Scorched Earth or Fertile Ground?
Indiana in the Civil War, 1861–1865

by

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Historians have often observed that the Civil War has generated more writings than any other topic or period in United States history. What Kenneth M. Stampp described twenty-five years ago as a “steady stream of books and articles” is today a raging flood of publications. Books, articles, magazines, film, and now the Internet crowd each other. The already popular interest in the war grew to enormous proportions with the Ken Burns public television series on the Civil War several years ago. The flood of writings on the Civil War began before the war was over, as soldiers published memoirs and personal accounts of wartime hardship and heroics. With the end of the war the outpouring of such accounts continued.

This essay will begin with an overview of writings that appeared shortly after the end of the conflict and demonstrated how it touched Indiana. I will focus on two important and frequently addressed issues that have been constants over the years in the literature. I will conclude with my thoughts about what can still be done to enhance the understanding of
the period based on the existing archival resources. Owing to space limitations, I cannot address important questions on the antecedents of the rebellion or the Reconstruction period that followed. The majority of the work on Indiana in the Civil War deals with military issues. The volumes of literature on units, battles, campaigns, and military leaders will not be assessed. Nonetheless, it is my intent to show that, despite the enormous outpouring of writings on the Civil War, much more can and needs to be done to gain a fuller, more comprehensive picture of the human experience in Indiana during wartime.

Among the first out of the publishing blocks in Indiana was Catharine Merrill, a well-educated daughter of a prominent Indianapolis family with publishing connections. Her two-volume work, *The Soldier of Indiana in the War for the Union*, published anonymously, was a compilation of stories gathered from newspaper accounts, some official reports, and personal accounts of Indiana veterans. The work focused on activities of Indiana volunteer regiments in putting down the rebellion. Merrill celebrated the heroism and sacrifice of the soldiers. Similar to most works on the Civil War, detailed accounts of military campaigns and battles comprise the body of the work. Little was noted of Indiana on the home front apart from numerous stabs at the perceived disloyalty of Indiana Democrats.

The most important work on Indiana in the Civil War from the nineteenth century also appeared shortly after the end of the war. In 1865 the Indiana General Assembly ordered the production of a report on the part taken by Indiana and its government in the prosecution of the war. The adjutant general of Indiana at the end of the rebellion, W. H. H. Terrell, was charged with the task. His famous report, published in eight volumes between 1865 and 1869, remains an invaluable resource for researchers. Seven of the eight volumes contain rosters of the commissioned officers and rank and file of all volunteer units raised in the state. This includes the twenty-eighth United States Colored Troops regiment, the majority of which was recruited in Indiana. The report featured brief histories of each Indiana volunteer unit, along with lists of the dead of each unit. Also included was a list of thousands of deserters and draft dodgers, a clear swipe at those perceived to have been slackers in the war effort as well as those who opposed the war. For indeed, the *Report of the Adjutant General of Indiana* was clearly a document of partisan intent. The eighth volume of Terrell's work was a narrative, in his words, "showing what was done by the State in carrying on the war." It was, in effect, an apologia for the administration of Gov. Oliver P. Morton and an attack on his critics and foes.

Terrell, who had served on Morton's staff before his appointment as adjutant general, dealt with the administration of Indiana's war effort topically: the call to arms at the beginning of the rebellion, recruiting and the numerous problems attendant to it, the state-administered draft of 1862 and the subsequent federally administered drafts, the problems of appointing competent commissioned officers, the state militia (the Indiana Legion), relief of soldiers' families, and the purchasing of arms for the troops. Terrell also wrote about some of the serious challenges that confronted Morton and his administration: the Bragg invasion of Kentucky in 1862 that threatened Indiana, the various guerrilla incursions into the state including the Morgan raid of July 1863, and, most notably, what he termed "Internal State Troubles." These were the manifestations of dissent and perceived disloyalty among Indiana citizens during the rebellion. Terrell devoted ninety pages to analyzing the sources for dissent and the ways antiwar sentiments translated into acts of opposition to the prosecution of the war: desertion and the encouragement of
desertion, obstruction of the draft including the murder of draft enrollment officers and the destruction of enrollment records, and the organization of secret groups to aid and abet the Southern rebels. Continuing the wartime partisan animosity, Terrell painted Democratic leaders as secretly plotting to overthrow the state's government. Only the energetic leadership of Morton stopped these disloyal traitors from seizing control of the state and weakening the federal government's efforts to suppress the rebellion.

Throughout the narrative volume, Terrell portrayed Governor Morton as the hero of the hour. Morton deserved much of the credit for preventing Kentucky from leaving the Union in 1861, and Morton's leadership stopped the Democrats in the Indiana legislature from seizing power from the governor. It was Morton who devised plans to reenlist the veteran regiments by offering the inducement of a furlough. He (and Gov. John Brough of Ohio) came up with the plan to enlist regiments for one hundred days in 1864. And so on. Terrell wrote:

This report does not aspire to the dignity of a history. It is but a compend of well authenticated facts, reliable official documents and accurate statistics. Possibly it may furnish some material for history hereafter.4

Despite his modest claim, Terrell's report constituted the first serious history of Indiana's role in the war. He had the mountains of records of the adjutant general's office and those of the governor's office at his fingertips and employed them to great effect. While strongly partisan in tone, he was careful to be accurate and solicited detailed reports from military leaders, administrators, and bureaucrats. It is also notable that while the focus of the report was clearly on the actions of Morton and his administration, glimpses of the people of the state can be seen. Public attitudes appear in the sections on internal dissent. The concern for women and children on the home front is evident in the section on relief efforts. Women volunteer nurses are celebrated in the section on the actions of the Indiana Sanitary Commission/Indiana Military Agency. Terrell's history stands as an important document and source, the usefulness of which continues today.

Numerous other nineteenth-century works of history shed light on Indiana's role in the war. Almost all of these books, essays, and articles focused on battles, campaigns, and military leaders of the conflict. Along with the myriad personal accounts, scores of book-length unit histories appeared, detailing the marches and battles of Indiana volunteer regiments. Many of these works are valuable additions to the historical literature on the Civil War's military aspects. In the years after the war, Union veterans' organizations celebrated the members' achievements and commemorated the sacrifices of the thousands of dead. These groups, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS) prominent among them, produced many notable works on the military exploits of the Union army. Under their aegis, numerous Indiana soldiers wrote and published accounts, including some detailed analyses of important campaigns and battles.5 The publication by the War Department of a massive 128-volume compilation of archival documentation served to fuel this work. This series, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, known popularly as the Official Records (OR), sparked many heated debates among former high-ranking officers eager to vindicate themselves and point the finger of blame at others for battlefield blunders. Several important Indiana commanders participated in
the wars of words, including Lew Wallace, Milo S. Hascall, and Henry B. Carrington.6

At the end of the nineteenth century an influential work of Indiana history appeared. William Dudley Foulke's two-volume biography, Life of Oliver P. Morton: Including His Important Speeches, was an important work of scholarship on the key figure in Indiana during the era.7 Foulke was an important voice for civil service reform for many years and a professional author. An erstwhile Wayne County resident and friend of the Morton family, Foulke was approached by one of Morton's sons to write the governor's biography. Foulke lamented in his autobiography that little of Morton's private correspondence had survived,8 but he employed to good effect the remaining correspondence, letter books, and telegraph books retained by the Morton family, as well as Terrell's history, other published documents, and interviews and reminiscences of Morton's contemporaries. The result was a work that elevated Morton to the highest levels of statesmanship, vindicated his controversial directives and moves during the war, and absolved him of the charges of dictatorship and illegal measures. In Foulke's view, Morton's energy, determination, and skill saved the state from civil war and disaster. Foulke's work has been widely cited and remains the only full-length biographical study of the wartime governor.

The increase in scholarly attention paid to the Civil War during the early years of the development of the historical profession at the beginning of the twentieth century owed much to the appearance of the Official Records series mentioned previously. For example, James Ford Rhodes's treatment of the rebellion in his History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850, published in eight volumes, is based almost solely on the documentation provided in the OR.9 The treatment of Indiana during the rebellion in Rhodes's work and that of other historians relied almost exclusively on what information the OR afforded on Indiana, supplemented by Foulke's biography. The result was the development of two themes: 1) the problem of disloyalty and dissent in the state, and 2) the proactive measures of Governor Morton to wage a vigorous war in the South and combat disloyalty on the home front. Other themes are absent from the literature. Indeed, in the one major work of social history of the North during the Civil War, dating from the early years of the twentieth century, Indiana is hardly mentioned.10

This focus on the two themes of disloyalty and Morton continued to be the norm in discussions of Indiana in the historical literature for much of the twentieth century. A number of useful biographies of important Civil War figures from Indiana have been written. These include works on Lew Wallace, George W. Julian, Schuyler Colfax, Robert Dale Owen, John W. Foster, and Walter Q. Gresham.11 Morton, however, has remained the focus of attention, and rightly so, since his influence both in the state and in the nation was significant. Just how significant he was depends on which historian you read. Starting with the titanic statesman depicted by Foulke, other historians had varying takes on the Indiana governor. James A. Woodburn in his 1903 essay “Party Politics in Indiana during the Civil War” portrayed Morton as “a conservative but a positive leader, who was ready to temporize, or wait on time and public sentiment, for the sake of success.”12 Stampp, in his excellent Indiana Politics during the Civil War, described Morton as a political opportunist, a man of great ability, unbounded energy, and ambition, who “never hesitated to shift his views as the occasion required,” and was willing to employ any method to further his ends. Stampp depicted the governor as humorless, intolerant of opposition, and happily willing to take on the mantle of dictator in order
to force his will on the state. Although Stampp’s portrait of Morton is wholly unsympathetic, the author does acknowledge the war governor’s achievements in organizing the state’s significant contributions to putting down the rebellion. In *Indiana from Frontier to Industrial Commonwealth*, John D. Barnhart and Donald F. Carmony blame Morton’s high-handed measures for driving opponents into disloyalty and treason.

Other historians held equally unsympathetic views of Morton. William B. Hesseltine analyzed the relationship between the Northern war governors and President Abraham Lincoln. *Lincoln and the War Governors* had its roots in the New Deal era of centralizing government and the magnetic leadership of President Franklin Roosevelt. Hesseltine’s account of the great national debacle, the Civil War, showed the “shrewd prairie lawyer” outwitting the Northern governors and claiming real power and authority for the federal government. Hesseltine described Morton as an opportunist and a man without convictions, albeit possessing great energy, but he praised Morton as the most efficient western governor. Morton was an alarmist, impatient, bombastic, and panicky, screaming and begging for the federal government to save him from imagined or exaggerated disloyal plots. Lincoln, in Hesseltine’s view, would calmly and patiently reassure the “hysterical” state leader, guiding him gently but firmly into line. Thus did Lincoln save the Union and transform the assemblage of states into a new nation.

Allan Nevins took a similar view of Morton in his eight-volume work, *The Ordeal of the Union*. The governor was a “hot-tempered,” “explosive” autocrat and easily excitable and frightened. Nevins portrayed Morton as a “vehement” radical who, nonetheless, “carried Indiana through the two crowning years of the war [1863 and 1864] with an energy for which he deserves enduring fame.”

The depiction of Morton and other Northern war leaders as excitable alarmists was a common characteristic of the works of historians keen to elevate Lincoln as the savior of the nation. Carl Sandburg’s biography of Lincoln featured a quaint quote of most dubious origin. Lincoln is credited as having said that Morton was “at times . . . the skitterest man I know of.” David Herbert Donald uses this quote in his Lincoln biography as evidence that the president had difficulty believing Morton’s reports of Copperhead conspiracies. Indeed, this accepted view sometimes descends almost to caricature. An example is the grossly inaccurate view of Morton in a recent work of Richard F. Bensel. Bensel averred that “under martial law and suspension powers, Morton exercised virtual dictatorial authority over the state of Indiana from 1863 to 1865 after the state legislature, controlled by the Democratic party, refused to enact war measures.” Three notable errors appear in this single sentence: 1) Morton mobilized the state militia, calling out all able-bodied men during invasion crises in 1862 and 1863, resisting the imposition of martial law by military commanders, especially during the “Morgan Raid” of July 1863; 2) Morton did not use suspension power—presumably meaning suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus. It was Lincoln who did—and Morton who resisted and protested military arrests of Indiana civilians; and 3) Democrats in the general assembly did not refuse to enact war measures in the 1863 session. Rather, Democrats were trying to pass measures to limit Morton’s powers as governor. Republican legislators skipped town to deny the Democratic majority a quorum.

Other historians have taken a more balanced view of the Indiana war governor. Emma Lou Thornbrough’s survey of Indiana at midcentury, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850–1880,*
praised Morton for his “organizational genius” and “determination” as a war governor. But, she wrote, the “personality and methods of Governor Morton exacerbated the bitterness and fears of his Democratic opponents, and his disregard for constitutional processes alarmed them.” Lorna Lutes Sylvester’s dissertation on Morton and Indiana politics during the war acknowledged his egotism, imperial self-confidence, and arrogance. At the same time, Sylvester worked to counteract the demonization of Morton by other historians. Her analysis demonstrated Morton has been blamed for things he did not do, such as fabricating the existence of secret societies, demanding military trials for civilians, and illegal operation of state government. Rather, Sylvester placed equal if not more blame on “malevolent, malicious, backward-looking” Indiana Democrats for transcending loyal opposition and venturing into “unjustifiable faction” by supporting “insupportable views” and policies based on their poor grounding in the reality of the rebellion.

There has been no consensus on the character of Morton and his role in the state’s history. He is either a towering statesman, genius, and dynamo, or a villain and political chameleon. But, clearly, Morton must be seen as one of the paramount leaders in the North during the rebellion. It would be time well spent for scholars to return to the subject of Morton and reexamine his role in light of the growing literature on Northern war politics in the states and Washington, D.C. Closer scrutiny of Northern war leadership outside the White House would correct the unfortunately distorted, but popular, view of the martyred Lincoln as national savior. The somewhat unfashionable medium of historical biography can still yield impressive results. The recent reorganization of thousands of pages of Morton records in the Indiana State Archives, which facilitates their use, along with new discoveries of records therein, should serve as incentives to historians.

A rich literature on antiwar dissent in Indiana and surrounding Northern states developed in this century. Possibly attracted by the drama of secret plots, spies, and skullduggery, historians have examined disloyalty and antiwar sentiment to understand the phenomenon of dissent during the great national crisis. The subject offers tremendous potential for scholars to delve into the motivations and actions of persons who heretofore rarely have been mentioned in discussions of the Civil War: the civilian on the home front. Unfortunately, the scholarship has been of very uneven quality and has not tapped that potential.

James Ford Rhodes’s treatment of dissent and organized disloyalty discounted the threat posed to the Northern war effort. Rhodes claimed it was “almost certain” that disaffected Northerners would not rise up in arms when rebel troops invaded Indiana in 1863. In the following year Morton was “undoubtedly more afraid” of losing to his Democratic gubernatorial rival than of a rising of the Sons of Liberty, a secret disloyal organization tied to the Democratic party that allegedly plotted an uprising in Indiana before the election. Mayo Fesler’s 1918 essay published in the Indiana Magazine of History on antigovernment secret societies was the first significant work on dissent. Focusing on developments in Indiana, Fesler also discounted the threat of subversion. Instead, Fesler argued that Republican politicians magnified any threat for electoral purposes, painting all Democrats as disloyal rebel sympathizers. The theme of minimal threat and Republican manipulation of the fear of insurrection has been echoed by many other historians. Nevins likened it to the ghost in Hamlet: “It was here, it was there, it was nowhere.” Stampp stressed the incompetence of the leadership of the secret groups and noted that they served primarily as foils for Republican electoral victories in 1864. Morton’s spies kept him apprised of all the plotters’
doings. Thus, concluded Stampp, Morton "had no reason to fear [the Sons of Liberty] as a menace to domestic peace."25

The leading historian of dissent and disloyalty in the North during the Civil War, Frank L. Klement, developed the theme of minimal threat and Republican manipulation of the evidence of Democratic disloyalty in a series of articles and books published over many years. Klement’s book, The Copperheads in the Middle West, challenged the traditional view that many Democratic leaders and party rank and file were disloyal and plotted insurrection. He depicted the Copperheads—those excoriated by Republicans—as conservative Democrats reacting to events brought about by the war. Klement’s Copperheads opposed the wartime measures of the Lincoln administration that threatened their Jeffersonian ideals. Midwestern Copperheadism, he wrote, “was a tangle of economic, religious, social, personal, and sectional threads ... colored by a conservatism that opposed the changes which the Civil War was slowly but surely bringing to America.”26 As Robert H. Abzug correctly observed in his bibliographical essay, “The Copperheads: Historical Approaches to Civil War Dissent in the Midwest,” Klement used the term Copperheads interchangeably with that of Democrats, or more accurately, the Peace Democrats.27 Klement dismissed as complete fabrications wartime reports of secret societies in Indiana and other Midwest states. Military officers and Republican politicians “concocted an assortment of cock-and-bull stories” for political purposes. Some Democrats in 1863 began a peace movement intent on compromise with the rebels, while others established the Sons of Liberty as a secret auxiliary to the party, in Klement’s words, to “help win elections, give support to weak-kneed Democrats, infuse new life into the party, and counteract the effective work of the Union Leagues,” the Republicans’ pro-Union organization. Stories that the Sons of Liberty were traitorous were, in Klement’s view, merely a “smear campaign” created by Morton and his henchmen “to justify his high-handed measures, to win elections, and to discredit the Democratic opposition.” Klement dismissed the “exposés” of the organization, seizure of boxes of firearms, and the subsequent treason trials before a military commission in Indianapolis as “wanton” fabrications.28 Clearly not satisfied that his views were widely accepted, Klement rehashed these same themes in a later book, Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War. Klement discounted everything said by Morton and other pro-Union partisans, even in private communications, and he credited any and all utterances by Democrats in defense of their views and actions.29 Klement’s partisanship seriously undermines his credibility. It may be possible that Klement, writing at the height and aftermath of the McCarthy witch-hunts, was more intent on vindicating the reputations of the Copperhead leaders than analyzing the phenomenon.

Klement’s self-described “revisionist” thesis that the Sons of Liberty and other secret antigovernment groups were never more than paper tigers has taken hold in historical circles. Gilbert R. Tredway’s Democratic Opposition to the Lincoln Administration in Indiana constitutes a more complete and thorough sifting of many available records. Tredway accented many of Klement’s contentions specific to Indiana but rejected others. As in Klement’s works, conservative, agrarian Jeffersonian Democrats in Indiana became threatened by war policies thrust on them by the Lincoln administration. Republican wartime propaganda transformed legitimate dissent into tales of traitorous secret organizations plotting subversion. Tredway doubted that the Knights of the Golden Circle ever existed in Indiana. Nevertheless, Tredway departed from Klement to give greater credence to the existence
by mid-1864 of the Sons of Liberty as one of several “anti-administration secret orders whose military potential was considerable.” Confederate agents and midwestern leaders of secret societies did plan armed insurrection in the summer of 1864. Democratic party leaders recoiled from the plan and tried to dissuade the “hotheads.” Furthermore, Tredway concluded that, contrary to Klement, in 1863 and 1864 “a grave danger of a spontaneous revolt existed .... The fact that it did not come seems due as much to chance as to management.”

Klement’s “revisionist” thesis has been accepted widely. Indeed, Mark Neely, Jr., formerly historian at the Lincoln Museum at Fort Wayne, wrote in 1991 that “Klement ... has proved, beyond any reasonable doubt, that no systematic, organized disloyal opposition to the war existed in the North.” More recently, however, some reasonable doubts to the Klement thesis have emerged. David E. Long’s book, *The Jewel of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln’s Reelection and the End of Slavery*, challenged several aspects of Klement’s thesis. In an analysis of the 1864 presidential election, Long pointed to several errors based on selective emphasis and reading of evidence in Klement’s work that distorted the significance of the activities of the Copperheads and minimized their threat. Long concluded that men from Indiana and other Northern states did actively plot with agents of the Confederate government in their effort to raise revolt in the North and thwart the reelection of Lincoln. Another historian, Robert Churchill, has recently examined the conspiracy efforts of the secret societies in Indiana. Churchill’s article points to the motivations of members of the secret societies in order to explain their willingness to rise up violently against their government. Threats to personal liberty, local autonomy, and white supremacy prompted resistance to draft enrollment and military arrest. The persistence of revolutionary libertarian ideology among the rural yeomanry, as Churchill calls them, fueled their actions to take up arms. Churchill saw the rural yeomanry as an independent force from the small-town and city-based leadership of the Democratic party, a force willing to make active resistance to the government.

Again, there is little consensus on the character and motivations of the dissenters. The recent work of Long and Churchill is buttressed by the employment of primary sources not used by Klement, Tredway, and others. For instance, neither Klement nor Tredway employed the personal papers of Henry B. Carrington, Morton’s military lieutenant and spymaster, in their studies. Churchill’s work is especially noteworthy for his extensive research into federal court records and records of the district provost marshals of Indiana found in the National Archives, which Klement and others did not cite. As mentioned before, recent reorganization of Civil War-era records in the Indiana State Archives provides new avenues for research into the questions of dissent and disloyalty. A large group of records of the Indiana Legion, the state militia that played an important role in suppressing dissent during the war, is organized and available. These records provide many glimpses into affairs in Indiana.

In summary, the historiography of Indiana in the Civil War has focused almost solely on political elites. Researchers and historians need to develop the social history of the war in Indiana and to integrate the political and social themes into a larger picture. Some work has been done on this score. Thomas E. Rodgers’s dissertation and recent articles on political ideology in the west-central part of Indiana during the war use rigorous statistical analysis of census, election, and draft enrollment records, along with manuscript collections of Indiana citizens, to form an idea of the political character of the population. Significant work has recently been done on
the aims and motivations of the thousands of Northern soldiers who left home to suppress the rebellion.35 Nicole Etcheson’s study of the development of a regional political and social culture in the Midwest provides a framework for future work.36 The publication of the letters and diaries of individual soldiers from Indiana is an important step in learning about the men who did the fighting. This is a fine way to intertwine military and social history threads.37 Although this is an admirable start, more needs to be done. Local community studies such as those published for cities, towns, and rural areas in other states would assist immensely and obviate the many vague generalizations that plague the existing literature. This is a serious void in the historiography.38 Noncombatant women and children and African Americans have been left out of the picture entirely, and their experiences need to be integrated into the study of the war. This is being done elsewhere but needs to be done for Indiana.39 Religion and the rebellion has gained some attention, but deserves more.40 Eric T. Dean’s Indiana-centered analysis of mental illness deriving from military service in the Civil War is an exemplar of the kind of work that can be done using sources seldom before employed.41 Studies on the draft in Indiana, the phenomena of desertion and draft dodging, violence, the military arrests of civilians in Indiana, and other topics are needed. An analysis of the Indiana Legion during the Civil War would yield many useful insights. Such topics and more await enterprising graduate students and senior scholars alike should they decide to venture into these realms.

Despite the large outpouring of works on the Civil War, much needs still to be done. Forest biologists know that ecological regeneration often occurs most readily after the forest burns down. The ashes enrich the soil; plant species that heretofore had been choked out can see the light. Pine seeds that are released from the cone by fire’s heat can germinate. That is why I conclude that although the fire of one hundred and thirty years of writing on the Civil War in Indiana has scorched the earth, the soil can be more fertile and fruitful than ever.

Notes

4. Ibid., introductory note.


25. Stampp, Indiana Politics during the Civil War, 241.


