

Documents

The Conduct of the Militia at Tippecanoe: Elihu Stout's Controversy with Colonel John P. Boyd, January, 1812

*Robert S. Lambert**

The forces commanded by Governor William Henry Harrison at the battle of Tippecanoe in November, 1811, were composed of Indiana militia, Kentucky volunteers, and regular army units. In the months that followed, a controversy over the relative merits of the militia and the regulars was waged in the columns of the Vincennes *Western Sun*, edited by Elihu Stout. The dispute culminated in an attempt by Colonel John P. Boyd, second in command at Tippecanoe and commander of the principal regular force, the Fourth United States Infantry Regiment, to do personal injury to the editor. Boyd had been offended by editorial remarks directed at him by Stout.

Actually the whole quarrel was only a segment of a much older political struggle in Indiana Territory between Harrison's supporters and opponents. The controversy first attracted public attention in the second session of the third general assembly in November and December, 1811. Here Harrison's opponents seemed determined to praise the conduct of units commanded by Boyd and Colonels Luke Decker and Joseph Bartholomew in an effort to embarrass the commander-in-chief. Harrison felt impelled to reply to a house resolution which he felt had slighted the role of the volunteers; his message was a forceful defense of the militia. In this dispute, as on most other questions of his administration, Harrison had the backing of Stout and the *Western Sun*. The following documents comprise the core of the Stout-Boyd controversy as it developed in January, 1812.¹

* Robert S. Lambert is professor of history at Shorter College, Rome, Georgia. During the 1952-53 academic year he was a member of the faculty of Vincennes University.

¹ See the introduction by John D. Barnhart in *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory, 1805-1815*, ed. Gayle Thornbrough and Dorothy Riker (Indianapolis, 1950), 2-17; this is vol. XXXII of the *Indiana Historical Collections*. For details of the militia controversy as it developed in the general assembly, see *ibid.*, 392-394, 400-401, 409-410, 415-416, 421, 426, 427-428, 431-433, 478. The material from the *Western Sun* was obtained from microfilm copies in the Indiana State Library archives through the kindness of Paul H. Patterson, assistant archivist.

A number of Inhabitants of Vincennes and its vicinity desirous of paying a just tribute of applause to Col. John P. Boyd, and to the officers and privates under his command for their noble conduct in the action with the Indians at Tippicanoe on the 7th ult. met at Vincennes on the 25th.—Judge Vanderburgh was placed in the chair, and John Johnson Esq. appointed Secretary.

The following Address was then read, and being unanimously agreed to, it was resolved that the same be presented to Col. Boyd in behalf of the said meeting, and that Judge Vanderburgh and John Badollet be a committee to wait upon for that purpose.

Vincennes, Nov. 25, 1811.

SIR,

Permit us to convey to you, and through you to the officers and men under your command, the exalted sense of the masterly and spirited conduct which you have displayed in the late engagement with the Indians at Tippicanoe, and to express the gratitude which fills our hearts for so many lives which your gallant exertions have contributed to preserve. Your near departure from this country prevents a more general and public manifestation of these sentiments which are not peculiar to ourselves: we find them universally entertained—and *those brave Regulars*, expressions repeated without enthusiasm by that spirited but untutored militia, who witnessed and emulated your COOL intrepidity, evince at once the importance of the service you have rendered, and the warmth of their gratitude.

In attempting thus to pourtray our feelings on the present occasion, we present you the only reward it is in our power to bestow, the homage of thankfulness and truth, not the less gratifying to noble minds for being spontaneous and artless.

A great good, sir, will flow from your example; our fellow citizens will be convinced that valor without science cannot, however duly exerted, lead to certain success, and may eventually cause an useless effusion of blood; that an armed force without military knowledge is little better than an efficient multitude; and they will learn to submit cheerfully to that discipline and subordination which alone can render it consentaneous and irrisistible.

In addressing you thus, sir, we are satisfied that we are discharging a duty of sacred justice, and will reluctantly take leave of you with fervent prayers to the author of all good, that he may long preserve you, and your gallant companions in arms, for the honor and defence of our common country.

HENRY VANDERBURGH, Ch'm.

JOHN JOHNSON, Sec.

JOHN P. BOYD, Col. 4th U. S. Infantry.

To which the Colonel returned the following answer.

To Henry Vanderburgh Esq. and the gentlemen of the meeting of Vincennes and its vicinity.

Regimental main quarters,
Vincennes Nov. 25, 1811.

GENTLEMEN,

We are honored by your notice of this day, which conveys to us, the officers and privates of the Fourth Regiment, your high approbation of our conduct in the action of the 7th inst, with dignified pride we acknowledge the meed of merit: it is the soldiers boon and if we have deserved it of our country, we are gratified by your public appreciation of our exertions, which are ever ready to meet the commands of our country.

With consideration and respect, in the name of the Regiment, I have the honor to be, gentlemen, your obedient servant.

JOHN P. BOYD.

Col. 4th Regt. U. S. Infantry.²

At a numerous meeting, (public notice for that purpose being given) of the Officers and Non commissioned officers, or privates of the Militia corps (Hargroves company excepted) of the county of Knox, which served on the late campaign under Gov. Harrison, met at Beckes's Inn, in Vincennes, on the 7th December, 1811, Col. Luke Decker was appointed Chairman, and Major Benjamin Parke, Clerk.

A paper purporting to be an address from "A number of the citizens of Vincennes, and its vicinity," and signed by

² The address to Boyd was received by Stout from "Snip," who had found it in another newspaper. The letter from Snip and the address are in the *Western Sun* (Vincennes), January 4, 1812. Henry Van der Burgh was at this time a judge of the general court; John Badollet was register of the land office in Vincennes; and John Johnson was treasurer of the territory. See *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory*, 28n-29n, 985-987, and *passim*.

Henry Vanderburgh, as Chairman to *Col. John P. Boyd*, being read, the following resolutions were thereupon unanimously agreed to.

1. *Resolved unanimously*, that we cannot consider the said Address in any other light than as *one* amongst the *many* attempts which have flowed from the same source, to wound the feelings and injure the character of Governor Harrison.

2. *Resolved*, That the said Address in attempting to bestow the merit of the *masterly conduct* in the direction and manoeuvring of the troops in the late action to any other than the Commander in chief asserts a notorious untruth, which will be acknowledged as such by the whole army.

3. That our indignation is justly excited at the false and contemptuous manner in which the *Militia* who served under Governor Harrison are treated, in the said address; being there represented as an *untutored, undisciplined* band, possessing, indeed courage, but none of the other requisites of soldiers; and owing eternal gratitude to Col. Boyd and his Regiment, for the preservation of their lives.

4. That the *Militia* which served under Governor Harrison were neither *untutored* nor *undisciplined*, but in common with the Regular troops, they shared the attention of the Commander in chief, and that by his *personal exertions*, both the *Militia* and Regulars were brought to a state of perfection in that kind of manoeuvring calculated for Indian warfare, and that they were enabled to perform all the directions of the Commander in Chief with promptness, facility, and precision.

6. That it is a notorious fact, known to the whole army, that all the changes of position made by the troops during the action of the 7th ult. and by which the victory was secured, were made by the direction of the Commander in chief, and generally executed under his immediate superintendance.

6. That we cannot but view as a most dangerous usurpation, the meeting of a few individuals, not more than from seven to ten, in a private house, without any previous or public notice being given, and to pass resolutions and addresses in the name of a neighborhood.—And we do further view the conduct of said individuals (*almost every one of whom are the avowed enemies of the Commander in Chief—and several of whom have uniformly discountenanced and opposed every measure of the government, in respect to the*

Shawnee Prophet and his party, and none of whom were on the Campaign) in daring to speak in the name of the Militia, as highly presumptuous and unwarrantable.

7. That it was owing to the skill and valor of the Commander in Chief that the victory of *Tippecanoe* was obtained.

8. That we have the most perfect confidence in the Commander in Chief, and shall always feel a cheerfulness in serving under him whenever the exigences of the country may require it.

9. That we would prefer serving under him to any persons that could be designated by the government for that purpose.

10. That when commanded by him, honor will be atchieved; and we have every confidence that victory will be obtained.

11. That in expressing the above opinions, in respect to the reprehensible conduct of the *Addressers*, we desire it to be distinctly understood, that we have no idea of wounding the feelings or injuring the character of Col. Boyd, but we are free to declare, that we believe his conduct during the action, to have been that of a gentleman and of a soldier.

12. That we feel the highest respect, and shall always recollect with gratitude, our brothers in arms, the Officers and Privates of the U. S. Troops.—*We have often heard. . . . We have now seen what YANKEE'S CAN DO!*

13. That in obeying our country's call we shall feel a proud satisfaction in being associated with *Kentucky volunteers*.

14. That the above resolutions be inserted in the *Western Sun*—and that such Printers as may give publicity to the Address above mentioned, be requested to publish also the aforesaid resolutions.

LUKE DECKER, *Chairman*.³

B. PARKE, *Clerk*.

We understand that Col. JOHN P. BOYD has obtained a Furlough, and will leave this for the Eastward next week—

³ *Western Sun*, December 14, 1811. Stout did not print the address to Boyd in the numbers of the paper which followed shortly after November 25, the date of the address. For reasons best known to himself, he did not print it until January 4, 1812; however, he did announce the meeting of the militia officers called for December 7 in the *Western Sun*, November 30, 1811. At this time Parke was judge of the general court and Decker of the court of common pleas. *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory*, 999-1002, 964-966.

we think it highly proper that the Officers under his command should present him a complimentary address for his great attention to the Regiment, and the skill he discovered in bringing them to the high state of discipline which they possess, together with the *unity* and *harmony* he has preferred in his Regiment—but should they refuse, we think it would well comport with military etiquette that a similar address should be presented by the Sergeants of the Regiment. The thing might be done in this way—Let the Colonel prepare a Farewell order, without date or signature, together with an answer to suit his own palate; give them a supper in some public house, and entrust the *Sergeant-major* with the execution of the plan—after supper when they have become warm, and their spirits elevated with the Colonels hospitality, the Farewell order can be produced and read in which they will be highly praised—after which the answer may be produced for their signatures; we cannot suppose but the thing would take, but should it fail, and some prove refractory, they can prepare another, better to suit their own ideas from the one previously read.

We cannot withhold from the Colonel our sense of his *merit* and the great *loss* our country will sustain by being deprived of *his* services.—Should there be a second expedition against the Indians, the Man, who by his *personal* skill and bravery decided the action of the 7th November, and took with his own hands the *war club* of their great warrior, the *magic cup* of the Prophet, and the scalp of a Chief, together with a number of other acts of bravery not necessary here to mention, but which will forever immortalize the HERO.⁴

ANOTHER BATTLE
on the Wabash,
 or Colonel JOHN P. BOYD'S DEFEAT!!

In the attack made by the Great Chief on Sunday last upon the *poor Printer*, he displayed none of that skill in military tactics of which she [*sic*] has so often boasted, nor any of that personal bravery of which he so much vaunts—nothing can be more plain than his lack of military knowledge, as all will agree, had he conducted the expedition with

⁴ *Western Sun*, January 18, 1812. This is the editorial to which Boyd took particular exception.

even common judgment, he must have been victorious. No man who has the least idea of military affairs will believe that with an army of disciplined troops consisting of *two to one*, opposed to raw and undisciplined militia, can be *defeated* unless from cowardice, or a lack of generalship in the commander.—Yet Col. BOYD, with all the advantages on his side suffered himself to be *defeated*.—Shame, shame on the Colonel—Yes, I hear my country cry out *shame!!*—The causes which led to hostilities of the parties, and a correct statement of the *battle* is as follows.

On *Sunday* the 19th about 1 o'clock, the Colonel drew up his forces after the old Roman manner, or perhaps in the *Maratta* mode of warfare, as we are told he pretends to have commanded a brigade in that service for a number of years.—There was no fire arms used in the contest, the parties fought *hand to hand*, but unfortunately the Colonel had lost or mislaid his shield, and the hair having deserted his crown, his head suffered considerably in the contest.—The Colonel is accused of a great want of military skill in conducting the expedition, or a most egregerous want of *courage*, otherwise he *must* have came off victorious, his force being two to one to that of the Printer. The Printer acknowledges himself to be extremely ignorant of military tactics, especially of *this* mode of warfare, both as to theory and practice—but no man can suppose that JOHN P. BOYD, who was honored with the command of the 4th United States Regiment, because of his *long* experience in military affairs, after having spent the greater part of his *most invaluable life* in the *tented field*, could be charged with deficiency on that score.—The Colonel, it seems had taken umbrage at a publication which appeared in last Saturdays paper, and commissioned *Eastman* and *Bacon* as plenipotentiaries to demand of the Printer the *author* of the publication; this however, the Printer refused to gratify *them* in, as they were neither named nor alluded to in the piece—they returned to the Colonel with this decisive answer, who in about fifteen minutes afterwards, accompanied by *Bacon* and his Orderly, knocked at the door of the Printer, who opened it and politely invited them in, not in the least suspecting but that the sanctuary of his house would shield him from brutal violence) and desired them to be seated, the latter they declined.—The Colonel “brim full of wrath and cabbage,” in an authoritative tone, demanded the author of

the piece—the Printer with mildness and a smile natural to him, answered, “you may consider *me* as the author.”—Now began the dreadful conflict!—The Colonel having a stick in his hand, made the first pass at the Printer who was sitting on the table.—Bets running high, five to one in favor of the Colonel.

The Printer instantly colored the Colonel, took his stick from him, made a pass, and hit the Colonel with his own stick—bets even, some offering odds in favor of the Printer.

Bacon, feeling his master would be caned *with his own cane*, seized the Printer round the body and arms—but Mars had decreed that Lieut. Robert Buntin (of the militia) should be present, who seeing two well trained Regulars opposed to one poor, raw, undisciplined militia man, hauled off Bacon—the Colonel finding himself deprived of the further use of his body de reserve instantly commenced his retreat.—No bets, to be had—ten to one in favor of the Printer.

Here the Colonel certainly shewed his want of military skill in conducting a *retreat*, which was made in the utmost confusion and disorder, either from the bad arrangement of his force or some other cause, *cowardice* more likely.—It was in vain the Colonel attempted by signs, gestures, wild, and frightful looks, to rally his *corps de reserve* to a second attack, but off they scampered helter skelter, with just presence of mind enough left in their great agitation to tell the Printer “*they would see him again*,” merely we suppose, as a compliment for their abrupt departure. As it is somewhere recorded, that

*“He who fights and runs away
May live to fight another day;
But he who is in battle can’d
Will ne’er return to fight again!”*

Surely the idea conveyed in the above lines must have had full possession of the Colonels mind on the occasion, if we may judge from the care and precautions he afterwards took to “keep out of harms way,” and of his precipitate retreat.

Does not, or is not every one ready to cry out shame! that such an *experienced* officer who has so highly boasted of his superior *skill* and *abilities*, should be thus ingloriously defeated, by a man who had never seen a “*tented field*?”—Can such a man be trusted with the defence of our common

country? Has he talents adequate to a corporals command?
The Printer pronounces he has not!!⁵

CANTONMENT

Vincennes, January 20th, 1812.

Having since the formation of our corps been placed under the command of col. John P. Boyd, and witnessed the ardent solicitude evinced by him for our respective interests and honor, as blended with the honor and reputation of the 4th U. States regiment of infantry—we should justly be considered as destitute of every military principle both of propriety and duty, as well as manly feeling, were we to omit this public avowal of the detestation with which we view the various publications that have been made in the news-paper of this place called the *Western Sun*, evidently intended to cause dissensions in the corps. The abusive and vulgar piece contained in the paper of Saturday last, together with others we have before observed, having the same object have excited our indignation, and we declare that we view them as scurrilous attempts to degrade and lessen the consequence of our commanding officer, and to deprive him of the respect due his character.

(Signed)

G. W. PRESCOTT,
Capt. 4th Regt. Infty.
R. C. BARTON,
Capt. 4th Infty.
O. G. BURTON
Lt. 4th Infty.
C. LARRABEE,
Lt. 4th Infty.
EBEN. WAY,
Lt. 4th Infty.
J. L. EASTMAN,
Lt. & A. Agt. 4th Infty.
BENJn. HILL,
Lt. 4th Infty.

⁵ *Ibid.*, January 25, 1812. J. L. Eastman and Josiah Bacon were lieutenants in the Fourth Infantry Regiment; see the following document. Robert Buntin was clerk of the county court of Knox County. *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory, passim.*

GEORGE P. PETERS,
 Lt. 4th Infty.
 LEAVIS PECKHAM,
 Lt. 4th Infty.
 JOSIAH BACON,
 Lt. & Quarter Master 4th Infty.
 GEORGE GOODING,
 Lt. 4th Infty.

The evidences of the above charges are before the public, they can judge for themselves, whether a single expression in any of them can be construed to imply or embrace the regiment, to produce disagreeable sensations in the breast of any of its members, (col. Boyd only excepted) or produce dissensions in the corps—but as they, or a part of them, have thought it necessary to declare that to have been their ideas as to the views of the pieces, I have no hesitation in saying that I respect at least a great part of the regiment as gentlemen and as soldiers, that nothing could be farther from my wish than to produce party dissensions, or destroy that harmony and good understanding which is so necessary in military bodies; that they were aimed at col. Boyd alone, who, I shall always believe deserved at least all that was said.

With respect to the resolutions adopted by the militia of this county, and those of the volunteers from Kentucky, embraced in the above general censure, it would be presumption in me to make any remarks.

EDITOR.⁶

Several of the papers which have published the letter of Boyd and Prescott,⁷ have expatiated on the misconduct of our militia. The address from Messrs. Vander Burgh, Johnson, Ewing, Badolett, Caldwell and M'Intosh, has been published with the letter. These gentlemen deny the militia pretensions to any sort of discipline—the colonel and his disciple assert that they are dastardly cowards.—Shades of the gallant Warrick, of White, of Randolph, of Mahan, of M'Coy, and the other brave men who fell when valiently performing your duty, do you not frown indignant upon your

⁶ *Western Sun*, January 25, 1812.

⁷ Boyd's letter to the Secretary of War, dated December 11, 1811, claimed that the victory at Tippecanoe was due to the efforts of the

comrades for suffering your memories and their own characters to be thus insulted?

What a fine opinion must the British and their Indian allies have of our militia, when they hear of the address of the gentlemen of Vincennes, and col. Boyd's letter to the Secretary of War. Poor militia! what will become of them if the regular troops should be withdrawn, or if they should have to fight where there are neither *waggon*s nor *trees*.⁸

Vincennes, 24th Feb. 1812.

Sir,

A Letter to the Secretary of War signed by Col. *Boyd* and Capt. *Prescott*, of the 4th U. S. regiment, and which was first published in the *Aurora* and republished in most of the papers upon the continent, having appeared also in your paper, I enclose you a correspondence which past between Capt. Prescott and myself on the subject, as well as the answers of several of the officers of the 4th U. S. regiment, to queries proposed by me similar to those addressed to Capt. Prescott on the 9th inst.—By these it will appear how far the Militia, who were in the action of Tippecanoe, have merited those severe animadversions upon their conduct in which the Colonel and the Captain have thought proper to indulge themselves.—There were in the action, exclusively of the Dragoons, ten companies of militia, or volunteers, for each company partook of both these characters. It will be seen that Capt.

regular troops in spite of the "dastardly" conduct of some of the militia units. Boyd justified his special report to the War Department because of "various paragraphs contained in newspapers published here [Vincennes] and in the neighboring towns." His wish was merely to "correct the many errors contained in these publications." This justification seems weak when it is noted that the *Western Sun* was the only newspaper in Vincennes, and that by December 11 it had not yet printed the address of the militia officers, the address of Van der Burgh, Johnson, *et al.*, or any of the other documents, nor had Stout taken up his pen on the matter. Of course, Boyd probably knew of the addresses mentioned but not because they had been published in newspapers at Vincennes. Boyd's letter to the Secretary of War appears in the *Western Sun*, February 8, 1812.

⁸ *Ibid.*, February 15, 1812. At this time Nathaniel Ewing was receiver in the land office in Vincennes, while John Caldwell had been a member of the territorial house of representatives in 1810 and 1811. William McIntosh was a former treasurer of the territory. *Journals of the General Assembly of Indiana Territory*, 770n, 962, 51n, and *passim*. An explanation of the reference to "waggon and trees" is found in Harrison's letter to Stout, which follows.

Prescott and all the other officers who have answered my queries, admit that of these, Biggers and Robbs companies alone abandoned their posts.—Lieut. Peters indeed says that a small company or detachment under the command of Capt. Beck, also gave way, but this detachment which was attached to Geigers company consisted on nine men only. It will be observed too that all these gentlemen admit that the other companies behaved with distinguished bravery, and that Robbs company, after it had fallen back from its first position was rallied and taken to a post of greater danger, where it not only retrieved its reputation, but established a character for bravery equal to that of any other company in the army.—As Capt. Prescott has acknowledged that the observations contained in his and the Colonels letter with regard to whole companies abandoning their posts, had reference to Biggers and Robbs only, the conduct of the former alone in this respect remains to be examined. It will be seen by the letter of Capt. Adams, who acted as Adjutant to the army, that this company was so unfavorably placed as to be subjected to an attack in front flank and rear by the enemy. As my design by this address is not to criminate anyone, but merely to defend the militia from what I consider an unjust attack; I shall not stop to enquire into the reason of their being so placed, or by whose mistake it was done. It is enough for the exoneration of the company to state and prove the fact. And let me ask, what company of *regulars* or *irregulars* could have stood in that situation. I blame them only for not rallying behind some of the other companies as Robbs did, but for this also they have an excuse, Their captain commanded the main guard and was of course not with them, and from the direction that the attack was made upon the left flank, it is probable that they were obliged to retreat some distance down the front line before they could get within the encampment. Under such circumstances and in such darkness, it is not surprising that they were much broken and scattered—I have been told and believe, that most of the men joined other companies, and that as soon as the day broke the greater part of them embodied. The conduct of these two companies then, one of which was entirely without the lines and formed no part of them, is the sole pretext for the assertion “that the dastardly conduct of some whole militia companies led to exposure and consequent loss of the life of some of the militia

officers, whose men deserting the lines were seen behind trees and waggons where many were actually killed." That some of the militia took refuge behind trees and waggons I have not the least doubt, I found some myself in that situation, but I do believe that the number was comparatively trifling. The statement of capt. Adams very properly accounts for the number being supposed greater than it really was. But in my enquiries to ascertain whether any were killed in that situation, I have not met with a single individual (capt. Prescott excepted) who ever heard of the fact. That "some of the militia officers lost their lives by their men deserting the lines," is a most extraordinary assertion, as the returns will shew that those companies which are accused of behaving badly had no officer killed or wounded, the loss of officers being entirely confined to the companies which were admitted "to have displayed the most distinguished bravery." —Why was this mistake made more than a month after the action? Capt. Prescott says that he was unacquainted with the names of the Captains—But was Col. Boyd ignorant of the companies which composed his brigade? The battle of Tippecanoe has attracted much of the public attention, the people however must be fatigued with the numerous newspaper discussions to which it has given rise. I regret the necessity I am under of adding to them; but it was impossible that I could disregard the various and urgent considerations which called upon me to make this statement. The vindication of the fame of those patriots and heroes who fought and suffered by my side would be a sufficient motive; but it appears to me that the American character is deeply concerned in the affair, and my fellow citizens will not be uninterested in a discussion which established the fact that our countrymen have not degenerated, that they still possess the undaunted valor of their ancestors. I could more easily have forgiven any reflection, however unjust, upon the living—but I never can forgive those cruel and unmerited reflections upon the memories of those gallant mortals who fell so gloriously and so disinterestedly, whose bodies are now exposed to be mangled by beasts of prey, & their bones whitened by the dews and winds of heaven. . . . Unhappy men! you have been deprived of your graves by the savages, but your *Commanding Officer* still more cruel, would strip you of your good name, & consign your memories to reproach. Your relations too are to be deprived of the

only consolation that remains to them. Their griefs were lightened by the reflection that you died in the discharge of your duty & in the bed of honor, they are now called upon to believe that you died "as a fool dieth," fugitives from your posts, and under the influence of the most cowardly fears. But while I have life my voice at least shall be raised against every attempt to insult your ashes or tarnish the glory you have acquired.

*William H. Harrison*⁹

⁹ *Western Sun*, April 18, 1812. A series of inquiries of officers of the Fourth Regiment to which Harrison alludes accompanied this letter; they were printed in the same issue.