Fear and Loathing in Indiana

By STEPHEN E. TOWNE

In February 1863, the states of Illinois and Indiana teetered on the precipice of revolution. So thought their governors, Republicans Richard Yates and Oliver P. Morton. Antwiw Democrats had won legislative majorities in the fall elections of 1862 in resounding fashion, energized by the public’s hostile reactions to the failing war effort and response to President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

With the opening of legislative sessions in Springfield and Indianapolis in early January, the new Democratic majorities were eager to flex their muscles; even the Union victory at Stones River in Tennessee at the first of the year could not quell a rampant democracy intent on ending coercive war against the Confederate rebels and beginning peace talks. At the state level, they aimed to take power away from Republican governors and vest it in Democrat-controlled boards. Yates and Morton employed all their considerable wits to stop them.

Springfield and Indianapolis were the scenes of epic partisan battles. At the Indiana State House, animosities quickly boiled over when Republican members “bolted” out of town, thus denying a quorum. This first bolt prompted a feud over Governor Morton’s message to the joint session. When Morton sent written copies of his speech to each chamber, Democrats refused to accept it and passed a resolution substituting that of Gov. Horatio Seymour, a New York Democrat.

Beneath the petty squabbling lay serious war-related disputes. First on the agenda for the Democratic caucuses was curtailing the military authority of the Republican governors. Democrats aimed to take away control over the raising of volunteer and militia troops and appointment of officers for the war. They also planned to seize the governors’ control over state finances that paid war-related bills. Illinois Democrats pushed resolutions condemning the war effort and calling for an armistice with the Confederate rebels and a peace conference in Kentucky. Only a Republican filibuster in the state senate blocked passage. In mid-January, a beleaguered Governor Yates wrote to his Indiana counterpart that “the legislature here is a wild, rampant, revolutionary body — will attempt to legislate all power out of my hands.” Adding, “I feel sure that there is concert between the traitors of your and our state,” he asked if Morton had “made any preparations for an emergency.”
Indeed, the Indiana executive took extraordinary steps to combat Democratic legislators with a powerful tool at his disposal: the Union Army. In late January, cooperative army commanders in Indianapolis deployed an artillery battery near the State House, running exercises with them in an effort to intimidate the legislators. Anticipating that legislators aimed to seize state-owned arms, late one night the governor signed over ownership of the contents of the state arsenal to the local commander.

Both governors had for months seen and believed evidence from credible sources that their Democratic opponents were intent on more than just partisan games. Yates and Morton received reports that secret organizations allied with Democrats aimed to obstruct the war effort. In past months these groups’ efforts had focused on discouraging enlistments and, most recently, encouraging desertion from the army.

Indeed, in the winter of 1863 desertion was widespread among troops from old northwestern states. Tens of thousands of troops went missing from the armies at the front, many of them encouraged to desert by a massive letter-writing campaign from home offering shelter and protection from arrest. Commanders voiced consternation. Rank-and-file troops in the field, angry at these and other signs of lack of support for the war at home, lashed out at their legislatures and antiwar-Democratic neighbors generally for what they saw as treasonous efforts to sow dissent. The governors and army commanders alike believed that conspiratorial groups were behind the efforts.

With a hostile legislature aiming to strip his powers and bands of armed civilians and deserters beginning to cause problems in parts of his state, in early February a worried Governor Yates pleaded with President Lincoln for aid. He wrote: “The slightest cause, as for instance the arrest of a deserter for instance in Southern Illinois, would likely precipitate revolution in the State unless the Government in such case suffers the deserter to be released. In at least two marked instances such deserters have been released by mobs.” He asked that four veteran Illinois regiments be sent home, “for the purpose ostensibly of recruiting,” but actually to police the state and “enforce the authority of the Government.” Brig. Gen. John M. Palmer, an Illinois “War Democrat” (that is, supportive of the war effort and the president) and friend of Lincoln, carried Yates’s letter to Washington. Palmer recalled the meeting in his memoir:

Mr. Lincoln, in response to the letter of the governor, handed him by me, answered with one of his jokes which cannot be repeated, and said: ‘Who can we trust if we can’t trust Illinois!’ and referred me to the secretary of war. ... I called on ... Mr. Stanton ... and after I told him my business was from Governor Yates, and that he asked authority to raise four regiments of cavalry for service in Illinois, he said: ‘You are to command these troops, are you not?’ and when I replied, ‘No, I am not, and would refuse the command of troops raised for service in my own state and amongst my own people...’ He then said: ‘That shows the d—d nonsense of the whole thing; if you thought your
own family and friends were in danger, you would be willing to command
troops raised to protect them.’

Days later, Governor Morton penned a letter to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton that
carefully analyzed the extraordinary challenges facing Indiana and the Northwest. “The
Democratic scheme,” he wrote, “may be briefly stated thus: End the War by any means at
the earliest moment.” Democrats would let the rebel states leave the Union and recognize
them as an independent country. “They will then propose to the Rebels a re-union and a
re-construction upon the condition of leaving out the New England States.” This “North
Western Confederacy” scheme, he added, had broad support among Democratic leaders
and party masses, abetted by “Secret Societies” like the “Knights of the Golden Circle”
who were organized “in every county and township” in Indiana.

To remedy the problem, he recommended a vigorous military campaign focused on
securing the Mississippi River to open commercial traffic, thereby guaranteeing the
loyalty of the Northwest and cutting the rebellion in half. In writing of the Northwestern
Confederacy plot, Morton reiterated his warning made to Lincoln in October in the
aftermath of the disastrous fall elections.

Morton’s letter traveled to Washington with Robert Dale Owen, a noted Indiana
reformer, War Democrat and friend of Stanton, who briefed the secretary on Indiana
affairs in person. Afterward, Owen reported that Stanton “fully believes in the plot to
reconstruct leaving New England out”; however, he “feels sure it cannot succeed.” Owen
added that “in my judgment [Stanton] does not fully appreciate the imminence of the
danger.”

In the immediate term, neither Yates nor Morton got the action from Lincoln that they
requested. Washington leaders did not understand the severity of the threat and left the
governors to their own devices. Stanton initially approved Yates’s request for the four
regiments, but a month later rescinded the order.

The Illinois General Assembly adjourned in February to reassemble later, by which time
Democrats hoped to have armistice talks underway. Reconvened in June, legislators
mistakenly disagreed on the closing date of the session, affording Yates the opportunity
to end it before his opponents could eat away at his powers. During those months Illinois
was the scene of violent clashes, as armed groups harbored deserters, resisted their arrest
by troops and obstructed draft enrollments.

In Indiana, Republicans in the legislature again bolted to prevent passage of Democratic
bills, running out the legislative clock. Refusing to call a special session, Morton went on
to govern Indiana illegally without legislative appropriation, borrowing funds from the
War Department and taking out personal loans from New York bankers and Republican-
controlled county governments to cover state expenses. Like in Illinois, during spring and
summer Indiana faced a rising tide of organized violence in opposition to the war. The
internal threats about which Yates and Morton warned Washington in February 1863 did not go away, but festered and grew.

For years, historians downplayed the difficulties that faced governors like Yates and Morton in the Old Northwest, preferring to portray them as either unscrupulous local despots or unreasonable whiners who had to be calmed and managed by Lincoln. As scholars continue to study and learn about Northern life during the Civil War, it becomes increasingly clear that the Old Northwest was also the scene of its own violent civil war, a battlefield of clashing ideologies about the future of the country.

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