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Rising Up Against the Civil War

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Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

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The draft loomed large in the mind of the Northern public during the Civil War. Supporters of the Union war effort cheered conscription as a tool to help to fill federal armies. But opponents of a coercive war against the Confederate rebels feared compulsory military service, which forced unwilling men to serve an administration and cause they despised. They denounced government intrusion into their lives and wanted nothing to do with the war. Many resorted to violence to avoid it. Throughout the Old Northwest – today's Midwest – large, organized groups banded together to resist the draft.

Most draft violence took the form of assaults on enrollment officers while they visited households to count white males between the ages of 18 and 45 years. They were beaten, chased off property, pelted with eggs, scalded with boiling water and shot at. In some communities, threats and violence were widespread enough that the Provost Marshal General Bureau, which administered the draft, could not find willing men to do the job. Many enrollments occurred only with escorts of troops in tow.

The bureau also had the responsibility of arresting deserters and draft dodgers, thousands of whom skulked in the forests and swamps of the rural

Northwest, often aided by family and friends. Arresting deserters was frequently a dangerous task. In fact, from the bureau's formation in the spring of 1863 to the end of the war, 38 bureau employees were killed and 60 more were wounded.

From the start, bureau officers throughout the Northwest encountered armed crowds that opposed the draft or the arrest of deserters. Sometimes mounted on horseback and masked, armed groups confronted officers, seized their enrollment records at gunpoint and warned them not to attempt to enroll a community. Some groups shot up the houses of enrollment officers in the dead of night. Likewise, armed assemblies rallied around deserters and draft dodgers to protect them from arrest. In some cases, groups, sometimes in the hundreds, faced off against troops sent to capture deserters or guard enrollment officers, defying the power of the government.

Across the region, what amounted to small uprisings against the government were frequent. Unrest in Holmes County, in northeastern Ohio, started in early June 1863, when a small group assaulted an enrollment officer. A provost marshal aided by a few locals found and arrested the assailants, but a crowd of 70 armed men surrounded them and forcibly freed the prisoners. Within days, authorities reported that between 600 and 900 armed men had gathered in the woods to "bushwhack" in resistance to the government. Military commanders in Columbus scrabbled together a force of 400 troops and sent them to the area. In a pincer movement, the troops converged on the "insurgents" and, after light skirmishing, scattered them with a bayonet charge.

In Wells County in northeastern Indiana, two brothers named Johnson assaulted an enrollment officer, and the 6 officials sent to arrest them found them holed up in a house guarded by 30 armed men. Soon, authorities reported that "several hundred" armed men rallied in the immediate neighborhood, bidding defiance to the government. Armed squads of 15 to 20 men roamed nearby to harass area Unionists, burn their property and threaten their lives unless they left. The Johnson brothers successfully evaded arrest.

Elsewhere around Indiana, acts of draft violence large and small brought out military counter-demonstrations of government authority. Deadly ambushes of

enrollment officers in Sullivan and Rush counties prompted commanders to send troops to arrest the culprits and finish the enrollments. Assaults in Fulton, Johnson, Monroe, Putnam and Montgomery counties likewise saw troops dispatched. In Boone County, northwest of Indianapolis, troops surrounded a town and commenced a house-to-house search to capture malefactors.

Displays of military power did not always succeed. In Sullivan County, 200 armed horsemen lay in waiting and surrounded a force of 50 soldiers sent from Indianapolis to arrest deserters. The soldiers turned back. Shortly thereafter, Brig. Gen. Orlando B. Willcox, commander in the state, voiced his frustration when he wrote, "Sooner or later, before the enrollment is completed, armed forces must be employed to crush the opposition."

Tensions between armed crowds and government authorities were severe on the prairies and rolling hills of Illinois. In the summer of 1863 large armed bands defied government officers all over the state. In early July, near Oconee in Shelby County, a band of 40 to 60 men stopped an officer to warn him to halt the enrollment. When he didn't, the next day they marched on the town to seize his records. Eluding them, the officer smuggled his records away and hid them. In another incident in Franklin County, 150 armed and mounted men freed deserters from arrest.

In late August, at Vandalia, the former state capital, citizens fired on troops who had arrested deserters, wounding two. Troops arrested four citizens. The next day, an armed force estimated to number from 500 to 700 gathered and demanded their release, threatening to take Unionists hostage. The district draft officer refused to yield and requested reinforcements from Springfield, but the armed men dispersed before troops arrived.

Events at Olney during the draft enrollment in July 1863 were dramatic. Nearby counties had seen armed groups intimidate enrolling officers and seize draft records. One evening, district bureau officials in Olney learned that 300 armed men on horseback and in wagons were descending on the town from the north. They then learned that another force of 200 armed men was advancing from the south. Townspeople barricaded the streets and armed themselves to

resist attack. In the meantime, the draft commissioner gathered up the district's enrollment records and slipped out of town on a train to Springfield, where he deposited the records for safekeeping. A delegation of townsfolk approached the force to the north and brought representatives into town for a parlay, after which the armed groups dispersed when they discovered that the draft records were gone.

Throughout the three-state region, officials reported that armed groups gathered regularly to drill, sometimes openly, but typically out of view in the countryside. Groups boldly vowed to resist the draft and rescue deserters. In one instance in July at Mattoon, Ill., 3,000 women and men — an estimated 600 of the men armed — met to drill and hear speeches praising figures like the Ohio copperhead Clement L. Vallandigham, New York's Democratic Governor Horatio Seymour, Confederate President Jefferson Davis and the rebel guerrilla chief Gen. John Hunt Morgan.

Throughout this period, armed groups that opposed the war measures of the Lincoln administration displayed a high degree of organization in their actions. Army commanders reported that groups gathered at short notice from throughout the countryside using horns, loud bells and gunshots as signals. Horsemen rode through the countryside to notify people. Groups gathered quickly and, in the Olney case, coordinated their movements. In one example on a night in June, a small group of soldiers on furlough got drunk and smashed up a saloon in Williamsport, Ind. By morning, upward of 800 armed Democrats assembled and surrounded the town, poised to attack. Authorities believed such organization was the work of secret political societies that encouraged desertion and resisted the draft in order to obstruct the war effort.

Armed opposition peaked in the summer of 1863, but even in later months armed groups continued to gather in defiance of government. Army commanders and government leaders feared that they presaged violent upheaval. In November, commanders dispatched troops to capture a band of 50 deserters and 200 citizens near Manchester in Scott County, Ill., all armed and vowing to fight to the death. After skirmishes, troops captured about three dozen "bushwhackers" and scattered

the rest. Interrogations led commanders to believe the incident was a preliminary step to a planned general insurrection in the region.

The assembly of even hundreds of armed men to oppose government action in thinly populated rural areas points to the strength of opposition to Lincoln's administration in parts of the Northwest. Though major federal victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg in early July buoyed Unionist sentiment, they did not eliminate antiwar, anti-Lincoln attitudes. Authorities in the region would continue to fear the threat of upheaval and disorder from large, organized and armed groups until the war's end.

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Sources: Robert E. Sterling, "Civil War Draft Resistance in the Middle West"; James W. Geary, "We Need Men: The Union Draft in the Civil War."

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