Civilian healthcare differed greatly to military healthcare during the Civil War era. For all its faults, the military paradigm had its advantages: sophisticated general and specialized hospitals, the emergence of the professional nurse, an improved ambulance service, surgeons trained and experienced in trauma and emergency surgery. For those Americans at home or the farm during the era, the state of medicine was less progressive. Nonetheless, in an editorial at the beginning of the Civil War, the American Medical Times appealed to their readers’ sense of patriotism, suggesting they become involved in the war effort for the public good and the good of their discipline.

There is, we believe, in our profession, a wide-spread and growing misconception of the duties of medical men as citizens; and this error of judgment is far more prevalent among that class, the members of which are regarded as representatives of the true spirit of medicine. With them, to exercise that most sacred of all the privilege of citizenship, viz. the choice of rulers by the ballot, is condescension of dignity never to be submitted to, except, perhaps, at the solicitation of a wealthy patron who may have a personal interest in the result of the canvass. And this act, in itself the most honorable perhaps of their lives, but truly dishonorable from its motives, is performed with the shamefacedness of premeditated guilt. They scorn a knowledge of our political history, and a familiarity with current political events, as matters too vulgar to occupy the attention of minds devoted to the sacred calling of physic. Diseases and their remedies arc the never varying themes of their thoughts and conversation. Health, and preventive medicine, and all measures of public interest, are discarded as without the pale of their “sacred calling.”

All such ignoble subjects are consigned, with a contemptuous sneer, to that class of medical men whom they term “political doctors.” Whoever has been interested in those measures which contemplated such social reforms as would improve the health and happiness of the people, but required the aid of legislation to give them form and force, and has sought the aid of medical men, has found too frequent exhibitions of this false pride of professional dignity. He has met with physicians from whom he anticipated a cordial support, who have signed petitions with a manner indicating that they tacitly protested against such desecration of their names and influence.

In the present crisis of our National Government we hear, though in subdued tones, the reproachful terms of these wiseacres of our profession; the adoption of patriotic resolutions by some of our county societies, the organization of medical bodies for the supply of hospital and other materials to the army, and the enlistment of Surgeons into the Country’s service, are regarded as acts unworthy of high bred physicians. They have no sympathy or fellowship with those who entertain such unprofessional subjects, and engage in such menial service. Patriotism and treason are, to them, meaningless terms; for, governed by the catholic spirit of medicine, they regard only scientific attainments as the test of membership in their exalted social state.

It is not a little singular that in a free government, where the duties as well as principles of the citizen are indefinitely extended, where practically, as well as theoretically, he is the sovereign, there should be a class of persons who lightly esteem their civil obligations. And it is still more remarkable, nay marvellous, that such a class should be found in a profession which holds the most intimate relations to those influences through which the most beneficial results to society may be secured. In European countries medical men regard it as a proud distinction to be engaged in the service of the State; here it is well nigh sufficient cause for expulsion from a medical society. Abroad, the most prominent physicians labor for years to attain courtly rank, or positions in Government service, while with us an intimation of such a penchant is evidence that the aspirant for political favor has abandoned all claims to professional respectability, and is gravitating to the lowest level of his profession.

Against this tendency in the medical profession to exalt itself above the claims of citizenship, we earnestly protest. This feeling has already become so general, that legitimate medicine has been deprived of many salutary legislative provisions which give it popular strength and social consideration. American medicine will have but half fulfilled its mission when it attains the rank it seeks, as a science. Upon it are also laid the burden and responsibility of important social reforms, which it alone can accomplish. Preventive medicine, or the practical application of the principles of sanitary science to the art of living, is yet to engage the earnest attention of medical men in this country. But whoever enlists in this great work must for the time incur the odium that many foolishly and most unjustly attach to those public movements of medical men necessary to the establishment of proper organizations. But let them not be disheartened. Preventive medicine will yet be recognised, we believe, as the noblest branch of
the science, and those who succeed in systematizing its operations among our people, will be regarded as the most worthy of the profession, as well as public benefactors.

Source: American Medical Times, July 6, 1861: 8–9.