Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

On Aug. 20, 1864, Oliver P. Morton, the governor of Indiana, received an anonymous letter in his Indianapolis office. The letter, postmarked from Buffalo, tipped him off to the arrival of arms and ammunition shipped secretly from the East Coast. The guns were intended, it said, for “antagonists of our Govt” who planned to foment unrest before the coming presidential election. The informer gave details about the whereabouts of shipments from a New York City arms dealer in boxes marked “stationary” [sic].

Morton wasted no time. He alerted the acting military commander in the city, who quickly determined that heavy boxes fitting the description had arrived and been picked up by business partners of Harrison H. Dodd, a man known to Army commanders to be the state leader of the Sons of Liberty, a secret organization tied to the Democratic Party. The Army also knew that the group, numbering in the several thousands, had been covertly planning insurrection efforts in Indiana and surrounding states. The commander promptly seized the boxes, which contained 400 revolvers and 135,000 rounds of ammunition. Troops arrested several of Dodd’s business partners who also were known to be involved in the conspiracy, but Dodd himself eluded arrest.

The seizure was only the latest in a long series of startling developments surrounding secret armed organizations in the Midwest during the Civil War. As political tensions in the region grew — over issues of war or peace, slavery or
freedom, state sovereignty or federal government supremacy – weapons flooded the Old Northwest states, bought by people who used them to protect deserters, resist the draft and, most dangerous of all, planned attacks on prisoner-of-war camps to release Confederate soldiers.

Beginning in early 1863, the Army had worked diligently to detect and intercept such shipments, and banned the sale of guns and ammunition to people they considered “disloyal” – but the weapons kept coming. And by 1864, the plots were growing bolder: The Army’s spies said that leaders of the groups were in communication with Confederate guerrillas in Kentucky, and planned coordinated raids and insurrection to throw the Union war effort into chaos.

Days before the arms seizure, Army commanders got word that Indiana conspirators planned an attack on Camp Morton, a prisoner camp in Indianapolis. With few troops at hand to stop it, officers watched anxiously as armed men filtered into the city by railroad and horseback and milled in city saloons. On Aug. 15, rebel guerrillas under Brig. Gen. Adam Johnson crossed the Ohio River from Kentucky and attacked Shawneetown, Ill., raising alarms about coordinated raids and drawing off scarce federal troops to pursue them.

Quite by luck, that week a group of veteran Indiana troops unexpectedly arrived in Indianapolis from the front, and a full regiment of raw recruits appeared from Massachusetts to reinforce the prison garrison. The leading conspirators got cold feet at the last minute. Politics had something to do with their decision, too: Mainstream Democratic Party leaders, aware of the revolutionary plots, intervened to quell the party’s hotheads. They even met secretly with the Army commander in Indianapolis to encourage him to arrest these ideologically driven firebrands who had won the allegiance of many of the party faithful.

The anonymous tip to Morton thus came at an opportune time. Union armies under Gens. Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman were bogged down in Virginia and Georgia, respectively. Political and military leaders in the North feared further efforts at insurrection and resistance to the government. President Lincoln’s re-election chances and those of other Republican candidates like Morton hung in the balance.
Ever the consummate politician, Morton saw an opportunity to capitalize on his partisan opponents’ mistakes and acted quickly. First, alerted to the arms shipments, he telegraphed the military commander in New York City, Maj. Gen. John A. Dix, to intercept the remainder of the arms coming from 42 Walker Street in Manhattan. Detectives arrested the dealer and found an additional 2,200 revolvers awaiting secret shipment to Indianapolis. Back in Indianapolis that evening, as news of the seizures and arrests created ferment, Republicans staged a rally. Waving one of the seized revolvers as a stage prop, a speaker described it as “one of the Sons of Liberty’s arguments for peace!” Later that night, troops raided Dodd’s printing warehouse and seized even more arms; they also confiscated records of the secret organization, the whereabouts of which were provided by an Army spy.

That weekend Morton and Army officers pored over the seized records. They included correspondence between Dodd and leading Indiana Democratic politicians, as well as leaders of the secret organization in other states, including Ohioan Clement L. Vallandigham, whom Army officers knew was the overall leader of the conspiracy. Morton decided to put the records in print, along with others found and seized by the Army in recent days. The Monday morning edition of the governor’s Republican Party organ, The Indianapolis Daily Journal, contained embarrassing correspondence found days before in Terre Haute in the former office of Representative Daniel W. Voorhees, a Democrat, including letters from the former senator James W. Wall of New Jersey, who had been arrested in 1861 for disloyalty. In the letters, Wall offered to sell 20,000 rifles to Voorhees.

That night, amid news of a state awash with guns in the hands of revolutionaries, Morton addressed another rally crowd to warn that the recently seized revolvers were just a “small fraction of an immense shipment” of arms being sent to equip the conspirators’ ranks. He reminded them that he had long warned of rising conspiracy; the recent discoveries did not surprise him. The next day, Aug. 23, the Journal published dozens of letters from the cache found in Dodd’s building.

The Army finally found and arrested Dodd in early September 1864. Orders arrived from Washington for the military commander in Indianapolis to form a
military commission to try Dodd for conspiracy, inciting insurrection, "disloyal practices" and aiding the enemy. The Army's spies and informers took the stand as chief witnesses. In early October, commanders arrested more of the Indiana conspirators, including Lambdin P. Milligan. While Dodd escaped to Canada, the military tribunal found others guilty and sentenced them to death.

In the meantime, Union military fortunes improved and fall saw the re-election of Lincoln and his Republican allies, including Morton. Republican election victories in the Midwest owed much to the exposure the conspiracies received during the trials, and the flood of pro-Republican sentiment that Morton and others generated from it.

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