



Senator Henry Wilson and the Civil War

John L. Myers

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By the beginning of the Civil War, Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson had established himself as one of the leaders of the Republican party. Together with Abraham Lincoln and Henry B. Stanton, Wilson ranks as one of the three most important civilian figures that contributed to creating and sustaining the military. As Chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, he introduced and succeeded in passing most of the necessary legislation to obtain and to support an army, including the Enrollment Act of 1863. Wilson, more than any other politician was responsible for influencing the successful passage of antislavery legislation during the Civil War years. Contemporary newspapers gave him the primary credit for abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, which was the most important abolition step prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. When free Black men were admitted to the army, Wilson worked hard to obtain equal pay for them. Late in the war, he played a major role in the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau. Among his other legendary achievements, Wilson used his influential position to support Clara Barton, enabling her to aid wounded soldiers. He also introduced and succeeded in having passed legislation creating the Congressional Medal of Honor and establishing the National Academy of Science.

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