of such an Association will tend to promote the good of our cause, we do recommend the formation of the same in every city and town in our state and throughout the Union.<sup>27</sup>

Expansion into surrounding cities was dependant upon the original Hartford club promoting its existence and by word of mouth. As the Wide Awakes spread to New Haven and other towns in close proximity to Hartford, the new marching club made headlines in local newspapers there, prompting interested young men to write Hartford

<sup>26</sup> Records: Republican Club of Troy, Illinois, Caleb Johnson Collection, 15 August 1860.

<sup>27</sup> Hartford Wide Awake Club, Constitution.

for instructions on how to organize their own club. The process became self-sustaining, repeating itself as the Wide Awakes grew geographically outward from Hartford. Soon the Wide Awakes had fulfilled their early resolution to reach “every city and town in [Connecticut] and throughout the Union.”<sup>28</sup>

Typically the Wide Awakes were an organization of young men in their mid-twenties to early thirties. However, any white male, regardless of age, social status, or ethnicity could join. Of the original members, C.V.R. Pond, secretary, and Henry E. Valentine were twenty-six years old; James A. Chalker, captain, was twenty-eight and James P. Carpenter, secretary/treasurer, was thirty.<sup>29</sup> The Wide Awake Constitution set a minimum age requirement of eighteen years, three years younger than the legal voting age. B. F. Thompson, a “charter member” of the Wide Awakes of Keene, New Hampshire, recorded that men were allowed to join if they were under the legal voting age.<sup>30</sup> However, there is no indication as to whether or not boys under the age of eighteen were allowed to join. There were older Wide Awakes as well. Caleb Johnson, a secretary for the Lincoln Wide Awakes in Troy, Illinois, was sixty-two years old in 1860 and as secretary was responsible for recording meeting minutes. Johnson was appointed as a member of the committee that organized the Troy Lincoln Wide-Awakes. In Ohio a group of sixty middle aged men organized a Wide Awake company and were well

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> 1860 U.S. Census [www.heritagequestonline.com](http://www.heritagequestonline.com)

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, 293; Hartford Wide Awake Club, Constitution; Caleb Johnson Collection, 18 August 1860; Benjamin H. Grierson, Benjamin H. Grierson Collection, Box 1, Folder 3; Republican Wide-Awakes of Albany, *The Republican wide-awakes of Albany; organized 16 June 1860* (Albany, New York).

trained. They meet “once a week and drill[ed].”<sup>31</sup> When it came to the fundamental principles of the Wide Awake movement, age was not a factor.

Although the Wide Awake Constitution did not expressly prohibit women or African-Americans from joining it is unlikely that they did so in any significant numbers. Women generally associated with the organization by assisting with pre-parade and rally preparations and by attending to other behind the scenes details.<sup>32</sup> There was one account of a company of “lady Wide Awakes” who participated in a Republican rally in Fairfield, Iowa. The *Fairfield Ledger* reported that the company of ladies numbered “sixty-two [and] they were dressed in white, with a blue sash around the waist. Each lady wore a jaunty cap, trimmed with ribbon. Each member also carried a pole with a spear on the end of it, and a flag on the pole with the names of Lincoln and Hamlin.”<sup>33</sup> At a Republican rally in Decatur, Illinois, women in “uniform” escorted mounted Wide Awakes along the parade route.<sup>34</sup> It appears, however, that female companies of Wide Awakes were the exception rather than the rule.

The popularity of the Wide Awakes and the ease with which they spread throughout the Union created apprehension that they were secret-society lodges similar to Know-Nothings. Chapter Two established that the Wide Awakes were nothing like their predecessor. Both organizations were geographically diverse, but only the Wide Awakes of 1860 appealed to a broader selection of individuals. Know-Nothing lodges were based on secrecy while Wide Awake clubs were widely advertised. Know-Nothing members

<sup>31</sup> Johnson Collection, 11 & 15 August 1860; Bela A. Adams to Abraham Lincoln 23 October 1860. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup> H. T. Sperry, *To the Republican Wide-Awake Ladies*, 12 November 1860.

<sup>33</sup> Rinhart, 47.

<sup>34</sup> John Sargent to Daniel Sargent, John Sargent Collection, 26 October 1860.

gained their name from a strict initiation policy that required all members to keep group beliefs, political agendas, and other private information secret from those not involved.<sup>35</sup>

No one was allowed to join in the Know-Nothing movement until they had been nominated by a council, investigated by an investigating committee, and then voted on by existing members. Of utmost importance was determining the Protestant and nativist genealogy of all potential members.<sup>36</sup> If allowed to join, potential members often had to undergo an intense and extremely secretive initiation ritual as well as demonstrate a vast knowledge of passwords, secret signals, and codes. In addition, potential members had to promise to uphold the beliefs of the group and respond to inquiries with the answer, “I know nothing.”<sup>37</sup> In order to ensure the secrecy of Know-Nothing lodges they were created in distant, almost rundown locations. In many instances a town did not realize it hosted a Know-Nothing lodge until a nativist announced a political position.<sup>38</sup>

Wide Awakes, on the other hand, openly advertised their organization, membership meetings, and drill practices. The *Hartford Courant* shouted the praises of the marching club and their torchlight parades with numerous articles appearing almost immediately following the first Hartford meeting in February 1860. Members of the organization openly promoted the movement with rally cries to “Push on the Column!” or

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<sup>35</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23-24.

<sup>36</sup> Anbinder, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Anbinder, 20-21 &24; David Morris Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), 248.

<sup>38</sup> Anbinder 21-22; Carleton Beals, *Brass-Knuckle Crusade: the Great Know-Nothing Conspiracy, 1820-1860* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1960), 23.

with reference to their young members, “Forward, Young Guard!”<sup>39</sup> It was common to read advertisements like these in Republican papers everyday between March and November.

**Wide Awake!** Every member who can devote the day to the cause, are invited to meet at the Republican Headquarters at 8 o’clock this morning.<sup>40</sup>

ATTENTION WIDE AWAKES! The Wide Awakes of the City of Trenton are hereby ordered to meet at Head Quarters on Warren street, fully equipped, on THURSDAY EVENING, 11<sup>th</sup> instant, at 7 ½ o’clock. By order of the Colonel. Thomas C. Brannin.<sup>41</sup>

For the Wide Awakes it was a wonderful thing to be campaigning for the Republicans. It was their mission and purpose, and not at all secretive or tethered by tedious rituals.

In many ways the Wide Awakes provided immigrants with a means to participate in the American political process. According to an article in *Vermont History* there was a group of Irish immigrants who supported Lincoln at a rally in Plattsburg.<sup>42</sup> More likely, Lincoln would have received wide support from Protestant Germans from the Midwest. On several occasions companies of German Wide Awakes marched in rallies in eastern states. One German company participated in a Baltimore, Maryland rally that erupted into brutal violence against the Wide Awakes. Overall, membership was encouraged and an attempt was made to make all participants feel welcome and involved. The Wide Awakes were known to make “‘outsiders’ feel welcome; people with few means of social

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<sup>39</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 3 March 1860. Newspapers also used “Do Your Duty!” which Lincoln used in his Cooper Union Address (DeWitt, 5). All three phrases were references for marching towards victory in November.

<sup>40</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 2 April 1860.

<sup>41</sup> *New Jersey Gazette and Republican*, 10 October 1860.

<sup>42</sup> Glenn C. Howland, “Organize! Organize! The Lincoln Wide-Awakes in Vermont,” *Vermont History* 48 (Winter, 1980), 32.

integration discovered that they could join the movement and attain a sense of belonging.”<sup>43</sup>

Another reason men were driven to join the Wide Awakes was because the organization offered experiences previously unattainable to many. Men were intrigued by the quasi-military element of the organization. They enjoyed wearing uniforms, marching in cadence, and otherwise conducting themselves as a military unit. Performing as a well-trained military unit was extremely important to the Wide Awakes. The organization adopted *Hardee's Tactics* as their drill book for military-style training. Every potential Wide Awake club received instructions from Hartford to use *Hardee's Tactics* as their military reference. New York's drill book, compiled by J. H. Hobart Ward (Grand Marshal of the New York Grand Wide Awake procession), included more advanced marching maneuvers such as the “Rail Fence Movement.” This maneuver required the company to march in a zigzag pattern diagonally from one side of the street to the other. The purpose was to simulate a rail fence symbolic of Abraham Lincoln’s campaign.<sup>44</sup> Intricate marching maneuvers entertained the crowds.

In addition, another incentive to join the Wide Awakes was the opportunity it provided members to travel around one’s state and even to other parts of the country, a definite appeal to the twenty year old working man who had never left home. This contributed to the increasing popularity of the Wide Awakes. Throughout the entire campaign, clubs from different cities would come together for local rallies and parades in

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<sup>43</sup> Howland, 32.

<sup>44</sup> H. T. Sperry, letter 10 August 1860 in Wide-Awake Club Records 1860-1861; J. H. Hobart Ward, *Tactics of the Wide Awakes of New York* (New York: Gavit & Co., 1860); *A Drill for the use of the Cincinnati Wide-Awakes* (Kroch Library Rare Books & Manuscripts).

order to present a more impressive image. It became a competition to see which town could send the most members to an out-of-town rally.<sup>45</sup>

**Wide Awake Celebration at New Haven, Tonight! “Do Your Duty!”** There will be a Grand Rally of the WIDE-AWAKES at New Haven, tonight. The Wide-Awakes of this city are going down. The New Haven Wide-Awakes came here Tuesday evening with over 400 men. You can beat that. “Say you will, boys!” A SPECIAL TRAIN will leave the Depot of Hartford and New Haven Railroad at **6:30 P.M.**, tonight. Fare, \$1.00 for the trip. The Republicans of Hartford are invited to go with the Wide-Awakes. Tickets can be procured at the stores of J.S. Chalker, N.J. Brockett, W.B. Smith, Allen & Rathbun.<sup>46</sup>

The Hartford Wide Awakes were greatly in demand and were constantly requested for rallies across the nation. Advertisements for the New York Grand procession made sure to indicate how many participants from Hartford were expected. These men were famous because they were the originals and were responsible for the national phenomenon.

Participating as a Wide Awake opened the eyes of many young men in more ways than one. Young men who had never left the family farm or the town limits of their birthplace suddenly found themselves marching in New York City, Springfield, Illinois, and other exciting places. Yet, no matter how exciting the prospect of marching in distant cities may have seemed to young men, they were not likely to join the Wide Awakes without some minimal indoctrination to the political ideologies of the organization. Had these men disagreed with what the Republican club stood for then they would have joined Democratic clubs, such as the Little Giants, even though these seemed less charismatic. Whether men joined the Wide Awakes because they felt an innate calling to support the Republican Party or because they were attracted to the

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin H. Grierson Collection, 22 August 1860.

<sup>46</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 1860.

glamorous nightlife of torchlight parades remains to be determined. It was the message behind the torches that was significant. By picking up a banner or torch, donning a cape and cap, and marching in step with their brethren from across the union, members of the Wide Awakes collectively voiced their hopes and dreams of Republican victory, nationally and locally.

When the original thirty-six met to organize the Wide Awakes as a quasi-military marching club they proclaimed themselves to be a subsidiary of the Young Men's Republican Union (YMRU), an organization which had been in existence in Hartford for at least several months prior to the 3 March meeting.<sup>47</sup> Many original members of the Wide Awakes had already joined the YMRU and for the first month or so the two organizations were virtually one and the same. H. T. Sperry became an essential member of both. His name appeared in the *Courant* as the Corresponding Secretary of the YMRU and of the Wide Awakes. He was a lieutenant in the Wide Awakes and Chairman of the Committee of Arrangements. Sperry filled secretarial roles for both organizations even though James P. Carpenter was listed as secretary/treasurer of the Wide Awakes. Sperry was responsible for communicating with potential new clubs.<sup>48</sup>

The Young Men's Republican Union and the Wide Awakes boasted the same members as well as virtually identical Constitutions. The only outward difference between the two was the military character of the Wide Awakes. But, as Republican

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<sup>47</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 4 March 1860

<sup>48</sup> *Hartford Courant*, March 1860 & 15 June 1860; Wide-Awake Club, Constitution; Sperry, 10 August 1860; H.T. Sperry, *To the Republican Wide-Awake Ladies of Hartford*, 12 November 1860.

clubs both organizations shared the same ideologies and expressed these in the preamble to each respective Constitution. The preambles also set the parameters for the members:

We the undersigned young men of the City of Hartford, desirous of securing the ascendancy and perpetuity of the principles of the Republican Party, and the election of its candidates for office to all places of honor and trust in the Government, do hereby explicitly declare our entire devotion to the Constitution of the Union, our opposition to interference with slavery in the States where it now legally exists, and our unqualified and unalterable determination to resist by all constitutional means its further extension.<sup>49</sup>

There are two existing copies of Wide Awake constitutions from Hartford, with only slight variations between them.<sup>50</sup> The Preamble of the other existing copy is identical, except for the added last sentence: “and pledge ourselves to use all honorable means for the success and triumph of the principles of the Republican Party and of the election of its candidates to office.”

Article one of the original Wide Awake Constitution confirmed the formal name of the organization as the “Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford.” This draft included ten different articles and several sub-sections while the second draft included twelve articles. These articles addressed a range of issues including the distribution of officers for each company, frequency of meetings, how many members constituted a quorum, duties of each member, and codes of conduct. Articles dealing directly with codes of conduct detailed that: “no boisterous or disorderly conduct or unnecessary demonstration of any kind shall be allowed.” Also, “any member who refuse[d] or neglect[ed] to obey the commands of the officers, or whose conduct [was] not in accordance with this

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<sup>49</sup> Hartford Wide-Awake Club, Constitution and preamble; *Hartford Courant*, March 1860.

<sup>50</sup> See Appendix A.

requirement, shall be liable to be expelled from the association.”<sup>51</sup> This article was important when considering the Wide Awakes were criticized in 1860 for being a violent organization. The similarity between the YMRU and the Wide Awake Constitutions indicates the strong connection between the two organizations.

While the Wide Awakes may have openly declared in the papers that they wished to exist as a subsidiary of the Young Men’s Republican Union, their instantaneous popularity and proactive mission destined the marching club to emerge as the leading Republican campaign club of 1860. One of the Wide Awake constitutions indicated that it was the intention of the club to spread throughout Connecticut and every other state in the Union. Additionally, George Gilman, president of the Wide Awakes and the Young Men’s Republican Union, was sent explicit instructions from the Republican Party in Washington, D.C. to encourage the formation and expansion of campaign clubs. As each new town began the process of organizing a Wide Awake club they wrote to Hartford for instructions and received “a copy of the constitution and by-laws, together with a letter containing illustrations and all directions necessary to carry out the design of the organization.”<sup>52</sup> When George Bissell witnessed the young men in oil cloth capes he set in motion the activities that would result in the organization of a *national* Wide Awake movement.

The Wide Awakes expected to become popular and initiated strategic marketing techniques to spread their message and ensure the success of their organization. They placed advertisements in newspapers encouraging interested towns and individuals to

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<sup>51</sup> Hartford Wide Awake, Constitution.

<sup>52</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 15 June 1860.

write Hartford for information, sent portions of their club to all nearby rallies and parades, and set up headquarters in Hartford. H. T. Sperry drafted a form letter to provide all the necessary information a new club would need, including a brief history of the origins of the Wide Awakes, uniform specifications, and the purpose of organizing a marching club. His description of the Wide Awakes invoked patriotic illustrations comparing them to Minute Men from the Revolutionary War: the Wide Awakes were full of hundreds of “active, zealous, and reliable Republicans, holding themselves in readiness to respond to the rallying call at a moment’s notice . . . in fact, wherever the fight is hottest, there is their post of duty, and there the Wide-Awakes are found.”<sup>53</sup> This analogy was echoed in the minutes of the Troy Lincoln Wide-Awakes when a motion was passed to allow men to take their uniforms home “so as to be ready at any time, and in any place.”<sup>54</sup>

Sperry’s letter was sent out to hundreds of prospective members similar to any national campaign where the general headquarters distributed information to various chapters across the nation. Hartford, Connecticut, became the national headquarters of the Wide Awake movement. Just as the Republican Executive Congressional Committee prompted George Gillman to spread Republican documents and speeches throughout Connecticut, the Hartford Wide Awakes prompted their various satellite organizations to spread their message to potential members outside of Connecticut. The Wide Awakes also anticipated creating a national “Records of the Wide-Awakes of the United States”

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<sup>53</sup> Sperry, 10 August 1860.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson Collection, 8 September 1860.

to be maintained in Hartford.<sup>55</sup> These records were intended to record when and where new clubs formed, who their officers and members were, and how fast the organization grew. While no indication of these records' existence has been confirmed, the fact that an effort was made to compile them is indicative of a national movement. It was another distinction which separated the Wide Awakes from other political campaign clubs in 1860.

Once Sperry's informational packet reached potential Wide Awake members, each organization had to establish a local headquarters and draft its own constitution. The Hartford Wide Awakes used the Constitution of the Young Men's Republican Union as a guide, and new Wide Awake clubs used the Hartford Constitution as their guides. In addition to Hartford, constitutions have been located for Albany, New York, Elmira, New York, Meredosia and Troy, Illinois. Almost certainly constitutions existed for other Wide Awake clubs as well. Each of the five existing constitutions resembled the Wide Awake and YMRU constitutions almost identically. All except the Albany Constitution included the preamble and all five began with Article one which formally adopted the name of each club as the Republican Wide-Awakes of the appropriate city. These documents became the rock of the Wide Awake movement as new clubs adhered to the articles within and followed protocol for establishing their club to Hartford standards. But once individual clubs were established, they became autonomous. Each individual club was responsible for setting up their own local headquarters, organizing torchlight parades and rallies, and attracting as many voters as possible for Republican candidates.

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<sup>55</sup> Sperry, 10 August 1860.

These clubs conducted themselves like modern chapters of Kiwanis, Lions, or Rotary clubs. Each acted as an independent entity, but was loosely connected to every other chapter across the nation. Clubs created committees to organize excursions to neighboring rallies, kept minutes of all meetings, recorded detailed descriptions of all expenditures, and wrote checks to pay for lamp oil and bands.<sup>56</sup> Any one of these clubs could have existed without the others, but all were unified with the common goal of pursuing Republican victory at the polls.

Wide Awake clubs in Vermont, New Hampshire, Michigan, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Connecticut, Indiana, and Maryland proved that the organization reached key states in the Union and influenced a large number of voters. They were not merely an outlet for boisterous young men or a minor campaign club. The Wide Awakes blossomed into a national organization with a larger purpose and these men believed their contribution would help assure Lincoln's victory. But to elect Abraham Lincoln and other Republican candidates the Wide Awakes had to use their influence to attract votes. Torchlight parades and enthusiastic mass rallies entertained the voters, but did not necessarily compel them to the ballot box on Election Day. On 1 November 1860 the *Hartford Courant* ran an article that touted the brilliancy of the Wide Awakes but sternly reminded members that they still had very important duties to perform. According to this article, "the prime object of these clubs [was] to secure a majority of the electoral college for Lincoln and Hamlin on the first Tuesday of November." The *Hartford Courant* wrote:

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson Collection, 8 & 28 September 1860; Letter to Benjamin Grierson, 2 August 1860; Receipts in Records: Republican Club of Troy, Illinois, Caleb Johnson Collection.

Finally, Wide-Awakes! Don't waste your time from now to the election in idle parades. You have done gloriously in keeping up the enthusiasm and shedding brilliancy over the field while the combatants were taking up their respective positions. The real fighting is now about to begin. On the day of battle, don't be preparing a programme for celebrating the victory. Don't be burnishing your banners and filling your lamps. Work at the polls from early dawn to set of sun . . . *organize!* Plan! WORK! America expects every Wide-Awake to do his duty!<sup>57</sup>

The goals of the Wide Awakes had always included putting down their torches and patrolling the voting polls on election day, urging eligible voters to exercise their right to vote. They accomplished this not with force, such as some Democrats and southerners later claimed, but rather by spreading the positive Republican message and encouraging voters in the belief that the only way the nation could survive was if slavery was put on the path to extinction, and that the only candidate willing to take a stand on slavery was Lincoln. The Wide Awakes were discouraged from ever attempting to hinder the balloting process and were forbidden to prohibit opposition voters from casting their votes. In Troy, Illinois the Wide Awakes organized committees to stand at the polls to tally the vote, & to challenge the voters . . . to prepare the legal voters in alphabetical order for the use of the challengers . . . to bring in laggard voters . . . to procure and see that pure ballots [were] distributed on the day of Election and to empower the committee to appoint others.<sup>58</sup>

Having achieved their purpose in electing Lincoln and all but one local Republican candidate, the Troy Lincoln Wide-Awakes ended their meetings with a “list of persons known as favoring cession, sympathison of Southern principles, and traitors.”<sup>59</sup> But not all clubs immediately suspended activities. N. D. Sperry, Chairman

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<sup>57</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 1 November 1860.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson Collection, 1 November 1860.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson Collection, 6 November 1860.

of the [Connecticut] Republican State Committee, urged the Wide Awakes to continue their work and to grow stronger in areas where they were weak.

Do not lay aside your organization now, but perpetuate and perfect it. In towns where no such organizations exist, let them be formed immediately. Remember that next Spring we shall have to elect Congressmen to assist in sustaining President Lincoln's Administration. Remember, also that Connecticut was the first in the Wide-Awake organization. Upon her, then, should devolve the honor of putting it on a secure basis, and under a more perfect system. Persevere, then, young men! and give to the country a perfect model of an institution which you had the honor to inaugurate. Hartford and New Haven Wide-Awakes! will you not now begin this work, and thus secure the fruits of victory you have so nobly won?<sup>60</sup>

Following the election, the Republican Party in Connecticut anticipated using the Wide Awakes to maintain party solidarity.

So why did an organization recognized as “the great feature of this presidential campaign”<sup>61</sup> and as popular as the Wide Awakes were in 1860, fade from the front page of history? The answer is that the Civil War changed everything. Men who marched with the Wide Awakes left in the spring of 1861 and marched off to war. As they did so, they left behind one of the most remarkable chapters in the political history of the United States; one that has never been duplicated since.

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<sup>60</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 8 November 1860.

<sup>61</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 22 May & 1 November 1860.

## CHAPTER IV: THE MEN BEHIND THE TORCHES

They have been characterized as everything from a quasi-military organization to a fraternal secret society, a political street gang to a Union army in waiting. They have been stereotyped as excessively young and unaware. Their identity has been cemented to their oil cloth cape and grand displays of enthusiasm. But in reality, the Wide Awakes were comprised of some of the most patriotic, loyal, and determined men in America in 1860 and they inspired a generation of new voters. They were overwhelmingly popular in the North and equally despised in the South. They were immortalized in print, tracked in newspapers, and judged for their every move. As an overnight sensation the Wide Awakes inspired everything from cartoons and songs to copycat clubs. In a world where public perception was everything, the Wide Awakes were always under a veritable magnifying glass. Regardless of how they have been depicted through the years, the Wide Awakes were something extraordinary, something that would change the lives of the members forever. The Republican campaign club should be remembered as an organization whose members, regardless of age, expressed their ideals openly and spectacularly, even when they faced mockery and jealousy, to become the flag bearers of the Republican Party. There were men behind the torches, most of them voters, many of them future soldiers in the Union army.

Non-republicans perceived the quasi-military structure of the Wide Awakes as a threat. From a distance they were perceived as a ready-made Republican army preparing to invade the South. Their uniforms and continuous military-style drilling were more of a psychological threat to Southerners than anything else. For this reason the Wide Awakes

were continuously attacked and ridiculed by some for their appearance and behavior.

Every chapter of the organization was subject to some form of attack – some more violent than others.

By 1860, tensions over slavery had reached a final breaking point and the election of a Republican president would surely result in the secession of some southern states. With this understanding imbedded in the minds of every U.S. citizen, it is no wonder southerners perceived the Wide Awakes as a Republican army, or “Lincoln’s Army.” Wilcomb Washburn, former Curator of the Smithsonian Institute, wrote that the quasi-military appearance of the Wide Awakes “foreshadowed the consequences of a Lincoln victory.” Washburn was less convinced than others that the Wide Awakes were aware of their particular situation but that “latent within the organization was the assumption, symbolically conveyed in its outer form, of a feeling that there could be no permanent compromise with the slave power.”<sup>1</sup> It was their overtly military presence that provoked opposition forces to instigate violent acts against the Wide Awakes.

The more noise the Wide Awakes made, the more likely they were to be attacked. The 27 March edition of the *Hartford Courant* included multiple vignettes devoted to the Wide Awakes and two in particular addressed attacks on members of the organization. In response to the assaults the *Courant* printed the following:

The Wide Awakes were assaulted again Saturday evening, by stones, dirt, and Seymour clubs’ which were thrown into their ranks. A stone thrown at them on Asylum street overshot its mark, and dashed in a window of the store of Day,

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<sup>1</sup> Wilcomb Washburn, “The Great Autumnal Madness: Political Symbolism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* XLIX, no. 4 (December, 1963), 427. Julius Rathbun and B. F. Thompson, original Wide Awakes from Hartford and New Hampshire respectively, both wrote in articles that the men who joined the Wide Awakes “knew the issues at stake” and were ready to face their responsibilities head on.

Griswold & Co. They are peaceful men – these Wide Awakes. They are also able to take care of themselves. The insults to which they have been always subjected are about to cease.<sup>2</sup>

In this particular instance the Wide Awakes were not responsible for instigating the violence, but as the *Courant* indicated, those who continued to assault the Republicans should beware, because these men were well trained and could protect themselves appropriately. Wide Awake constitutions explicitly forbade instigating boisterous or unruly behavior and members risked expulsion if they did so.<sup>3</sup> However, no one expected members to cower when attacked. To do so would be giving into the Democracy and backing down from the ideals that built the organization.

Some protestors used words instead of stones to express their disdain for the Wide Awakes. Republican speakers were often prevented from finishing their speeches by political opponents in the crowds who engaged in obnoxious “hootings or howlings.” The Wide Awakes were often referred to as the “Sleep-Walkers” or the “Fast Asleeps” in opposition papers.<sup>4</sup> More inventive “jesters” made the oil cloth cape and uniform of the Wide Awakes the butt of their jokes. The *Connecticut Gazette* asked its readers “why is the Wide Awakes’ cape like the Southern extremity of Africa?” The answer was “because it is the cape of Good Hope.”<sup>5</sup> Other jokes included suggesting new capes, such as “Cape Fear – for the ‘pheelinx’ of the party; . . . Cape North, for the only section of the

<sup>2</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 27 March 1860. Seymour clubs refer to Connecticut’s Democratic gubernatorial candidate and his supporters.

<sup>3</sup> Hartford Wide Awake Constitution, Article 9, Sections 1 & 2, in Records 1860-1861 (Wide-Awake Club, Hartford, Connecticut).

<sup>4</sup> Melvin L. Hayes, *Mr. Lincoln Runs for President* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1960), 138 & 159; Floyd & Marion Rinhart, “The Prairies A-Blaze: Iowa Wide Awakes Carry Torches for Lincoln,” *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 77 (Spring 1996), 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Connecticut Gazette* reprinted in the *New Haven Columbian Weekly Register*, 6 October 1860.

country they have an interest in, and Cape Farewell, to any hope of electing their candidates.”<sup>6</sup> The Wide Awakes were also chided in written publications such as *Pipps Among the Wide-Awakes*, a short booklet designed to instruct “virgin voters” in the “correct and entire method of being Wide Awake, Awoke, and Awaken.”<sup>7</sup> While annoying, these attempts by Democratic supporters to disrupt Republican parades and rallies and to provoke public distrust or distaste for the Wide Awakes failed miserably. They were merely futile attempts by a losing team undertaken in the desperation of imminent defeat. Republican candidates and campaign clubs ignored opposition threats and pressed onward, true to their motto “Push on the Column!” Each day Wide Awake and Republican numbers grew, testament to the strength of the Republican Party in the North and the success of their campaign club.

Occasionally, however, protests became more violent. A Wide Awake parade in Troy, New York, was interrupted when objects were thrown into the crowd, resulting in melee in the streets, in which participants in the fight used everything from guns to Wide-Awake torches.<sup>8</sup> Baltimore was also a hotspot for open hostility against the Republicans. A Wide Awake headquarters there was attacked, “caps and capes were destroyed; ink was poured upon the records; and pictures of Lincoln were shredded.”<sup>9</sup> A torchlight procession and rally on 1 November 1860, also in Baltimore, was met with formidable resistance. The Wide Awakes rallied at the Front Street Theater after a torchlight procession. Between two hundred and three hundred Wide Awakes participated and an

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Pipps Among the Wide-Awakes* (New York: Wevill & Chapin, 1860).

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Gate City (Keokuk, Iowa)* reprinted in Hayes, 160.

<sup>9</sup> Hayes, 161.

estimated five-times that number turned out to protest. The marchers were “stoned and pelted with rotten eggs” as they made their way through the streets of Baltimore. In anticipation of the protests, the Republicans were accompanied by police protection, estimated at one hundred men. The police kept the procession moving and the protestors away from the marchers. Despite the angry mob, Republicans managed to briefly gather to discuss the upcoming election.<sup>10</sup> Here again, Wide Awakes were blatantly harassed and attacked.

The Baltimore riot on 1 November was most likely a direct response to the growing reality that Abraham Lincoln would win the presidential contest.<sup>11</sup> The importance of this incident, however, was not in its demonstration that the Wide Awakes were able to thwart violent actions from disgruntled Democratic supporters. It was not to be expected that the Wide Awakes would have found a warm reception in Maryland, a slave state, especially knowing the history of gang warfare in Baltimore prior to Lincoln’s election. What is important about the Wide Awake presence in Baltimore is that the organization marched in a slave state, a state which six months later was on the verge of secession. It is unclear as to whether these Wide Awakes were primarily from Baltimore, or whether they were from another part of the state. Regardless, there were Wide Awake clubs in the state of Maryland who were marching in anticipation of election day.<sup>12</sup> The attempt to bring the Republican political message to the lower North

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<sup>10</sup> Ollinger Crenshaw, *Slave States in the Presidential Election of 1860*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), 121; *Philadelphia Daily Press*, 3 November 1860; Worthington G. Snethen to Abraham Lincoln, 3 November 1860. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>11</sup> Emerson David Fite, *The Presidential Campaign of 1860* (NY: The Macmillian Company, 1911), 232.

<sup>12</sup> Louis H. Caldwell to Abraham Lincoln, 19 October 1860. The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

was indicative of the extent of Wide Awakes' influence in trumpeting the Republican message. If its members were not serious about promoting Lincoln and the Republicans they would not have chosen the streets of Baltimore as their playground.

It would be naïve, however, to maintain that the Wide Awakes were never the instigators of violent acts. In New Haven they were accused of tearing down fences to "feed their bonfires."<sup>13</sup> They were also accused of drunk and disorderly conduct in Dover, Delaware, and Joliet, Illinois (among other places), where members allegedly picked fights with Douglas supporters.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from Baltimore, one of the most violent rallies the Wide Awakes were associated with occurred in Stone's Prairie, Illinois, on 25 August 1860.. This particular rally was Republican-organized but was initially advertised to participants of all political persuasions. Disruptions began when Democratic speakers realized that they would not be allowed to speak.<sup>15</sup> At the heart of the rally were the Quincy Wide Awakes who engaged in a tête-à-tête with Democratic supporters over a party pole. Pole raisings were a familiar part of nineteenth century political gatherings in which participants tried to erect a pole (with their candidate's banner attached to the top) taller than their opposition's pole. Friendly competition ensued when Republicans tried to cut down Democrat poles, and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> In Stone's Prairie, however, a struggle over a Democratic pole earlier in the day turned into a twenty-minute fistfight capped off by

<sup>13</sup> *Columbian Weekly Register*, 6 October 1860; Hayes, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Hayes, 160 & 162-163.

<sup>15</sup> Iris A. Nelson & Walter S. Waggoner, "Sick, sore and sorry: The Stone Prairie Riot of 1860," *Journal of Illinois History* 5 (Spring 2002), 25-26 & 29.

<sup>16</sup> William Eldon Baringer, "Campaign Technique in Illinois – 1860," *Transactions for the Year* (1932), 264.

gunfire directed at the Wide Awakes. Democrats were angry with the Republican club because they had attempted to remove rowdy participants from the rally. Several Wide Awakes were hit by gunfire and required medical attention.<sup>17</sup> The Wide Awakes were guilty of using “strong-arm tactics” to “disperse the crowd.” A rowdy crowd, plied by significant alcohol consumption, made it inevitable that violent disruptions would occur. Rallies attended by both Democrats and Republicans were not typical in 1860 and especially not rallies in which invitations to speak were given and then retracted.<sup>18</sup> But, considering the thousands of torchlight processions and rallies the Wide Awakes participated in all across the North, it is extraordinary that more violent attacks like those at Baltimore and Stone’s Prairie were not recorded. Even when the Wide Awakes were partially responsible for the attacks committed against them, they held true to form and protected those who needed to be protected.<sup>19</sup>

The perception that the Wide Awakes were really “Lincoln’s Army” emerged from southern fears of a Republican President. According to Emerson Fite, southerners misconstrued “the existence of the Wide Awakes into a military menace . . . , the military discipline practiced, the order, the drill, and the marching were only in preparation for the defense of Lincoln’s inauguration and of the North in general.”<sup>20</sup> This misconception was given life not only from the Wide Awakes’ quasi-military presence, but also from interpretations of the club found in political cartoons and campaign songs. The cover of the November 1860 *Wide-Awake Pictorial* conveyed the image that Lincoln and the Wide

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<sup>17</sup> Nelson, 29-31.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson, 30. Republican speaker Orville H. Browning credited the Wide Awakes with his protection during the riots.

<sup>20</sup> Fite, 229.

Awakes were one and the same and that Lincoln was in fact controlling the organization. A young-faced Lincoln was dressed in uniform holding a Pioneers torch and leading a column of Wide Awakes (See Appendix B, Figure Two). The caption below the cartoon reads: "Honest Old Abe Marching Forth to the White House."<sup>21</sup> Overly sensitive southerners interpreted this illustration literally when in reality it was a metaphor for the importance the Wide Awakes played in Lincoln's campaign. Obviously Lincoln had no plan to use the club to invade the south.

Cartoons often involved Lincoln dressed in a Wide Awake uniform or made reference to the omnipresent torches and lanterns. Currier and Ives, one of the leading publishers of political cartoons in 1860, published many cartoon interpretation of the Wide Awakes and Lincoln. In the cartoon, *Storming the Castle*, Lincoln was depicted in the traditional Wide Awake cape and cap and was carrying a lantern and rail fence (See Appendix B, Figure Three).<sup>22</sup> Lincoln was approaching the White House, disturbing attempts by the other presidential candidates to gain access. The rail fence and uniform were symbolic references to important components of Lincoln's campaign. The Wide Awakes and the rail-splitter campaign helped raise awareness of Lincoln and Republican principles, similar to William Henry Harrison's hard cider campaign in 1840. Combined, the two elements helped put Lincoln in a position where he was knocking on the White House door.

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<sup>21</sup> "Honest Old Abe Marching Forth to the White House", *Wide-Awake Pictorial*, 1 November 1860, <http://elections.harpweek.com/1860/cartoon-1860-Medium.asp?UniqueID=15&Year=1860>. A Pioneers torch is larger than the standard torches used by most Wide Awakes. It was usually given to the tallest men in a company, who marched on the outside of the lines and was meant to attract the most attention.

<sup>22</sup> *Storming the Castle* (Currier & Ives, 1860). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number: LC-USZ62-12420].

In the cartoon *The National Game. Three ‘outs’ and one ‘run.’ Abraham winning the ball*, the four presidential candidates were pictured in a game of baseball (See Appendix B, Figure Four).<sup>23</sup> Each presidential candidate was holding a bat inscribed with the basic theme of their party platform and was supported by a belt inscribed with the names of their respective campaign clubs. From the left, John Bell carried a bat labeled Fusion and wore the belt of his Union Club; Stephen Douglas was batting with non-intervention, supported by the Little Giants while John Breckinridge strikes out with slavery extension and his Disunion club. Lincoln hit a “home run” since he was supported by a strong bat (his rail labeled “equal rights and free territory”) and was supported by the Wide Awakes. The other three men were no match for Lincoln who had the winning combination of a successful political club and the strongest platform. In this particular cartoon, the Wide Awakes were compared to their opposition in the most accurate representation of the 1860 election. Alone, each of the three elements (Lincoln, the Republican platform, and the Wide Awakes) were not enough individually to insure Republican victory. But together they created the winning package. The Republican club was an important part of Lincoln’s success. To the audiences who viewed this cartoon, the Wide Awakes appeared as a strong, successful organization and a vital component in the election campaign.

It should be mentioned here that in addition to cartoon interpretations, the Wide Awakes also inspired a wide array of copycat clubs. Both Democrats and Constitutional Unionists formed campaign clubs in an attempt to undermine the popularity of the

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<sup>23</sup> *The National Game. Three ‘outs’ and one ‘run.’ Abraham Winning the Ball* (Currier & Ives, 1860). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-12425].

Republican clubs. The “Little Giants,” “Little Dougls,” and “Chloroformers” (who were meant to put the Wide Awakes to sleep), supported Stephen Douglas and the Northern Democrats. John Bell supporters formed clubs called the “Bell-Ringers” or the “Everette Guard.”<sup>24</sup> John Breckinridge did not have colorful names for his campaign clubs, but his supporters did use torchlight processions similar to the Wide Awakes to attract attention.<sup>25</sup> These clubs formed in cities throughout the country, but at best they came across as cheap imitations of the originals. The Wide Awakes were the originals and had become popular before the Democrats even had a candidate in the race. They had become household names, their popularity so widespread that no number of Democratic or Constitutional Union clubs could have even approached the influence of the Republican machine.<sup>26</sup>

The only imitation club, which even remotely posed a threat to the Wide Awakes, were the Minute Men. This new southern club formed late in the campaign and drafted their own constitutions that dedicated their club to the pursuit of “constitutional equality” in the federal government or the establishment of an independent South.<sup>27</sup> In St. Louis, the Minute Men were the military equal of the Wide Awakes and prepared for battle by “secretly drilling” in a manner similar to their opponents. They were defenders of secession just as the Wide Awakes were defenders of the Union. Despite attempts at a mutual truce in early 1861, conflicts between the rival clubs never dissipated. When the war began several months later members of each club volunteered for their respective

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<sup>24</sup> Hayes, 141-142; Roger A. Fischer, *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns, 1828-1984* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 81 & 91-93.

<sup>25</sup> *New Jersey State Gazette and Republican*, 24 October 1860.

<sup>26</sup> Baringer, 251-252.

<sup>27</sup> Fite, 230.

sides.<sup>28</sup> Overall, neither the Bell Ringers nor Little Giants or Minute Men ever came close to the popularity and success of the Wide Awakes.

In addition to inspiring cartoons and copycats, the Wide Awakes also became the source for numerous campaign songs and songbooks. Verses were set to popular tunes like Yankee Doodle and Dixie Land. According to Gerald McMurtry, the most popular song sung during parades was “Wide Awake Rallying Song” (set to the tune of *Nelly Bly*) but many company bands performed the “Wide Awake Quickstep,” published by A. & D.R. Andrews of Albany, New York.<sup>29</sup> Some tunes were created for parade bands and individual clubs while others were compiled into songbooks and published for the Republican Party. The *Wide Awake Songster* and the *Wide-Awake Vocalist* are two examples of campaign music compiled for larger audiences. The latter even included sheet music.<sup>30</sup> The *Connecticut Wide-Awake Songster*, first published in New Haven, included a copy of the Republican Party platform and seventy-two pages of pro-Union songs like “Lincoln and Liberty,” “Freedom’s Call,” and “We’ll Send Buchanan Home.”<sup>31</sup>

Most songs were meant for Republican ears and as a campaign tool, but occasionally they fed southern apprehensions about the existence of “Lincoln’s Army.”

In *The Irish Wide-Awake* (set to the tune of *Billy O. Rourke*), a man was coerced by the

<sup>28</sup> Galusha Anderson, *The Story of a Border City During the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1908), 20-23 & 80-81.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald R. McMurtry, “The Wide-Awakes and Their Torchlight Parades,” *Lincoln Lore*, no. 1572 (February 1969), 3; *The Wide Awake Quickstep* (Albany, NY: A. & D.R. Andrews, 1860). Historical American Sheet Music: 1850-1920, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. <http://memory.loc.gov> [call number: Music A-87218]. See Appendix C.

<sup>30</sup> *The Wide Awake Songster* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1860); *The Wide-Awake Vocalist: or Rail Splitters’ Song Book* (New York: E. A. Daggett, 1860).

<sup>31</sup> John W. Hutchinson, ed., *Connecticut Wide-Awake Songster* (New Haven: Skinner & Sperry Publishers, 1860).

Republicans to join “Lincoln’s torch-light army” in exchange for a warm meal.<sup>32</sup>

Although unlikely, it was not inconceivable for Irish men to join in the Wide Awake ranks. Most Irish immigrants, however, were supporters of Stephen Douglas and the Democrats. It is also highly unlikely that Wide Awakes forced any person to join their ranks – especially someone who did not support Republican candidates. The organization had become so popular that it no longer needed to solicit members. Those interested in joining the Republicans found the nearest club or organized their own. Instances like the one described in *The Irish Wide-Awake*, almost certainly fabricated, added to anti-Republican misconceptions that the Wide Awakes were secretly carrying guns instead of torches.

In response to these southern accusations, the *New York Times* defended the Republicans claiming that it was “unfounded and absurd” to consider the Wide Awakes as a “military force, raised and trained for purposes of aggression upon Southern rights.” The *Times* assured its readers that the organization’s intentions were “pacific and political” but that if an appropriate situation arose in which their services were needed, “they would form the nucleus of an admirable volunteer force for any service that might be required of them.”<sup>33</sup> Any serious consideration of using the Wide Awakes to invade the South or defend Lincoln’s inauguration did not surface until December 1860, around the time South Carolina seceded from the Union.<sup>34</sup> George Bissell, grand marshal of

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<sup>32</sup> Harry M. Palmer, *The Irish wide-awake* (New York: H. De Marsan, n.d.). America Song Sheets, Rare Books and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [digital ID: as201700]. See Appendix C.

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, 3 October 1860.

<sup>34</sup> David Hunter to Abraham Lincoln, 18 December 1860. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

Hartford's 25 February 1860 torchlight parade, wrote to Lincoln on 30 December 1860 informing him that if he so requested, any number of "organized and armed men" would be present at his inauguration for his protection, including a "true delegation of Hartford Wide Awakes, not in uniform but ready for duty."<sup>35</sup> Other letters to Lincoln indicated that companies of men could be ready at a moment's notice if he "furnished" the army. And in areas already prone to bloodshed, such as Missouri, Wide Awakes were encouraged to maintain formation throughout the winter, continue military drilling, and raise money to purchase munitions.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of how others viewed the Wide Awakes, they were not organized with the intent of becoming "Lincoln's Army" or marching off to make war on the South. They were organized as guardians and promoters of Republican principles and to use "honorable means" to resist the expansion of slavery into the territories. They were not to "interfere" with the institution where it previously existed.<sup>37</sup> It would have been neither honorable nor sanctioned for any Wide Awake club to "invade" southern states. However, when the War Between the States began, the Wide Awakes were among the first to volunteer.

So what became of the enthusiastic young men who campaigned for Abraham Lincoln? The fact that they virtually disappeared as Wide Awakes following the election has caused some speculation to the effect that they were not a national institution or the "greatest feature of the campaign." Their disappearance after the election and failure to

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<sup>35</sup> George P. Bissell to Abraham Lincoln, 30 December 1860. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>36</sup> W. S. Hathaway to Abraham Lincoln, 26 January 1861. Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress; Anderson, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Preamble, Hartford Wide-Awake Constitution.

form again in 1864 (when Lincoln needed their assistance even more than 1860) could be the basis for claiming that the Wide Awakes were an anomaly. This, however, is another misconception about the organization. Without a doubt, the same men who joined in 1860 would have rejoined in 1864, save for their almost universal participation in fighting the Civil War.

Following the election, Wide Awakes were given many different instructions. Members in Lambertville, New Jersey, were instructed to continue as a fire company, using their same uniforms. Hartford and New Haven Wide Awakes were instructed to keep vigilant and to protect what they had worked so hard to achieve.<sup>38</sup> In Albany, a resolution was passed to preserve the records of the organization so they would be available for the next election, and to continue as normal in the meantime.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of individual intentions, once war began in April 1861, the Wide Awakes marched off to an even bigger fight. According to Julius Rathbun, tens of thousands Wide Awakes “enlisted for the defense of the old flag.” The organization’s attention to detail and close order drill proved beneficial in a Union Army filled with green volunteers.<sup>40</sup>

Young men who were carefree and idealistic in 1860 were changed by war. Even the most ardent supporters of Lincoln and the Republicans began to question their loyalties as the war dragged on. One Wide Awake composed the song “Two Years Ago” to express his feelings. The Chorus explained how death, starvation, and homesickness wore heavily on his mind:

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<sup>38</sup> *New Jersey State Gazette and Republican*, 17 November 1860; *Hartford Courant*, 8 November 1860.

<sup>39</sup> *Chicago Daily Journal*, 12 November 1860.

<sup>40</sup> Julius G. Rathbun, “The Wide Awakes. The Great Political Organization of 1860,” *The Connecticut Quarterly* 1 (Oct., 1895), 334-335; B. F. Thompson, “The Wide Awakes of 1860,” *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries* 10, no. 5 (Nov., 1909), 296.

Oh, if I then had only dreamed  
 The things which now I know,  
 I ne'er had been a Wide-Awake  
 About two years ago.<sup>41</sup>

Death affected everyone and many Wide Awakes never made it home. James Francis, brother of D.G. Francis, was killed in Louisiana.<sup>42</sup> He was but one of thousands who died in the field. Those who did make it back alive were exceptionally lucky. General Joseph Hawley, an original Hartford Wide Awake, went on to become a U.S. Senator from the state of Connecticut. Without question other Wide Awakes returned from war ready to enjoy successful lives. But, no matter where their postwar activities took them, they would always be remembered as Wide Awakes.

Attempts were made to reorganize the Wide Awakes and reunite the old organization. Chicago Wide Awakes reformed under the name “Tanners” to support Ulysses S. Grant in 1868. Other cities and states were expected to do the same. However, no formal constitution was drafted and this attempt never produced anything as memorable as the Wide Awakes.<sup>43</sup> Other attempts to reorganize were made in the 1880s and a reunion was planned for 1 November 1888. However, these attempts lacked the zeal and enthusiasm of 1860, therefore the Wide Awakes remain forever, the greatest phenomenon of nineteenth century politics.<sup>44</sup>

The men who became Wide Awakes should be remembered for more than their oil cloth capes, lanterns, and torchlight parades. They were men who campaigned from

<sup>41</sup> *Two Years Ago*, Civil War Song Sheets, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [digital id: ew202070]. See Appendix C.

<sup>42</sup> Rathbun, 328.

<sup>43</sup> James P. Root, *Illinois Republican Union State General Committee 1868*, 8 & 14 July 1868, James P. Root Collection, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

<sup>44</sup> Rathbun, 335.

Vermont to Maryland and Missouri. They were men who marched in the face of danger and whose popularity inspired their own array of material culture. They became so large and so popular that their opponents copied them in an attempt to squeeze an ounce of support away from the Republicans. The Wide Awakes were not perfect, but they were important; they were unique; and they were successful. They truly were one-of-a kind.

## CONCLUSION

The *New York Tribune* wrote that the Wide Awakes were one of the greatest achievements of the “political revolution of 1860” and that their participation would become a “glowing chapter” in histories of the campaign.<sup>1</sup> In the last century and a half this prophecy has been only partially fulfilled. Monographs on the election of 1860 either totally ignored or only briefly described the Wide Awakes and what they did say about them focused on the most obvious and superficial aspects of the organization . . . the torchlight processions, banner waving, and quasi-military appearance. The things that catapulted the organization into the spotlight of nineteenth century political campaigns overshadowed the substantive matters, such as who the Wide Awakes were and why they were so influential. These concepts have been lost in the shadows of history. Thus in regarding the history of the “greatest phenomenon of the 1860 election” only the tip of the iceberg has been explored. By focusing on the most spectacular and exciting features of the Wide Awakes, historians have failed to examine the heart and soul of the organization. Beneath the oil cloth capes and swinging lanterns was a political ideology as deep and pure as the Republican Party itself, one which, until now, has been overlooked.

Previous historical interpretations of the Wide Awakes stereotyped the organization as a political club of men too young to vote, who dressed up in military-style uniforms and marched around all night carrying torches and banners. Those interpretations concluded that these men provided entertainment during the long

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from the *New York Tribune* as reprinted in the *Hartford Courant*, 1 November 1860.

campaign season, but were of no real political value. Reinhard Luthin placed so little emphasis on the Wide Awakes' influence that he mentioned them only in passing in his monograph. William Baringer, "Campaign Technique in Illinois," took the opposite tack, concluding that Lincoln only won the election because of these dedicated and successful campaign clubs. Neither historian was historically accurate. As this thesis has demonstrated, the Wide Awakes were a dynamic *national* organization that had a significant presence in an extraordinary election campaign. They were the noisemakers and banner wavers depicted in histories, but they were also dedicated Republicans and more politically influential than most historians have indicated.

Historians have failed to consider the possibility that the Wide Awakes were anything more than local entertainment to celebrate the arrival of leading Republicans in the various towns and cities of the North. In fact, the Wide Awakes began as a spontaneous, grassroots political club but quickly evolved into a national political movement. Achieving a national status was a goal of the founders from the start. It was the Hartford Republicans who advocated expanding their club to all cities and states in the Union and it was Hartford that advertised their organization in local newspapers across the North. Hartford, Connecticut, *was* the national headquarters of the Wide Awake movement; however, there were hundreds of Wide Awake clubs that developed.

The Hartford club had a secretary and officers just like clubs from New Haven and Albany and every other city where they existed. But it was H.T. Sperry's job as Corresponding Secretary at Hartford to facilitate communication with every other chapter throughout the free states. His job was to facilitate the creation of a network of campaign

clubs that extended far beyond the state of Connecticut. He worked directly with the Young Men's Republican Union and was one of the most important men in the Wide Awake organization. Within a matter of weeks after the creation of the Hartford club, identical clubs began forming in towns neighboring Hartford and by April the movement was well on its way to becoming a national phenomenon. The Wide Awakes spread like wildfires through the North. Their popularity grew every day. They may have been created spontaneously, but their national status was the result of hard work and planning. In other words, the Wide Awakes became a national organization because they wanted to and not because they just happened to be popular.

A vital component of the Wide Awakes' status as a national organization was their adoption of club constitutions. Granted, the Wide Awakes borrowed from the constitution of the Young Men's Republican Union, adapting it to fit their needs. That was a commonplace occurrence for new organizations coming into existence. However, the fact that the Wide Awakes felt it was necessary to draft a constitution that outlined the objectives and ideologies of their organization as well as to establish a complete description of club rules and regulations separated them from other contemporary political clubs. Tippecanoe Clubs in 1840, the Order of Free and Accepted Americans (OFAA) in 1852, and Fremont Clubs in 1856 did not adopt club constitutions. The Tanners (former Wide Awakes who campaigned for U.S. Grant in 1868) did not draft a constitution. Yet Hartford published two versions of their Constitution, the first on 4

March 1860 (the day after their formation), and another three months later on 2 June 1860.<sup>2</sup>

The nomination of Abraham Lincoln in Chicago reinforced the need for a stronger constitution that would include the new goal of electing Lincoln president.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the revised constitution added new language and it was this version that Wide Awakes in other states adopted. Identical constitutions guided sister clubs in New York and Illinois and were part of the fabric that held the organization together nationally.

The most important language of the Wide Awake Constitution was in the preamble, where the intentions of the organization were stated. These intentions included a political purpose, in writing, unique among nineteenth century political clubs. There was a reason the Republicans carried banners and marched in unison dressed in military-style uniforms and carried gaslight lanterns. Members were voicing a political message and doing so in the most dramatic way possible. The preamble to the Constitution stated that:

We the undersigned, young men of the City of Hartford . . . do hereby explicitly declare . . . our opposition to interference with slavery in the States where it now legally exists, and our unqualified and unalterable determination to resist by all constitutional means its further extension . . .<sup>4</sup>

No previous campaign club had taken a stance on slavery. The Wide Awake position mirrored the Republican party platform. This was hardly the work of men who had no political agenda or who only cared about showing off in grand displays of enthusiasm.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for a complete copy of the revised Hartford Constitution and a detailed description of the variations between the revised and earlier draft.

<sup>3</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 2 June 1860.

<sup>4</sup> Preamble, Hartford Wide Awake Constitution, in Records, 1860-1861 (Wide-Awake Club, Hartford, Connecticut).

This was the work of men who believed in the Republican Party and what the election of a Republican president would mean for the country. This was the work of men who had a purpose for the organization and clearly defined objectives. This one paragraph represented the heart and soul of the Wide Awake organization.

Article thirteen of the Hartford constitution required that all potential members be at least eighteen years of age *and* commit to be “governed by [the] constitution.” Therefore, potential Wide Awakes had to at least theoretically know and agree with the ideologies of the organization before they were allowed to join. This article was important because it demonstrated just how unique the Wide Awakes really were. Article thirteen allowed men under the legal voting age (in 1860) to join, thereby certainly allowing for the possibility that the organization could become a young men’s organization. However, just because they accepted younger members did not limit the organization to underage men. Original Hartford members were in their mid-twenties to early thirties and Caleb Johnson, secretary for the Troy, Illinois Wide Awakes, was sixty years young. The Republicans were trying to attract first-time voters as well as build a foundation for the future. An organization with a vision toward the future certainly would allow future voters to hold membership. Eighteen year olds in 1860 would be eligible voters in 1864, and they would remember the Republican revolution of 1860.

Secondly, article thirteen cited two criteria potential members had to meet before joining. They had to be over the age of eighteen and they had to agree to be governed by the Wide Awake constitution. That was it. There were no background checks for lineage; no race, religion, or gender restrictions. There were no property or job

qualifications to meet. The Wide Awakes were an inclusive organization vastly different from the Know-Nothing lodges to which they were frequently compared. There were regiments of German Wide Awakes<sup>5</sup> and possibly regiments of women and Irish Wide Awakes. Old, young, rich, or poor . . . the Wide Awakes were inclusive, though probably even they would have balked at having black members. Nevertheless, the inclusiveness of the Wide Awakes obtained for Republican speakers and candidates a positive reception and enthusiastic support group, and brought the Republican message to thousands of new voters.

On election day the Wide Awakes put down their torches, took off their oil cloth capes, and went to the polling places, ensuring the safety of Republican voters and the legitimacy of Democratic votes. The overall objective of the Wide Awakes was to campaign for the election of Republican candidates on the state and national level, and as election day neared newspapers constantly reminded them that their commitment to the Republican Party meant putting down their torches for a day or two. Amidst all the midnight marching members of the Wide Awakes took the time to register voters and identify where their assistance was needed the most. The Republican campaign club was multi-faceted and multi-dimensional and that has been overlooked in recording their history.

When the dust settled on 6 November 1860 the country had elected the first Republican President of the United States. The participation of the Wide Awakes helped make it possible. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the “coming administration would

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<sup>5</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 27 October 1860.

be a Wide Awake administration – . . . [the] result of the zealous efforts of the Wide Awakes, and . . . an administration wide awake to the interests of the country.”<sup>6</sup>

After the banner waving and torchlight processions subsided, the glitz and glamour and the excitement that was the presidential election of 1860 quickly became a memory. Gone was the innocence of a political revolution and in its place flowed the rolling floodwaters of a bitter, bloody civil war. Swinging lanterns were exchanged for muskets and blue wool uniforms replaced capes and caps. The Wide Awakes quickly faded into the memory of a happier time as they now became Union soldiers. As they grew from citizen soldiers to hardened warriors, they lost their carefree existence and naïve innocence. Lincoln had taken a stance against slavery’s expansion, which later he expanded into a war to end slavery in America, and ultimately gave his life in that cause. In many regards the Wide Awakes’ experience paralleled that of the man they honored.

They too took a stance on the nation’s most divisive issue, wrote it into their constitutions, and many of them likewise gave their lives to the cause. Many of the original Hartford Wide Awakes joined regiments of Connecticut volunteers, and undoubtedly members elsewhere joined local volunteer regiments from their states. The war that followed changed the face and future of the nation and ensured America’s place in the twentieth century as the foremost defender of democratic government. But the price of this freedom was high. The youthful idealism that had been so much a part of the nation in 1860 had changed by 1865. It was unrecognizable, seemingly purged from memory by four years in the forge of war. What had been lost might never again be

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<sup>6</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 8 November 1860.

regained. And with it went the story of the greatest campaign club of the nineteenth century.

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## APPENDIX A: WIDE AWAKE CONSTITUTION

*The Republican Wide-Awakes of Hartford, organized March 3, 1860<sup>1</sup>*

### Preamble:

We the undersigned, young men of the City of Hartford, desirous of securing the ascendancy and perpetuity of the principles of the Republican party, and the election of its candidates for office to all places of honor and trust in the Government, do hereby explicitly declare our entire devotion to the Constitution of the Union, our opposition to interference with slavery in the States where it now legally exists, and our unqualified and unalterable determination to resist by all constitutional means its further extension, and pledge ourselves to use all honorable means for the success and triumph of the principles of the Republican party and of the election of its candidates to office.

### Constitution:

- Art. 1.      The name of this Association shall be “The Republican Wide Awakes of Hartford.”
- Art. 2.      The Association shall, by meetings held under its direction, by its general influence, and the personal influence of its members, seek to attain the object set forth in the preamble.
- Art. 3.      The officers of this Association shall consist of a President, six Vice Presidents, a Corresponding Secretary, a Recording Secretary and Assistant, a Treasurer, an Executive Committee of five, and an Auditor of Accounts.
- Art. 4.      On occasion of public parade this Association shall be under the command of a Captain, who shall have power to appoint such subordinate officers as he may deem proper.
- Art. 5.      The officers of this Association shall be elected by a major vote of the members present, at a meeting called for that purpose, and such vote shall be by ballot.
- Art. 6.      It shall be the duty of the President to preside at all meetings of the Association, and to call meetings at any time under the direction of the Executive Committee.
- Art. 7.      It shall be the duty of the Treasurer to receive and hold the funds of the association, and disburse the same only upon an order from the Executive Committee.
- Art. 8.      It shall be the duty of the Executive Committee to superintend and control the financial affairs of the association, to arrange for and collect funds for the use of the same, and pay the moneys so collected over to the Treasurer, and they alone shall have power to order public parades, and to make

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<sup>1</sup> Hartford Wide Awake Constitution in Records 1860-1861 (Wide-Awake Club, Hartford, Connecticut).

- contracts, and they shall exercise a general supervision over the affairs of the association.
- Art. 9. It shall be the duty of the Captain to call meetings for drill, to conduct the same, and to take command of the association on occasions of public parade.
- Art. 10. Each member shall provide for himself, at his own expense, a glazed cap and cape, and shall pay into the treasury the sum of seventy-five cents, which shall entitle him to the use of a torch for parade.
- Art. 11. It shall be the duty of each member to appear in each torchlight procession, and in all public parades of the association.
- Art. 12. Sec. 1 – No boisterous or disorderly conduct or unnecessary demonstration of any kind shall be allowed.  
Sec. 2 – Any member who refuses or neglects to obey the commands of the officers, or whose conduct is not in accordance with this requirement, shall be liable to be expelled from the association.
- Art. 13. Any person 18 years of age who will maintain and will be governed by this constitution, may enroll his name upon the list and be considered a member.
- Art. 14. This Constitution may be altered or amended by a two-thirds vote of the members present at a regular notified meeting, at which meeting 100 shall be a quorum.

This particular edition of the Wide Awake Constitution was revised by an elected committee and approved at a meeting on 1 June 1860 in response to Abraham Lincoln's nomination in Chicago. The Hartford club felt it was necessary to "reorganize the company and amend their constitution in order that the institution might better accord with the demands of the greater campaign which opened so gloriously at Chicago."<sup>2</sup> This draft remained almost identical to the earlier draft; however, the revised preamble included the phrase "honorable means" to describe their intended behavior while campaigning. Additionally, the revised constitution provided more details about the structure of the organization, including the separation of private and public domain – a President now resided over club meetings while the Captain, previously head of the entire

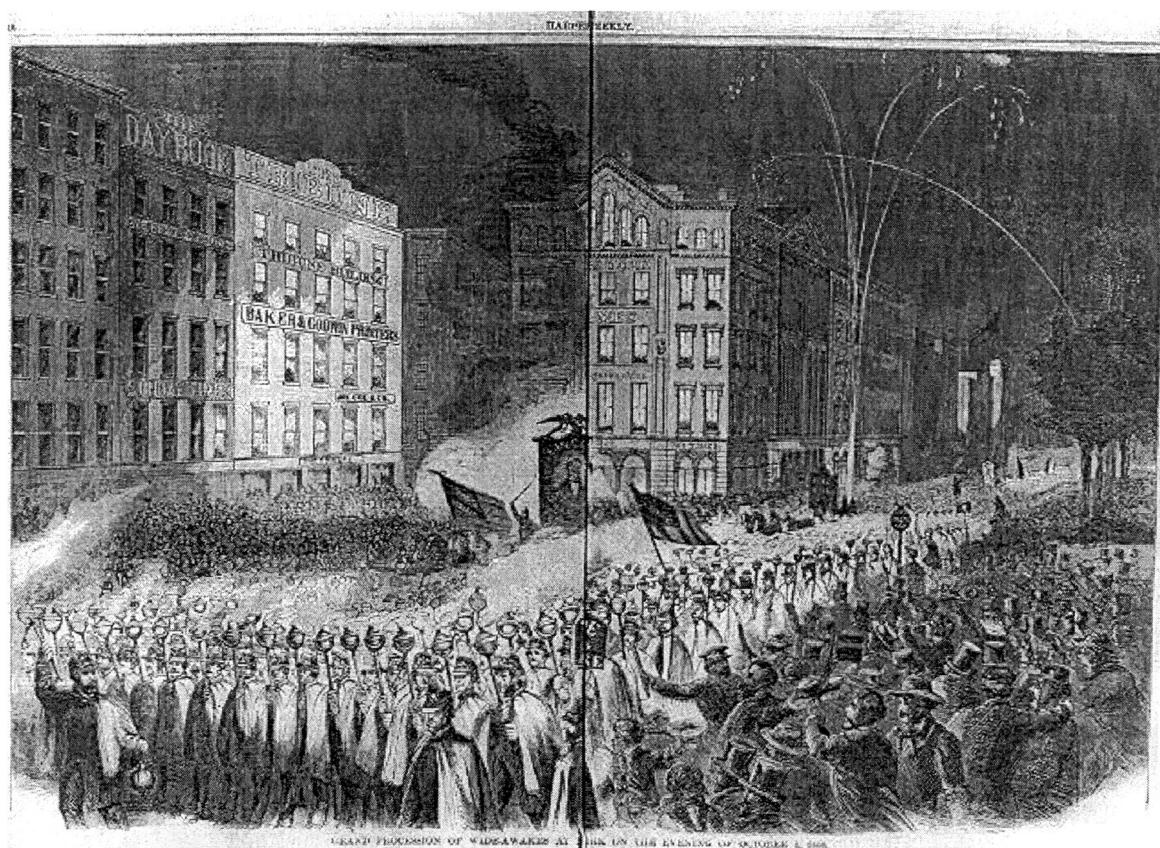
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<sup>2</sup> *Hartford Courant*, 2 June 1860.

club, resided over parades and public affairs. Also, the revised edition placed an age restriction on potential members, while the earlier edition enrolled any man who vowed to be true to their constitution and principles. Overall, the June Constitution was more indicative of a national institution and the expectation that the Wide Awakes would become a permanent component of the Republican Party.

## APPENDIX B: PICTURES AND CARTOONS

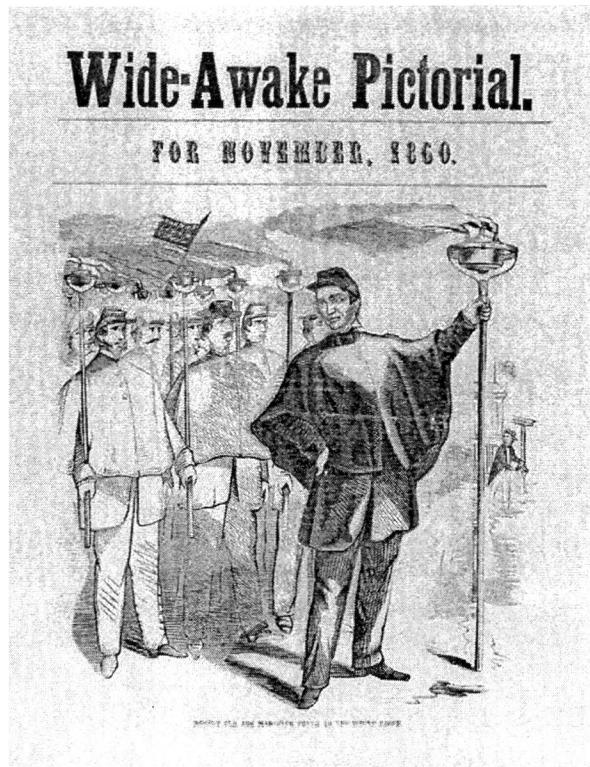
## Grand Wide Awake Procession

Figure 1<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Grand Procession of Wide-Awakes at New York on the evening of October 3, 1860 in *Harper's Weekly* 4 (Oct., 1860), 648-649. Library of Congress Prints and Photograph Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-59401].

This is the most famous sketch of the Wide Awakes from the Grand Procession of Wide Awakes in New York City on 3 October 1860. Notice the tall men on the perimeter of the company. They were known as Pioneers and were usually the tallest men in each company; therefore they carried the tallest torches. Each division of Wide Awakes in this procession was accompanied by a wagon full of fireworks. Twelve thousand members from all across the North participated in this parade and thousands of spectators lined the streets to watch.

## Wide-Awake Pictorial

Figure 2<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Honest Old Abe Marching Forth to the White House,” *Wide-Awake Pictorial*, 1 November 1860 in HarpWeek Online, <http://elections.harpweek.com/1860/cartoon-1860-Medium.asp?UniqueID=3&Year=1860>.

This illustration was the cover of the November issue of the *Wide-Awake Pictorial*. Here Lincoln was dressed in the traditional oil-cloth cape and cap of the Wide Awakes and carried the Pioneers torch. Lincoln was also drawn as a younger version of himself that reflected the common interpretation of the organization as a youth movement. Lincoln appeared to be leading the Wide Awakes, possibly suggesting that he was in control of the organization. In fact, Lincoln had absolutely no control over the Wide Awakes.

## Storming the Castle

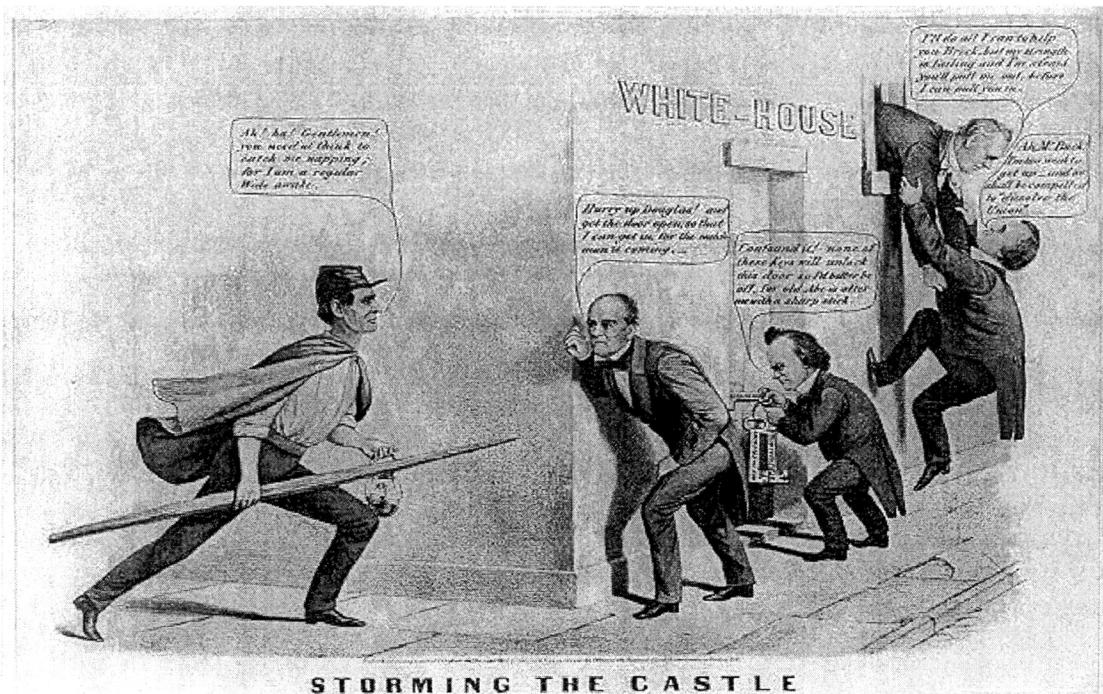


Figure 3<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Storming the Castle* (Currier & Ives, 1860). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number: LC-USZ62-12420].

In this Currier & Ives 1860 cartoon, Lincoln was wearing a Wide Awake uniform and carried a lantern and rail-fence. As he closed in on John Bell, Stephen Douglas and John Breckinridge Lincoln proclaimed: “Ah! Ha! Gentleman! You need’nt think to catch me napping; for I am a regular wide awake.” Keeping watch at the corner of the White House was Bell who urged Douglas to quickly open the door so that he could enter “for the watchman is coming.” Lincoln was the watchman Bell referred to. Meanwhile Douglas was attempting to open the door using keys labeled “Regular Nomination,” “Non Intervention,” and “Nebraska Bill.” Frustrated, Douglas lamented that: “none of these keys will unlock this door so I’d better be off, for old Abe is after me with a sharp stick.” To the right of Douglas incumbent James Buchanan attempted to pull his Vice President Breckinridge though the window of the White House. Buchanan failed, saying: “I’ll do what I can to help you Breck, but my strength is failing and I’m afraid you’ll pull me out before I can pull you in.” Breckinridge responded with, “. . . I’m too weak to get up – and we shall be compelled to dissolve the Union.”

## The National Game

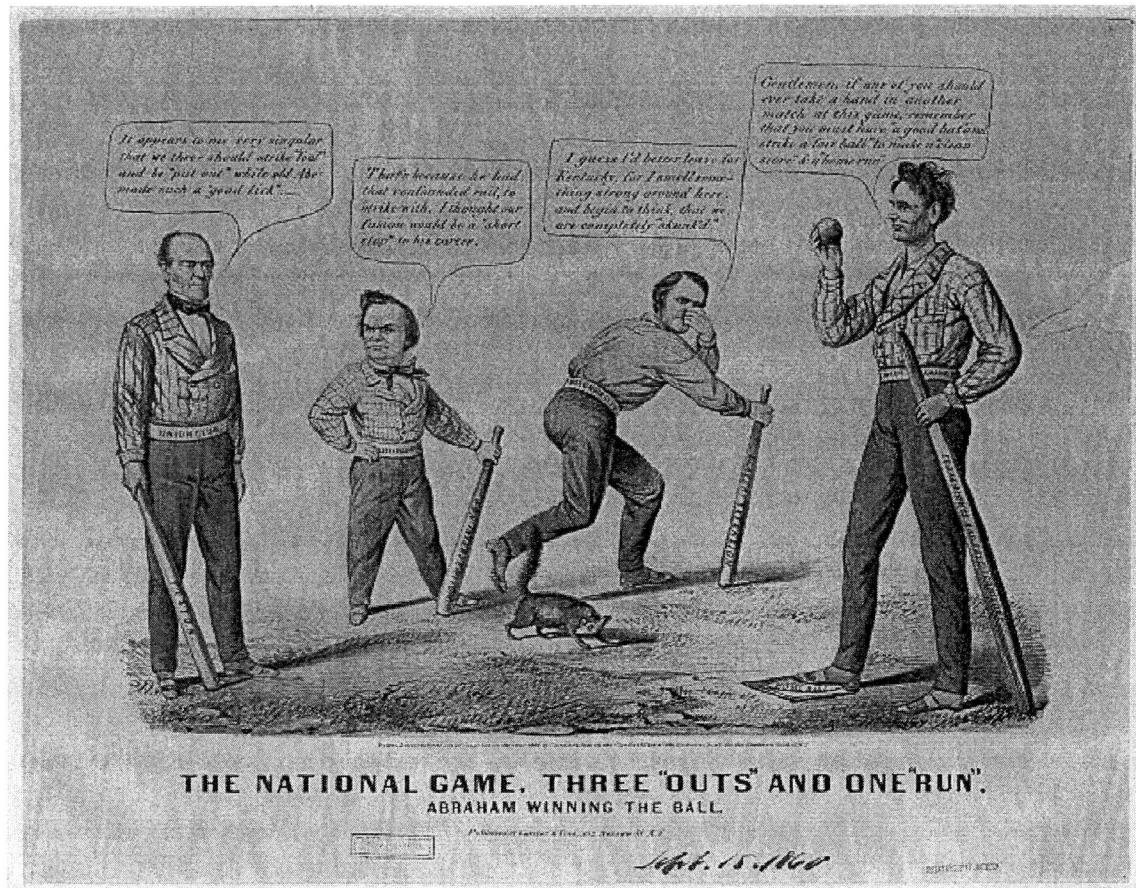


Figure 4<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *The National Game. Three 'outs' and one 'run.' Abraham Winning the Ball* (Currier & Ives, 1860). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-12425].

In this political cartoon which portrayed the four presidential candidates in a game of baseball, each candidate was holding a bat inscribed with their campaign platforms and each wore a belt inscribed with their respective campaign club. Lincoln held the ball and had a much larger bat (which resembled one of his split rails). He wore the belt of the Wide Awakes and addressed the other candidates, saying: "Gentlemen, if any of you should ever take a hand in another match at this game, remember that you must have 'a good bat' and strike a 'fair ball' to make a 'clean score' & a 'home run.'" On Lincoln's immediate left John Breckinridge held his nose and ran away, saying: "I guess I'd better leave for Kentucky, for I smell something strong around here, and begin to think that we are completely 'skunk'd.'" Stephen Douglas responded with, "That's because he had that confounded rail to strike with, I thought our fusion might be a 'short stop' to his career." Douglas referred to Breckinridge's bat labeled slavery's extension, and addressed John Bell about the attempt to fuse the Northern Democrats and the Constitutional Unionists together to beat Lincoln in the North. Bell responded to Douglas, saying: "It appears to me very singular that we three should strike 'foul' and be 'put out' while old Abe made such a 'good lick'."

## APPENDIX C: SONGS

### Wide Awake Jordan<sup>7</sup>

Oh! The wide awakes and white hats, am getting all the go,  
 And the wide awakes will wear them according,  
 In spite of all the micks, you can raise to fight with sticks,  
 For they'll drive them to the other side of Jordan.

Chorus: Then I took off my coat, and I roll up my sleeve,  
 Over Jordan is a hard road to travel,  
 Then I took off my coat, and I roll up my sleeve,  
 Over Jordan is a hard road to travel, I believe.

No popery—that's a go, and the wide awakes will show  
 That they can sing it out according,  
 If you want your head broke, just hurrah for the pope,  
 And they'll knock you to the other side of Jordan.

Chorus:

Oh! The mickeys of New Orleans, thought to carry the day, a feet,  
 But the greatest news they ever heard on,  
 Was, that their candidates were beat, by the know-nothings  
 For they voted them the other side of Jordan.

Chorus:

Street preaching am the fashion, it am getting all the go,  
 And the wide awakes attend there according,  
 So if your fond of black eyes, tell the preacher that he lies,  
 And they'll kick you to the other side of Jordan.

Chorus:

Our election is coming, and the Irish are a drumming  
 Up all the voters they can depend on,  
 So perhaps we'll have to fight, for we'll stick to our right,  
 And we will challenge them to the other side of Jordan.

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<sup>7</sup> William C. Marion, *Wide Awake Jordan* (New York: J. Andrews, [n.d.]). American Songs and Ballads, Series 4, Volume 4 in American Songs and Ballads, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [Digital Id: sb40575b].

Paddy's Fight With the Know-Nothings<sup>8</sup>

*Air: "Rory O'More" or "The Campbells Are Coming"*

Paddy, mavourneen, ye have but one eye,  
 The other is blackened all over wid' dye:  
 Come, Paddy, now tell me, where you've been to-night?  
 Be jabbers, I've been in a very great fight.

Ye see 'twas them fellows that KNOW-BODY KNOWS,  
 Gave me a black eye and most beautiful nose;  
 And had it not been for a red-headed "mick,"  
 Be Saint Patrick, they'd kill'd me in spite of my stick!

Chorus:

Paddy, my honey, what makes you blue!  
 Somebody's been playing the devil with you!  
 Ah! Bridget, my darling, how can I look gay!  
 When the bloody "Knownothings" have carried the day.

Our party was thirty, all armed wid' big sticks,  
 Sure we'd knock 'em about like a thousand of bricks;  
 At the villains we went, we "brave men of the hod,"  
 An' I gave' a big "Yankee" a belt in the gob.  
 "Wide Awake" was their war cry, from near and from far,  
 We answered their challenge wid' "Erin-go-bragh;"  
 On my eye I then got a we bit of a whack,  
 Which laid me right out on the broad of my back.

Wid' sprigs of shelalah so bravely we fought,  
 We'd belt them like blazes, so all of thought;  
 But the hard-fisted Yankees they bate us so swate,  
 That all of us Irishmen had to retrace.  
 Now I tell you one thing an' that you may note- -  
 I'll keep far away from the place where they vote;  
 For I'll tell ye'se the truth, and it's no mistake- -  
 We found the Knownothings were all WIDE AWAKE.

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Robinson, *Paddy's Fight with the Know-Nothings* (New York: J. Andrews, [n.d.]). American Songs and Ballads, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [digital ID: sb30402b].

Wide Awake Rallying Song<sup>9</sup>

*Air – Nelly Bly*

Wide awake! Wide awake! This is no time for sleep,  
 Let every friend of Freedom his weary vigil keep;  
 The foe is on his march again, his council fires aglow,  
 Then rally now, my gallant boys, to battle with the foe.

Chorus – Wide awake! Wide awake!  
 Let us our torches take,  
 And show the foes of Freedom, boys,  
 That we are wide awake.

Wide awake! Wide awake! There's no such word as fail,  
 The omens of our triumph, boys, are borne on every gale;  
 From East to West, through all the land where Freedom yet holds sway,  
 The shouts of Freedom's conquering hosts still cheer us on our way.

Chorus

Wide awake! Wide awake! The foe is on his way,  
 There is no time for slumber, if we would win the day;  
 Our cause is just, our hearts are firm, and fixed on truth and right,  
 If we keep wide awake, boys, we'll put our foes to fight.

Chorus

Wide awake! Wide awake! The stars with loving light  
 Look down upon our gallant band who battle for the right;  
 We bear no weapons in our hands, our motto's "Love to man,"  
 And Freedom, peace, and happiness, still follow in our van.

Chorus

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<sup>9</sup> Gerald R. McMurtry, "The Wide-Awakes and Their Torchlight Parades," *Lincoln Lore*, no. 1572 (February 1969), 3.

The Irish Wide-Awake<sup>10</sup>

*Air – Billy O. Rourke*

As I walked out one evening,  
 I think ‘twas in October,  
 I came across a jolly blade,  
 A rale ould fashioned toper;  
 He axed me would I go wid him,  
 And tould me: none should harm me,  
 Will give you soup and chowder too.  
 In Lincoln’s torch-light army.

Chorus: Fal dir al &c.

--Army? Says I, be gobs! I'll not,  
 Although I'm fond of chowder;  
 I'd rather hungry go by far  
 Than muss wid guns and powdher.  
 --You are mistaken, friend, says he,  
 We join'd on this condition:  
 Our muskets are ould-Abe's split rails,  
 And oil's our ammunition.

Chorus

To Cooper Institute we went:  
 It fairly made my head sick  
 To hear the spaker spout and blow  
 About nagers, rails, and conflicts.  
 He tould how Abe had often trailed  
 The wild Cats, Bears, and Panthers;  
 But forgot to mention ould John Brown,  
 As well as bleedin Kansas.

Chorus

Chorus

Upon my head they put a cap,  
 And a cape upon my shoulders,  
 And stuck a big torch in my fist:  
 No wide-aware was boulder.  
 Now, what they gave me them clothes for?  
 I niver could diskiver;  
 But I think the torch was meant to light  
 Abe Lincoln up Salt-River

Chorus

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<sup>10</sup> Harry M. Palmer, *The Irish wide-awake* (New York: H. De Marsan, n.d.). America Song Sheets, Rare Books and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [digital ID: as201700].

Two Years Ago<sup>11</sup>

By a Drafted Wide Awake

I was a glorious Wide-Awake,  
All marching in a row;  
And wore a shiny oil cloth cape,  
About two years ago.  
Our torches flared with turpentine,  
And filled the streets with smoke;  
And we were sure, whate'er might come;  
Secession was a joke.

Chorus: Oh, if I then had only dreamed,  
The things that now I know,  
I ne'er had been a Wide-Awake  
About two years ago.

I said the South would never dare  
To strike a single blow;  
I thought that they were cowards then,  
About two years ago.  
And so I marched behind a rai',  
Armed with a *wedge* and *maul*;  
With honest Abe upon a flag,  
A boatman gaunt and tall.

Chorus

My work was good, my wages high,  
And bread and coal were low;  
The silver jingled in my purse  
About two years ago.  
In peace my wife and children dwelt,  
Happy the live-long day;  
And war was but the fearful curse  
Of countries far away.

Chorus

My wife sits pale and weeping now,  
My children crying low;  
I did not think to go to war  
About two years ago.  
And no one now will ear their food,  
No one will be their shield;  
God help them when I lie in death  
Upon the bloody field!

Chorus

One brother's bones, half buried lie,  
New the Antietam's flow;  
He was a merry, happy lad  
About two years ago.  
And where the Chickahominy  
Moves sluggish towards the sea,  
Was lait another's wasted corpse--  
I am the last of three.

Chorus

Just now I saw my torch and cape,  
Which once made such a show;  
They are not now what once they seemed,  
About two years ago.  
I thought I carried freedom's light,  
In that smoky, flaming band;  
I've learned I bore *destruction's* "torch" --  
That *wedge* has sput the land.

Chorus

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<sup>11</sup> *Two Years Ago*, Civil War Song Sheets, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov> [digital id: cw202070].