Irrepressible Optimism in Northern Political Cartoons of 1861

Spirits must have been high in the North during the opening months of the Civil War—or at least some small-time printers in the region banked on their being so. Various companies in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Hartford, Buffalo, and Cincinnati produced hundreds of mailing envelopes illustrated with simple political cartoons always expressing an irrepressible optimism for northern fortunes in the coming war to sell to customers eager to signal their patriotism at the start of the stirring rebellion. An album of such envelopes from the early months of 1861, collected by an eleven-year-old schoolboy in Worcester, Massachusetts, and cataloged as the Civil War Cartoon Album in the LSU Libraries Special Collections, collectively forms a record of northern political humor about the South during the early days of the war when Yankees assumed their armies to be unbeatable and could not yet imagine the protracted conflict that the US Civil War ultimately became.¹

William Sargent Smith (1850-1944) was the eldest child of William Addison Smith, a Harvard graduate, attorney, and assistant clerk of court of Worcester, Massachusetts, and his wife, Eliza Adeline Howe Smith. At the start of the war, William lived in Worcester with his parents, his sister Eliza, his brother Charles, and Ellen Powers, an Irish maid who lived with the family. The couple previously had lost their second son, George, at age six before the war, while their youngest son, named Lincoln for the president whom the nation had elected only a few months before his birth, died at only three years of age while the war remained far from over.²

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¹ Civil War Cartoon Album, Mss. 3411, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.
The envelopes that young Willie carefully pasted into his album date approximately from January to July 1861, as they cover events from the secession of the southern states early that year to military operations in the vicinity of Manassas, Virginia, over the summer. Most simply denounced secession or lampooned Jefferson Davis and the southern aristocracy that they blamed for disunion, but others referenced very specific events in those early months, such as the anti-Union Baltimore riot of April 19 or the enactment of Benjamin Butler’s “Fort Monroe Doctrine” regarding contrabands of May 27. Cartoonists recognized the cruelty of slavery and its role in the cause of the war, immediately caught on to the challenge of the Confederate States to win European recognition or at least maintain foreign trade, and predicted the difficulty the South would have in raising funds by selling cotton-backed bonds. The heroes and villains of these cartoons reflected the status quo at the start of the war, spotlighting generals whose stars rose at the time only to fall later. Grant, who had not yet won fame at Forts Henry and Donelson, appeared nowhere, while cartoonists instead rallied the nation’s hopes behind aging warhorses like Winfield Scott and Robert Patterson, or the presumably unbeatable George McClellan. Likewise, cartoonists appear never to have heard of Robert E. Lee, who was still on minor duties and a year away from taking command of the Army of Northern Virginia, while P.G.T. Beauregard, the hero of Fort Sumter and First Manassas, stood as the target of northern cartoonists’ ire, second only to his president, Jefferson Davis.

The drawings on illustrated envelopes (some of which are sampled below) were simple compositions, nothing like the more detailed and urbane political cartoons published in newspapers. In fact, some were only stock illustrations refitted with amusing captions apropos to the times. Nevertheless, images that marshalled a fundamentally patriotic spirit with odd, forgotten phrases like “…or any other man” and “that’s what’s the matter,” which must have
been on the lips of every American at the time but now are understood only by the most
discerning Civil War scholars, revealed how this lower-tier cartooning culture still appreciated
the political climate in which Americans lived at the start of the war. They managed to satisfy a
demand for admittedly crude and blunt humor to interpret the looming conflict and prepare
Americans emotionally for a war that turned out not to be as simple as their humorists and
themselves imagined.
These cartoons of Winfield Scott, Abraham Lincoln, and Jefferson Davis were rare among these envelope cartoons because their characters looked like they did in real life. As will be seen below, most illustrators made no effort to portray their subjects accurately, instead relying on drawings of simple common cartoon characters.

Printers sometimes did not even bother to commission original cartoons, but simply printed stock drawings refitted with new captions to make some point about the war.
This canine-themed cartoon of Winfield Scott daring Jefferson Davis to march on Washington became a popular image reinterpreted by several cartoonists early in the war. It meant to reassure the nation of the strength of its defenses when worry of an attack on the capital was a genuinely palpable fear among northerners.
These cartoons probably date from sometime during or after July 1861 after George McClellan became commander of the Federal Division of the Potomac but before his vacillations over what to do about the Confederates encamped at Manassas Junction and Centreville, Virginia.

These cartoons allude to the Pratt Street Riots in Baltimore on April 19, 1861, when Copperhead Democrats and Confederate sympathizers clashed with Massachusetts state militiamen transiting the city en route to Washington for federal service. The five soldiers killed by the mob became the first Union deaths in the Civil War.
These envelope cartoons celebrated figures whose notoriety peaked early in the war. This illustration focused on belittling the “First Families of Virginia” and only indirectly referred to Colonel Elmer Ellsworth’s 11th New York Infantry Regiment, a Zouave unit, that captured Alexandria, Virginia, on May 24, 1861. Ellsworth became the first Union officer to die in the war when he was killed while removing a Confederate flag from atop the Marshall House, an inn in Alexandria.

This cartoon likewise featured some people prominent at the start of the war but now little remembered, such as John Floyd, a former Virginia governor and James Buchanan’s secretary of war who later lost Fort Donelson when serving as a Confederate general; Henry Wise, another former Virginia governor and Confederate general; Louis Wigfall, a former US senator from Texas who served as an aide to P.G.T. Beauregard at Fort Sumter; and John Letcher, the wartime governor of Virginia. “Young America” refers to the youth of the United States who would fight the war for the Union, not the Young America Movement that thrived between the 1830s and 1850s.
Cartoons often chastised the South for the cruelty of slavery, but without calling for abolition as an explicit war aim. This changed somewhat after the enactment of Benjamin Butler’s “Fort Monroe Doctrine” on May 27, 1861, which determined that any runaways who reached Union lines at Fort Monroe, Virginia, would be kept as “contraband of war” rather than be returned under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act. While satirists still stopped short of demanding abolition, they rejoiced in the damage that self-emancipation wreaked on the southern war effort.
Cartoonists quickly caught on to the difficulty the Confederate States of America would have raising funds with cotton-backed bonds and leapt to proclaim their worthlessness.

Many envelope cartoons speculated on the efforts of the Confederacy to secure recognition from Britain and France, as well as British avarice for southern cotton regardless of the political or moral cost. The character on the far right is Brother Jonathan, a personification of the United States since the days of the early republic, who gradually became supplanted by Uncle Sam over the course of the Civil War.