

Kentucky Governor Beriah Magoffin

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INTIMIDATION & CONSPIRACY PROVOCATION & INTRIGUE



THE MILITIAS OF KENTUCKY, 1859-1861

By John A. Boyd

Militias are paramilitary organizations that have made international headlines, their actions covered during the breakup of Yugoslavia, during the famine and civil crisis in Somalia, and during the ongoing coalition operations in Iraq. They brought death to untold thousands in Rwanda and are now active in the Darfur region of Sudan. In Iraq, few have not heard of the Badr militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq or Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's militia of the down-trodden masses, the Jaysh al-Mahdi. Militias today invoke a certain sense of fear and dread, as well they should. To modern Americans, they now symbolize death squads, fanaticism, anarchy, and destruction. However, for better or ill, loath them or embrace them, militias have had their uses.

During the secession crisis of 1861 prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War, the militias of Kentucky—variously pro-Union, pro-Southern, and even pro-neutral—played a pivotal role in determining whether the Bluegrass State would stay out

of civil war or enter the conflict on the Union or Confederate side. Implausible as it may seem, they did this without firing a shot.

The militias of Kentucky cannot be understood properly without understanding the martial heritage of antebellum America in general and of Kentucky in particular. Schoolbook histories in 1860 immortalized a republic born in blood, dwelling on the rattle of musket and the clash of bayonet in the founding of free institutions. A war record could turn a backwoods politician into a president, and, at least in the South, the readiness to use violence to vindicate one's honor actually improved many a statesman's standing. What was true elsewhere held truer still on Kentucky's "dark and bloody ground." Statues in Daniel Boone's honor showed him, quite uncharacteristically, as an Indian fighter, and legends about him coated him in the glamour of a bloodlust utterly foreign to the man himself. Kentucky still had its veterans of the War of 1812, and every town could point to its old-timers raised in the days of the Indian

Wars. If backwoodsmen looked on the landed gentry with suspicion, one reason was their suspected lack of fighting qualities. Four-term Senator John J. Crittenden repeatedly reminded voters of his actions at the Battle of the Thames during the War of 1812, for "to have fought at the Thames was the 'open sesame' to public and political honor." Mexican War veterans won the same acclaim if not notoriety in the politics of the 1850s.¹

In peacetime, even with the Indian Wars receding into the distant past, Kentucky could boast of several well-trained prewar militia companies, among them John Hunt Morgan's Lexington Rifles and Simon B. Buckner's Louisville Citizens' Guard. No patriotic celebration was complete without a turnout of the local militia. Spectators could watch close-order drill, rifle volleys, and mock battles, and, from the size of the crowds that turned out, they thought it was very good theater. Throughout America, "in the everyday life of the city, private military clubs ranked first among the street performers." The public con-

sidered Morgan's Lexington Rifles the best and demanded its attendance at holiday occasions like Washington's Birthday or Independence Day. Sometimes the Rifles' best performances at resorts like Paroquet Springs and Crab Orchard lasted a full week.²

That meant less and more than it might seem. The prewar militia, as Morgan's own contingent showed, was primarily a social organization. Young men were eager to join. Membership gave them a chance to parade in splendid uniforms and to perform elaborate maneuvers with sabers and rifles in front of a vast audience, including eligible young ladies. Militia companies also sponsored charities and dances. They staged shows for worthy civic causes. And finally, to their members, they offered all the benefits of a fraternal society.³

Militia membership gave many a young man a sense of belonging. Most military companies had fewer than fifty members. A company was built on a common culture, shared interests, and a general sense of brotherhood. It encouraged political fealty and social cohesion, especially when, as often happened, the men elected their own officers or were recruited by the man who paid the organization's bills. Long before the war the loyalty of Morgan's men to their leader was well known throughout Kentucky, as was their slogan: "Our laws, the commands of our Captain."⁴

Most active militia companies in the 1850s were inclusive by being exclusive. Their sense of belonging rested on being separate from those outside. "[These] citizen soldiers were in their conceit and imagination very important and consequential fellows," an ex-lieutenant later wrote scornfully of the Flat Rock Greys. "Invited to all the noted gatherings and public affairs of the day, dressed in gaudy and flashy uniforms and flying plumes, filled with pride and *conceit*." For obvious pocketbook reasons, poorer men rarely joined such units. Panoply did not come at cut rates. The Lexington Rifles wore duty caps with the seal of the state of Kentucky and paraded in bearskin grenadier-style hats. Another company used the tricorn hat of the

American Revolution. Typical styles of the day included elaborate tunics, buttons, ribbons, buckles, and belts.⁵

The fraternal benefits of militia membership, then, gave members psychic rewards, but they were far from the universal service—the kind of citizen armies that Americans liked to think would save them from foreign foes in wartime. They were more for play than work because there was not much work for them to do. Theoretically, they stood ready to keep the civil peace and maintain order. A few actually served that purpose. Lawyers outraged at an outbreak of vigilantism in Louisville in 1857 formed Buckner's Citizens' Guard. At one point, Louisville's fire chief led a company of militia that stood prepared to help on-duty firefighters if an emergency arose. (Curiously, there is no record of any militia company created in the 1850s specifically to forestall slave revolts.) But all these were rarities.⁶

Conceivably, Kentucky could have created a state militia to go along with all these private companies, one open to all citizens. Such a system had existed once. But with no Indian menace requiring a citizen army, it seemed an anachronism. The state legislature allowed the militia system to become dormant in 1854. The commonwealth dropped requirements for regular militia musters. It had passed out weapons but lost track of where they had gone. Those arms remaining were outdated muskets, usually in such poor repair as to be practically worthless. "There is in fact, no organized militia in the State," a governor summed up in 1856.⁷

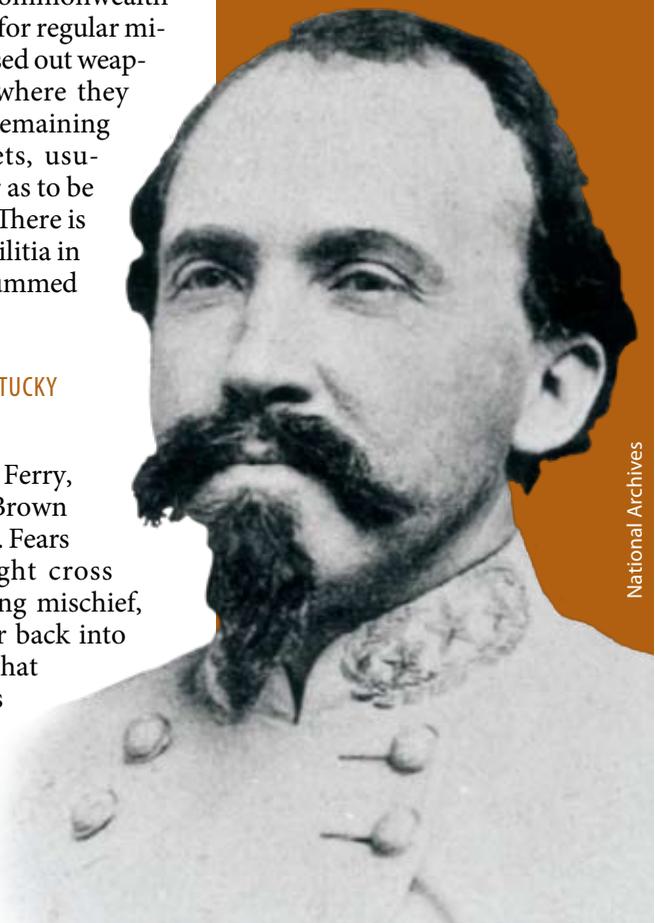
THE CREATION OF THE KENTUCKY STATE GUARD

The raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, led by John Brown in 1859 changed all that. Fears that abolitionists might cross into Kentucky spreading mischief, if not murder, went far back into the state's past. Now that a group of abolitionists had attacked Virginia, a sister border slave

state, an attack on Kentucky would inevitably follow, or so most men believed. It seemed obvious to Governor Beriah Magoffin. Kentuckians had no way of knowing "at what moment we may have need of an active, ardent, reliable, patriotic, well-disciplined, and thoroughly organized militia," he informed the legislature in December 1859. If "some of the most distinguished leaders and ministers of the Abolition and Republican party" did not plan Brown's invasion, they surely knew of it, approved it, and helped it out. Of course, Magoffin erred. No Republican leader was involved, and the event shocked even radicals like Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, who remarked, "You hung them exactly right, Sir," to a Virginia representative after Brown's execution. But Magoffin had made a convincing point to quite receptive lawmakers.⁸

In planning for a revived militia, the governor turned to 37-year-old Simon

Morgan in a Confederate uniform



National Archives

B. Buckner, a West Point graduate and Mexican War veteran living in Louisville. Buckner quickly submitted a proposal for reorganization so detailed that it even prescribed how many ostrich plumes the governor ought to wear, not to mention their color. The legislature gave swift approval, bringing a new militia—the Kentucky State Guard (KSG)—into existence.⁹

To command it, Magoffin appointed Buckner himself to the office of state inspector general with the rank of militia major general. The appointment gave Buckner considerable powers and responsibilities. He could activate the militia in any emergency and for an indeterminate period.

Buckner had the energy and enthusiasm for the task. At once he set to work scouring state records for weaponry to arm his forces. By early 1861 he could report that the state owned 11,283 muskets, 3,159 rifles,

2,873 cavalry arms outfits, and 53 field pieces—more weapons than the state of Ohio controlled at the onset of the Civil War. Around him he gathered a talented staff, among them Abraham Lincoln’s brother-in-law, Ben Hardin Helm, a U.S. Military Academy graduate who became assistant inspector general. He chose surgeons, commissary officers, quartermasters, and even chaplains considering both their military capacity and the attendant political ramifications. The choices proved effective ones.¹⁰

Buckner found much of his army ready-made. Existing companies quickly joined the Kentucky State Guard, with Morgan’s Lexington Rifles among the first officially mustered in. Other militia units, organized in reaction to John Brown’s Raid, did the same. By August 1860 Buckner oversaw a force of forty-nine militia companies—some 2,500 men. That month, he put them on display, ordering a week-long training encampment near Louisville, which became a highly publicized event. Seeking a tactically proficient force, the inspector general reserved the first three days of training at the newly christened Camp Boone for officers only.¹¹ One could, perhaps, see it as a rebel army in embryo, but the striking thing about the occasion was how much the Kentucky State Guard fit the social character and behavior of militia companies from times past. Alcohol flowed freely. Soldiers also made money. One Sunday, 3,500 guests paid a 25-cent fee to watch a mock battle.¹²

Yet, upon closer inspection, the Kentucky State Guard had gone beyond people playing soldier—the politics of Union or secession had intruded. For some men, among them visiting secessionist Blanton Duncan and Maj. Thomas H. Hunt, commander of Louisville’s KSG regiment, the encampment gave them their first opportunity to exchange views and forge secret alliances with militia leaders from all over the state. With the 1860 presidential campaign in full swing, it is

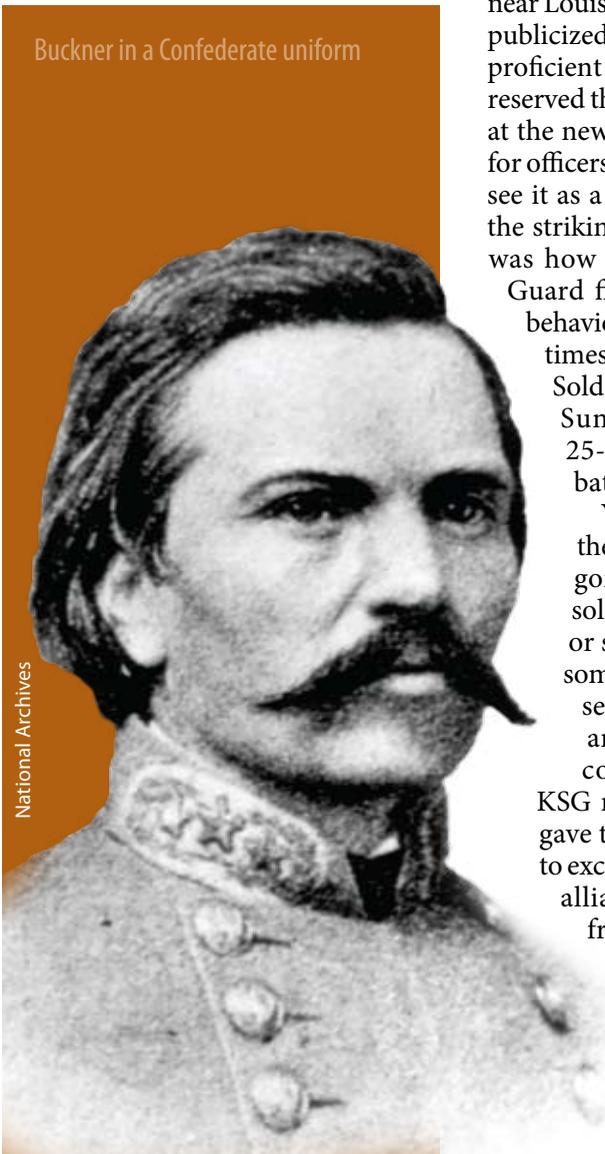
reasonable to speculate that, around campfires and over drinks, talk may well have turned to politics and what Kentucky would do if worst came to worst. The induction of the governor and many KSG officers into the “ske-tie-tu-rus” society (code for state rights) may have been as much a burlesque as it seemed, but what did it mean when select officers became members of the Knights of the Golden Spur? Was this mysterious order a thinly disguised surrogate of the Knights of the Golden Circle, an organization dedicated to the conquest and creation of an American empire for slavery?¹³ No hard evidence has survived, but, quite possibly, that August 1860 encampment served as a school for political education for those willing to listen.¹⁴

Certainly Buckner created a military force loyal to himself and ready to follow his commands—one with a professional officer corps that placed personal loyalty above political disagreement. Officers like Morgan, Helm, Hunt, Lloyd Tilghman, and Thomas L. Crittenden (the senator’s son) owed first allegiance to Buckner, whatever their own views of the rights and wrongs of the sectional conflict. That loyalty mattered; without it, Buckner’s leadership during the secession crisis of 1861 would not have proved so consequential.

Just as important, most KSG officers plainly held to the Southern rights position. That did not make them disloyal to the Union in 1860. Southern sympathies, fealty to Kentucky, and allegiance to Buckner were perfectly compatible with love for the Union at that time. But when sectional and national loyalties began to pull men apart, Buckner’s influence provided one of the strongest forces to hold them together and to keep men of Union and secessionist sympathies working together for the longest possible time.

Finally, an effective Kentucky State Guard just may have given Governor Magoffin more confidence in taking the political positions he did. The Kentucky Constitution of 1850 had made the governor a near-figurehead, drastically trimming his powers of

Buckner in a Confederate uniform



National Archives

patronage. But no provisions tampered with the governor's powers as commander in chief. Now Magoffin had something worth commanding, an army eventually numbering 4,000 men that might conceivably seize the Bluegrass State in a secessionist coup.

THE SECESSION CRISIS, 1861

Lincoln's election and the secession of South Carolina shattered and realigned the political parties of Kentucky beyond recognition. During the 1860 presidential campaign, Kentucky's Democratic Party had split into a pro-Union group behind Senator Stephen A. Douglas and a pro-Southern element that supported the candidacy of Vice President John C. Breckinridge. Meeting in private after Lincoln's election, leaders of the old pro-Union Whig party and pro-Union Democrats joined forces early in 1861 to form a Unionist party officially named the Union Democracy (UD). Pro-Southern Democrats countered this Unionist realignment several months later, creating the Southern Rights Party (SRP). Locked in a political struggle to determine Kentucky's allegiance to North or South, the Union Democracy and the Southern Rights Party competed feverishly for the hearts and minds of Kentuckians.

These political maneuverings and machinations left the commonwealth's Governor Magoffin almost as a man without a country; he had lost his formerly unified Democratic party and, with it, his legislative majority. While Magoffin publicly espoused only Southern rights, in his heart he favored secession. But he understood better than most that loyalties in his state divided evenly and that his beloved commonwealth could rapidly disintegrate into anarchy and chaos.

Lexington Rifles in camp



Kentucky Army National Guard

He feared that Kentucky—a border slave state—would be ripped apart and destroyed due to its geographic proximity to both sides, as well as consumed in an internecine civil war.

And so Magoffin sat on the fence. He attempted to ride the crisis out, hoping for a sign and waiting for some indication of which side Kentucky should take. After all, many pundits predicted a short ninety-day war. He had everything to gain and nothing to lose by waiting it out. He resisted President Lincoln's calls for troops after Fort Sumter had been fired upon, saying Kentucky would not supply soldiers for the "wicked purpose of subduing her sister Southern States," but at the same time he spurned Southern commissioners and troop requests from the newly formed Confederate States.¹⁵

The aftermath of Fort Sumter tested the loyalties of the newly minted KSG militia. Secessionist Blanton Duncan and other radicals had perfected a

scheme to muster rebel troops. Duncan recruited a regiment of Kentuckians for immediate Confederate service and, before the firing on Fort Sumter, had arranged that the rebels gather in Louisville for transfer south whenever he gave the word. "I have tendered to Genl Davis a regiment of 1,000 men well drilled and prepared to march at a moment's notice," Duncan misinformed Senator Douglas in March 1861. "Of course you will keep this private."¹⁶

Acting on Duncan's plan after Sumter, the first rebel volunteers started arriving in Louisville on 12 April. Local authorities worried, and Unionists openly charged, that their real aim was to take over the city. Word

soon spread that Buckner himself had arranged with Duncan to keep his soldiers home a little longer, "in the event that their services may be needed for the defense of Kentucky from Northern aggressions." "Our city is assuming a decidedly military aspect," one Louisville man noticed. "The tread of armed men is heard in our streets every day and night."¹⁷

Alarmed, Louisville Mayor Thomas Crawford had earlier asked the governor to place a KSG company at his disposal in the event of trouble. Buckner now obliged, ordering Major Hunt to have a company report to newly elected Mayor John M. Delph. On 18 April Buckner detailed the Citizens' Guard as a special police, ordering them to guard the city battery throughout the night. All that week, KSG companies shared the task of guarding the city. When a hundred-plus Confederates under Joseph Desha arrived from Cynthiana, Delph ordered state guardsmen "to be in their armories ready at a moment's notice," for "trouble might ensue." But calm prevailed. When Duncan's Confederate regiment, now four hundred strong, marched to the

Louisville & Nashville railroad station for the journey south, they furled their banners, except for Captain J. B. Harvey “who flung his to the breeze.” The city fathers must have breathed a sigh of relief, and they were right to do so. The departure of Duncan’s Confederates erased the most serious threat to the internal peace of Kentucky for the moment, and the Kentucky State Guard had proved loyal to the commonwealth in its first test.¹⁸

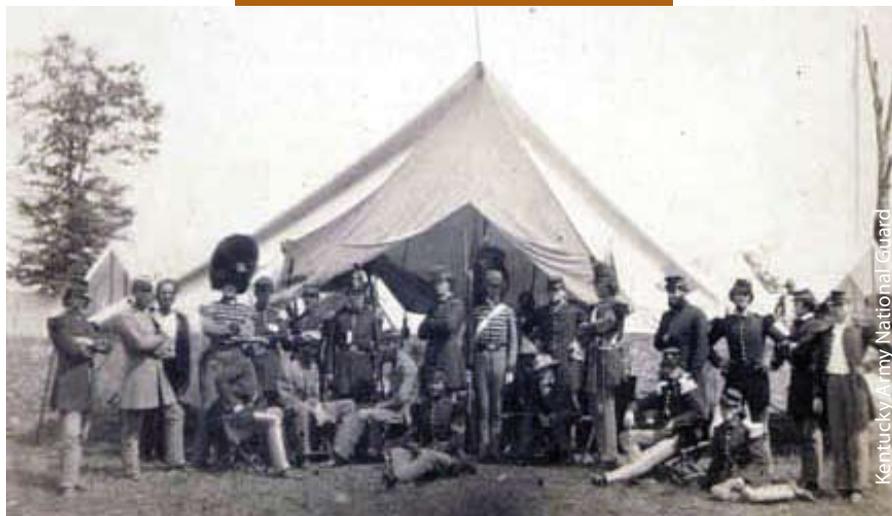
THE UNION HOME GUARD

If Buckner and his cohorts did not see the issue clearly at first, Unionists of the new Union Democracy party did. To save Kentucky for the Union, they must defeat or disarm the pro-Southern Kentucky State Guard. The belief in a secessionist plot to seize the state was fixated in the minds of Union-loving men. According to the *Louisville Journal*, they saw daily indications that “the secessionists of Kentucky are moving in a secret conspiracy to take the State out of the Union by a sudden, violent and if necessary, bloody process.” Unionists needed military force to guard against this, and it could not, due to political sensitivities, be a force of federal soldiers. Consequently, the Unionists created local Union Home Guard militias.¹⁹

The presence of well-trained, active KSG militia companies, consisting of Southern sympathizers, intimidated the Unionists. Carrying muskets and bayonets, forty to fifty men chanting secession slogans had the ability to frighten average citizens who had never seen large armed formations. Mexican War veterans—men such as Buckner and Morgan—knew better. They understood that the Kentucky State Guard and its tiny battalions could not effectively seize and hold

the commonwealth. But to the average Kentuckian, a militia company of forty armed men seemed a mighty host. One Unionist complained that the organization was “daily becoming insolent and overbearing and disposed to violence.” Another attacked the KSG, saying “the thing they most respect is the strong arm with a weapon at the end of it.”²⁰

Unionist Garrett Davis was convinced that the military situation in Kentucky was at a flash point. “The Union men of Kentucky express a firm determination to fight it out,” reported his contact, Union Maj. Gen. George McClellan. “Yesterday Garrett Davis told me ‘We will remain in the Union by voting if we can, by fighting if we must, and if we cannot hold our own, we will call on the General Government to aid us.’ He . . . convinced me that the majority were in danger of being overpowered by a better-armed minority.”²¹



Kentucky State Guard officers gather after parade.

To counter the Southern Rights Party, the Union Democracy immediately called for the creation of local Union Home Guard militias to protect hearth and home. These independent companies—in reality, political militias—were organized and equipped by prominent Union men in Kentucky’s major cities and towns. On 25 April Louisville opted to recruit two regiments of “police” and designated the new pro-Union mayor John Delph as the commander in chief. “We are in favor of the Home Guards,” trumpeted the *Frankfort Yeoman*, “and in favor of distributing arms judiciously among them, for local defense of the counties.”²²

The elderly John Crittenden, a veteran of the War of 1812, captured headlines when he announced his membership in the 162-member Frankfort Home Guard. One can only imagine the impression it made upon Kentuckians seeing the ancient former senator, rifle in his hands, but the message was manly and clear: the Union men of Kentucky would fight, and the Bluegrass State would go down in blood should secession be attempted.²³

COVERT OPERATIONS

Like their KSG counterparts, the chief problem for Unionists was finding weapons with which to arm themselves. Fortunately for Kentucky Unionists, a covert operation under the direction of Navy Lt. William “Bull” Nelson came to their rescue. Nelson, stationed at Washington, D.C.,

met secretly with President Lincoln and proposed smuggling guns to Union men. Using Lincoln’s close personal friend, Joshua F. Speed, as his point of contact in Kentucky, Nelson met secretly with key Union leaders—James Harlan, Charles A. Wickliffe, Garrett Davis, Thornton F. Marshall, and John Crittenden—in Frankfort on or about 6

May. They founded the Union Defense Committee. All were of the “profound conviction that the guns were necessary to the salvation of the state.”²⁴ And guns they would get—the “Lincoln Guns, . . . neutrality with a vengeance.”²⁵

Bull Nelson signed for his first consignment of Lincoln Guns (5,000) at Cincinnati on 5 May, just days after his conference with Lincoln. He then shipped part of the consignment to Jeffersonville, Indiana, where 1,200 rifles were quietly issued by his agents to the Louisville Home Guard. Following this, Nelson put part of his Cincinnati cache on board Kentucky Central trains (17 May) and shipped them to Paris and Lexington, saturating the Bluegrass counties. Having exhausted his initial supply by 5 June and promised an additional 5,000 rifles by Lincoln, Nelson continued his weapons operation from Cincinnati. In all, Nelson oversaw the distribution of 23,000 rifles in Kentucky.²⁶

Once the smuggled arms were in the hands of Union Home Guard men, the news was leaked with great fanfare and effect. Southern Rights Party leaders protested that the Lincoln Guns were designed to “begin civil war in Kentucky.” Under a headline reading “The Conspiracy,” the Southern Rights Party accused the Union Democracy of duplicity, crying, “Companies of home guards . . . have driven every Southern man from their ranks.” The Southern Rights Party also exaggerated

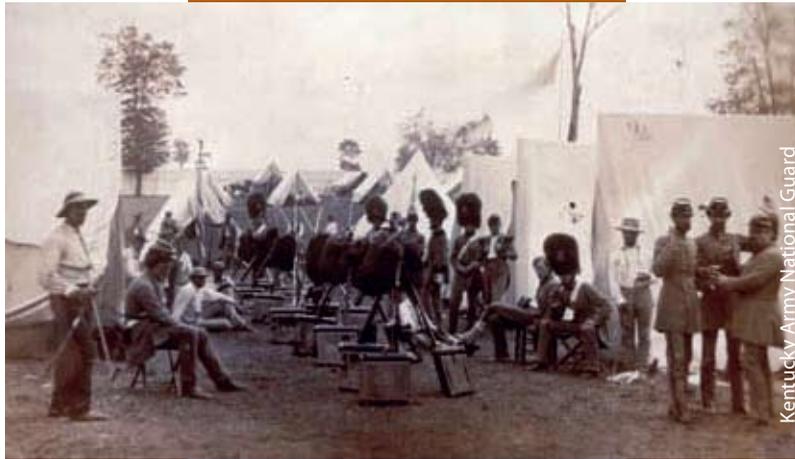
the number of weapons, severely damaging its own cause; at one point, it overestimated the 2,500 rifles as 15,000. A Unionist later quipped, “Each gun was thus made to have the moral effect of three or four.”²⁷

The psychological effect of militia weaponry made a significant impact upon friend and foe. It tipped the balance in favor of the Union. Watching men parade down Main Street in Danville with their new Lincoln Guns, Speed S. Fry was amazed at public reaction. “It would be impossible,” Fry observed, “for any one to describe, in language sufficiently strong, the consternation

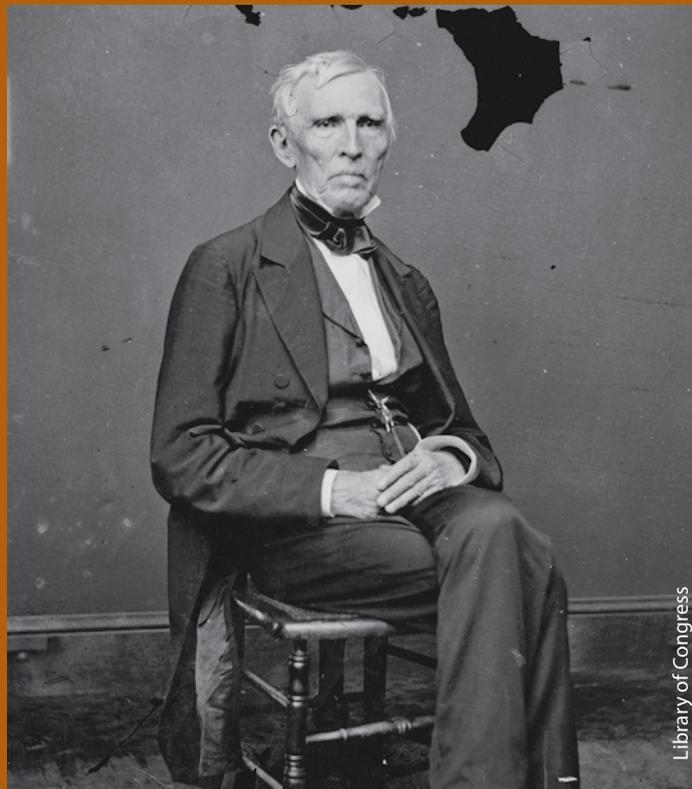
expressed in the countenances of these people, when they beheld my company of a hundred men file down Main street, with bayonets glistening in the sunlight, pointed above their heads, and nodding to and fro as they ‘kept step to the music of the Union.’” Guns, in the opinion of most Union men, “had a wonderfully quieting effect in the communities into which they were introduced.”²⁸

A NEUTRAL REGIME?

With KSG and Home Guard companies threatening and taunting each other, Governor Magoffin—sometimes derided as His Hesitancy—worried that Kentucky teetered dangerously on the brink of destruction. In one of the most extraordinary actions of the Civil War, he proclaimed the Commonwealth of Kentucky neutral on 20



Militiamen of the Kentucky State Guard relax after parade; (bottom) John J. Crittenden, c. 1861



May 1861. In his proclamation, the governor urged Kentuckians “to refrain from all words and acts likely to engender hot blood and provoke collision.”²⁹ He failed to mention his intention to mobilize units of the Kentucky State Guard to enforce neutrality throughout the commonwealth.

The recent crisis in Missouri—a bloody day in St. Louis on 10 May that sparked internal civil war in that state—plus public knowledge of Nelson’s smuggled Lincoln Guns resulted in special KSG military orders.³⁰ Buckner, with Magoffin’s concurrence, determined to field a pro-neutral thousand-man militia army. In addition, Buckner sent orders to the Lexington Battalion (Roger W. Hanson commanding) to activate a camp of instruction on 20 May (the same day as Magoffin’s proclamation). Rumor had it that Lincoln’s troops would attack the Kentucky State Guard on 21 May. Was it all just coincidence? That same day, the Louisville KSG battalion was ordered by KSG headquarters (Louisville) to activate a camp for six of its companies (to meet 21 May). The KSG actions had two purposes: first, to guard against Union military actions as had just occurred in St. Louis; and second, to ensure public tranquility as the neutrality proclamation became known.³¹

Working together, Magoffin and Buckner now attempted to restructure the commonwealth into an armed neutral, positioned to repel any invaders from the North or South. Under Magoffin’s direction, his state government energetically launched a neutral “foreign” policy, sending emissaries to President Lincoln and Confederate President Jefferson Davis as well as to Union and Confederate military commanders. Two-man diplomatic teams, consisting of a pro-Union and a pro-Southern

negotiator who had pledged to promote Kentucky’s neutrality and interests, enjoyed initial successes, securing guarantees that Kentucky would not be invaded by either side.³²

Columbus, Kentucky, a hotbed of secessionist sentiment, threatened to destroy

However, by June, the situation in Columbus, Kentucky, a hotbed of secessionist sentiment, threatened to destroy Magoffin’s and Buckner’s attempts to enforce neutrality. The town boasted a number of Confederate flags and banners that invited Union gunboats to threaten the town with naval gunfire. Outside observers labeled Columbus “Kentucky’s

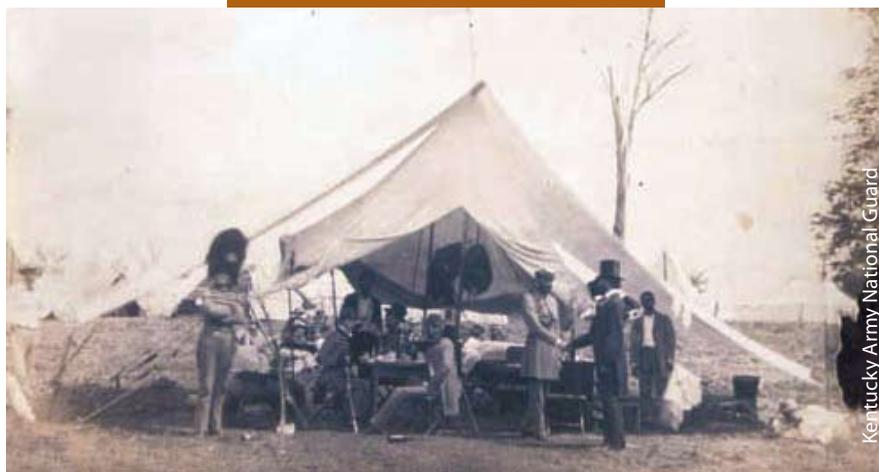
Charleston.” To quell secessionist sentiment, Buckner, on 10 June, in the most unusual act of his KSG inspector generalship, ordered six companies of the 4th Battalion (KSG troops from Paducah) to deploy to Columbus to pacify secessionists and to enforce state neutrality.³³ He placed Lloyd Tilghman in command and ordered Capt. Henry Lyon of the engineer corps to join them. Buckner had been busily engaged throughout western Kentucky at this time. Prior to his activation of the KSG troops, he had persuaded Confederate Brig. Gen. Gideon Pillow to cancel a planned Kentucky invasion, but Columbus’ problems and the threat from Union gunboats required decisive action. According to Buckner, “the highly excited state of the citizens of Columbus and vicinity, and the indiscretion of many of them, at every moment imperiling the peace of the Commonwealth, induced me to . . . call into the field a small military force [to] quiet the unhealthy excitement.”³⁴

Buckner clearly stated that his purpose in activating the Kentucky State Guard was to “protect all citizens” and to “carry out the obligation of neutrality which the State has assumed . . . , restraining our citizens from acts of lawless aggression.” One newspaper was shocked, asserting that the troops had been called out

“to protect Union men.”³⁵ In ordering this most peculiar of actions, Buckner, a Southern rights man, had deployed pro-Southern militia units to quell secessionist sentiments and uphold Kentucky neutrality! Why had he done this, and to what purpose?

SETTING TRAPS

Unionists believed, and Buckner’s actions and those of his subordinates seem to suggest, that secessionists desired to keep Kentucky neutral as a first stage or half-step to disunion until a major-



Governor Magoffin visits Major Hunt at encampment.

privately whispered to take Kentucky out

ity of Kentuckians finally made up their minds that their true destinies lay with the South. Conversely, Buckner and other disunionists must have been extremely discouraged as they witnessed the creation of opposition Union Home Guard militias comprised of loyal Union men equipped with thousands of Lincoln Guns. How could they dare hope, as many privately whispered, to “take Kentucky out?”

Providentially, the overt and aggressive actions of Union Capt. Nathaniel Lyon at St. Louis on 10 May provided KSG conspirators with a usable template for revolution. An incident similar to St. Louis, if it were to occur somewhere in Kentucky, would allow disunionists to rally an outraged Bluegrass state to the Southern side. “If Unionism means such atrocious deeds as I have witnessed in St. Louis, I am no longer a Union man,” a Missourian who had strongly opposed secession exclaimed. Many citizens of Kentucky shared his thoughts on the subject. Kentuckians were edgy.³⁶

Could Kentucky Unionists be provoked, trapped, or manipulated into perpetrating an act of violence on Kentucky soil? Southern sympathizing military men hoped so. For years, Kentuckians had heard that the “Black” Republicans were aggressive abolitionists who would stop at nothing. Following St. Louis, the belief that federal usurpations formed part of a

larger Republican conspiracy to subjugate the border slave states gained dominance. Alfred Pirtle’s friend Cabell from St. Louis believed,

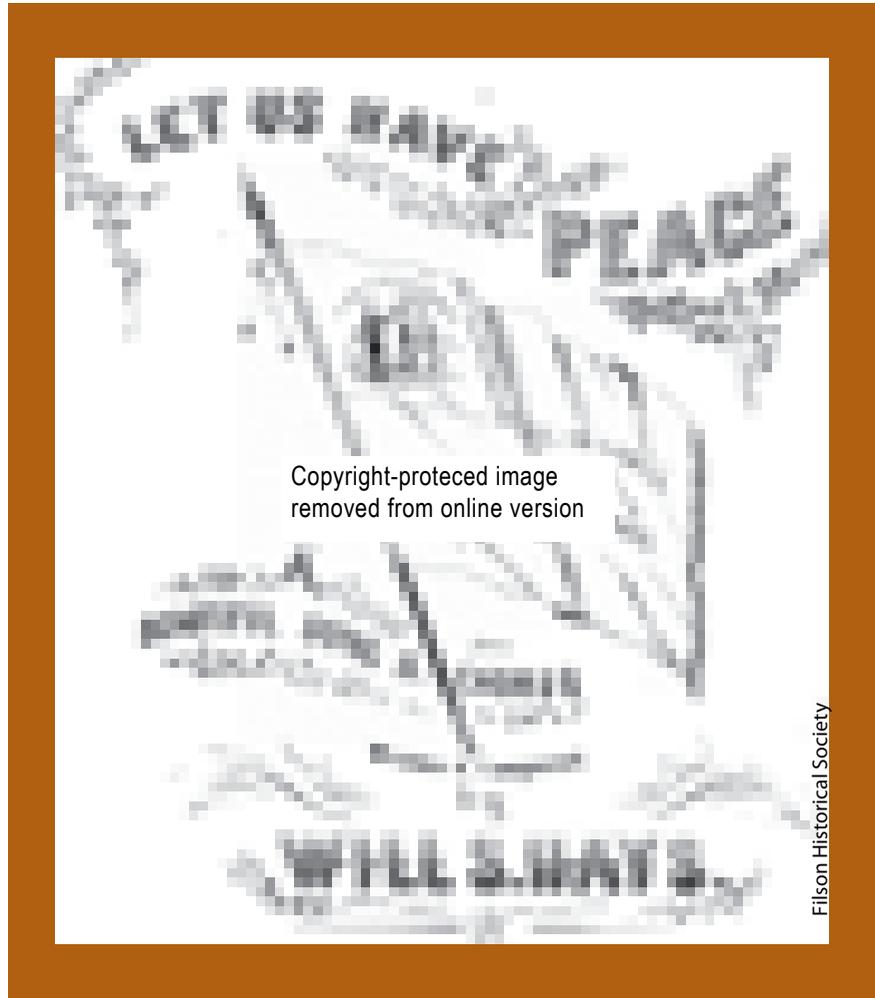
that [Missouri] will be changed by these high-handed actions into secession and then the Federal government having succeeded in their object of precipitating the

State will throw so many and such large bodies of troops into the State that the citizens of Missouri will find themselves overawed and held in check by the hands of hireling Abolitionists. . . . He sees in the Administrations [*sic*] movements towards our Commonwealth [Kentucky] indications of such proceedings here.

Pirtle, although he later became a Union army officer, shared the same outrage and conspiracy beliefs as most Kentuckians, commenting, “We hope the time will not find us so unprepared as Missouri was.”³⁷

Believing Lincoln and Republicans to be aggressive by nature, Buckner and his KSG cohorts believed that all they needed to do was to set the traps. And so, beginning in May 1861, this is exactly what they attempted to do. Buckner ordered the KSG militia into a number of camps across the commonwealth in hopes that Unionists would launch an attack against at least one of them.

One Union attack on a KSG encampment, regardless of the military outcome, would act as a catalyst for revolution. “Indeed, the Secessionists of the State Guard, if there be any, went out on purpose to be taken, perhaps,” an embedded reporter observed. “They will hold Lincoln to be meaner than ever if he doesn’t accommodate them in this cherished wish of their gizzards.” Still, “it is rather ominous that a cause needs blood to give it vitality.”³⁸



Cover to an 1861 song for peace by a Louisville songwriter

With a potentially hostile Union army camp just across the Ohio River from Louisville (Camp Joe Holt), KSG Lt. Col. Thomas H. Hunt carefully chose an exposed campsite. Expecting a federal attack, Hunt decided to train his battalion at Shepherdsville, 30 miles south of Louisville. Positioning his camp at a bend on the south side of the Salt River, Hunt began training his men in six-day iterations. He named the site Camp Shelby. The Paroquet Springs resort, conveniently at hand, lent this encampment the same social-military atmosphere that had prevailed at the previous year's outing.

Hunt went into camp with six companies of his regiment on 21 May for one week of training. He expected the Kentucky Rangers (cavalry) and the Citizens Artillery in a few days. To read Citizens' Guard soldier Pirtle's account of camp life, one would think that the entire enterprise consisted of sheer boredom: "The hours are spent reading, writing, card-playing, rowing on the Salt River." In fact, "reading and lounging around is the order of the day."³⁹

Magoffin and Buckner perhaps thought otherwise. Convinced that Unionists were about to move, they awaited action. Receiving what later proved to be false reports, Magoffin informed Buckner that he believed a Union force from Cincinnati would attack Camp Shelby between 21 and 26 May. Events in Missouri filled everyone's minds. Rumors of an imminent attack circulated. "It has been softly whispered," wrote reporter Charley Kirk, "that if this camp is continued (and the probability is it will be for some time) the 'Abolitionist Administration' will adopt the same measures in regard to it that they did so effectually with the St. Louis Brigade. . . . We have an eye to this."⁴⁰

Buckner arrived at Camp Shelby to take command on 26 May, and the following scene ensued: "Last evening was one of excitement in our little camp. A rumor was set afloat that dispatches of great importance had been received at Headquarters [and when] orders to sleep on arms and 40 rounds of cartridges were issued the boys gave vent to their feelings in three



A soldier of the Louisville Citizens' Guard in 1858, as depicted on the cover of a march written in the unit's honor

cheers. Picket Guards were posted last night."⁴¹

Forty rounds of ammunition was standard combat issue in 1861, so for Hunt's battalion state neutrality had become mighty peculiar. But the awaited Union attack never came; the KSG's traps had all been set in vain. Union leaders of Kentucky had also observed the events in Missouri and had learned the appropriate lessons. Kentucky Unionists opted to await events while building a Union Home Guard as a deterrent force. Meanwhile, they sought bloodless ways to eliminate the Kentucky State Guard.

DISMANTLING THE KENTUCKY STATE GUARD

The end of the Kentucky State Guard came about by cutting off funds, redistributing weapons, and requiring loyalty oaths. Suspicious as ever, the UD-dominated Kentucky General Assembly demanded access to Magoffin's correspondence and transactions with the Confederate government and insisted that all KSG militiamen take an oath of loyalty to the United States. It also arranged to divide the weaponry between KSG and Home Guard units. Finally, on the last day of the May session, the legislature set up a five-member military board to oversee the arming of Kentucky. "Humiliating as it is," an SRP supporter noted, this creation stripped Magoffin of "all his military power."⁴²

The results of the UD-dominated military board's decisions did not take long to effect a change. Secessionists in the KSG, tired of marking time while war raged about them, slowly but surely left KSG ranks and went south to join the Confederate Army, many of them turning over their arms to Home Guard units in their communities. A lack of funding would force the closure by mid-July of Camp Joe Daviess, a permanent training camp established by Hunt in early June atop Muldraugh's Hill, and of other places like it.⁴³

The Union loyalty oath proved to be most deadly. The insistence of Southern rights men upon a code of honor was admirable but naïve for

revolutionaries. They again played into Unionist hands. In this instance, Kentucky Unionists understood Southern rights men better than Southern rights men understood themselves. The insistence on a Union loyalty oath led pro-Southern members of KSG units to quit their ranks in large numbers.

Lucas G. Hughes informed Governor Magoffin, “The members of the Hancock Rifle Company K.S.G. in the 2nd Saturday in July 1861 at their Company meeting, after reading of the General Order No. 4 refused to take the oath required . . . having thereby become disbanded.” His letter was one of many. Submitting his resignation, M. S. Kouns admitted that his company strength had fallen to seventeen members: “Some have Vol[unteered] in the Federal Army & Some have gone to parts unknown.”⁴⁴

To most modern observers, the oath appears trivial; to many men of 1861, however, matters of principle and honor were essential to one’s self-respect. Pirtle understood the issue and was alarmed. He worried that if the oath was insisted upon, “the only arm the State now has would be disbanded.”⁴⁵

A few pro-secessionists dodged the oath. They understood the object of Unionists and urged their comrades not to feel obligated by having sworn. Pirtle was not impressed when one of Buckner’s aides-de-camp, Maj. Alexander Cassidy, dropped by the Citizens’ Guard to administer the oath. “A great diversity of opinion exists as to the obligation imposed by the oath, some taking it very lightly,” Pirtle noted. “The officer administering it, Cassidy [*sic*] said he would be willing to take it every morning before breakfast thus speaking lightly of the oath.”⁴⁶

Money, state armaments, and loyalty oaths—none of this eventually mattered. On 21 July, as the news of the Battle of Bull Run became known, Buckner and his personally loyal but pro-Southern officers resigned their positions in the Kentucky State Guard and headed south to join the Confederate Army. The Kentucky State Guard was at an end. Union Home Guard militias now held the high ground, for they had saved Kentucky for the Union.

CONCLUSIONS

The Kentucky State Guard’s contribution to Kentucky in 1861 was significant in many respects. Buckner later argued that his pro-neutral militia had delayed a Union and Confederate invasion while preserving the peace of Kentucky. The record shows that Governor Magoffin forcefully advocated the use of the Kentucky State Guard as an instrument of neutrality, despite the fact that he was initially, at best, a secret secessionist. Over time, however, events seem to have forced Magoffin to evolve into a sincere neutralist.

Almost as importantly, the Kentucky State Guard recruited Kentucky secessionists and held them in check. It inadvertently paralyzed the revolutionary zeal of men ready to join the rebellion and force Kentucky out of the Union at the point of the bayonet. While bivouacked at the training camps, they dreamed of secession and glory and waited for orders and military action that never came. The Kentucky State Guard saved Louisville from a possible Blanton Duncan secession plot in April, and in June it pacified the would-be secessionists of Columbus. When Southern rights men burned a Kentucky Central railroad bridge near Cynthiana to stop the southward movement of Lincoln Guns in August, Magoffin granted Thomas Crittenden permission to call out a KSG company if needed. At every turn, the Kentucky State Guard, despite its pro-Southern proclivities, had helped preserve the hegemony and peace of Kentucky.

The KSG’s second contribution was strategic. Albeit unwillingly at times, it backed state neutrality with force. The presence of a well-armed pro-Southern militia willing to back neutrality also kept Unionists temporarily off-balance. Tacticians on both sides had to abide by neutrality rather than risk a bloodbath. As long as a sizable portion of the Kentucky State Guard remained in Kentucky and loyal to Magoffin and Buckner, neutrality stood a chance. Buckner fully understood the Kentucky State Guard was the only force in Kentucky that included pro-Southern, pro-Union, and neutral men in its ranks.

Only with the KSG’s dismantling could the commonwealth take a decisive stand for the Union. Meanwhile, the hollow force stood as a potential nuisance to invaders—perhaps just enough of one to discourage belligerents early in the war.

The KSG’s third contribution was political. KSG companies bolstered and supported the Southern Rights Party at meetings and political gatherings. Without KSG protection, Union men might have broken up SRP meetings. The odds are that SRP leaders would have been subjected to arrest or forced to flee Kentucky much sooner than September 1861. In this sense, the Kentucky State Guard added to the longevity of Kentucky’s Southern Rights Party, giving it backbone and allowing the debate over North or South to continue well beyond that of any other border state.

Finally, the Kentucky State Guard and Union Home Guard made possible a more peaceful process of polarization between UD and SRP constituencies. Unionists joined Home Guard units, while SRP men joined KSG companies. Kentuckians sorted themselves out peacefully, and over time the extremists of both sides were siphoned off to rival Confederate or Union armies gathering on the commonwealth’s borders instead of fighting it out inside the state. The Kentucky State Guard, in ways unique and unforeseen, had helped assist in preserving state hegemony, internal peace, and political freedom. Be it Kentucky 1861 or Iraq 2008, peaceful or violent, militias have their uses.



NOTES

This article is a revised version of a paper read at the conference of Army historians held in Arlington, Virginia, in August 2007.

1. Albert Kirwan, *John J. Crittenden* (Lexington, Ky., 1962), pp. 25–26, quote p. 25. See also John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800–1861* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956).

2. Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theater in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*

- (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 49–53, quote p. 49; James A. Ramage, *Rebel Raider: The Life of General John Hunt Morgan* (Lexington, Ky., 1986), pp. 35, 41–42.
3. F. C. Harrington, *Military History of Kentucky* (Military Department of Kentucky, 1939), p. 141.
 4. William Henry Perrin, ed., *History of Fayette County* (Chicago, 1882), p. 444.
 5. L. D. Young, *Reminiscences of a Soldier of the Orphan Brigade* (Paris, Ky., 1918), p. 11–12, quote, p. 12; *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, 16 Sep 1857.
 6. Prior to John Brown's Raid, Kentuckians had little reason to fear slave revolts—there had been none. After the raid, they effectively expelled abolitionist John G. Fee of Berea and others without incident.
 7. Richard G. Stone, *A Brittle Sword: The Kentucky Militia, 1776–1912* (Lexington, Ky., 1977), p. 59.
 8. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky . . . , 1859* (Frankfort, Ky., 1859), p. 40, initial quoted words; Fawn M. Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens: Scourge of the South* (New York, 1959), pp. 133–34, final quote.
 9. An Act for the Better Organization of the Kentucky Militia, approved 5 March 1860, in *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky Passed at the Session Which Was Begun and Held in the City of Frankfort on Monday, the Fifth Day of December, 1859 and Ended on Monday, the Fifth Day of March, 1860* (Frankfort, Ky., 1860), pp. 142–71.
 10. Harrington, *Military History of Kentucky*, p. 147; Stone, *Brittle Sword*, p. 62.
 11. The camp was set up at the fairgrounds of the Southwestern Agricultural and Mechanical Association, of which secessionists Blanton Duncan and Thomas H. Hunt were members. See *Sketches of Camp Boone: The First Encampment of the Kentucky State Guard* (Louisville, Ky., 1860), pp. 15–20; *Louisville Daily Courier*, 27 Aug 1860.
 12. *Louisville Daily Courier*, 28 Aug 1860; *Sketches of Camp Boone*, p. 25.
 13. The Knights of the Golden Circle, led by founder George W. L. Bickley, constituted a secret military society dedicated to the expansion of slavery throughout Latin America. The primary goal of the organization was to annex northern Mexico and create a new slave state.
 14. Ltr, Blanton Duncan to Stephen A. Douglas, 7 Mar 1861, in Stephen A. Douglas Papers, University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.; Basil W. Duke, *History of Morgan's Cavalry* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1867), p. 36.
 15. Magoffin to Secretary of War Simon Cameron, 15 April 1861, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880–1901), ser. 3, vol. 1, p. 70.
 16. Ltr, Duncan to Douglas, 7 Mar 1861, Douglas Papers, University of Chicago. Duncan is apparently referring to Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who held the rank of major general in the Mississippi Militia.
 17. *Louisville Daily Courier*, 13, 18, 20 Apr 1861.
 18. Kentucky State Guard (KSG) Special Order (SO) 56 (initial quoted words), Personnel Records, Kentucky National Guard (NG), Frankfort, Ky.; Alfred Pirtle Journal, 20 and 22 Apr 1861, Alfred Pirtle Papers, Filson Historical Society (FHS), Louisville, Ky.; *Louisville Daily Courier*, 20 Apr 1861.
 19. *Louisville Journal*, 8 Jun 1861.
 20. *Ibid.*, 2 Jul 1861.
 21. Ltr, Maj Gen George McClellan to Lt Col E. D. Townsend, 17 May 1861, *War of the Rebellion*, ser. 1, vol. 51, pt. 1, p. 381.
 22. *Frankfort Yeoman*, 16 May 1861.
 23. *Ibid.*, 30 Apr 1861. The willingness of Crittenden and other Union elders to shoulder a musket for their cause conjures up the image of revolutionary Iranian mullahs who, circa 1979, were no less determined.
 24. Kirwan, *Crittenden*, p. 436; Daniel Stevenson, "General Nelson, Kentucky, and Lincoln Guns," *Magazine of American History* 10 (1883): 121–22, quote, p. 122.
 25. Ltr, R. H. Stevenson to T. B. Stevenson, 18 May 1861, T. B. Stevenson Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society, Cincinnati, Ohio.
 26. Stevenson, "Nelson, Kentucky, and Guns," pp. 119, 123–25. Most of the July consignments (13,000 rifles) were stored for issue to Tennessee units, which would be recruited in August.
 27. *Louisville Daily Courier*, 20 May 1861, first quote; Stevenson, "Nelson, Kentucky, and Guns," pp. 122–23, 126, second quote, p. 126.
 28. Stevenson, "Nelson, Kentucky, and Guns," p. 131, first quote; Thomas Speed, *The Union Cause in Kentucky, 1860–1865* (New York, 1907), p. 109, second quote.
 29. Speed, *Union Cause in Kentucky*, pp. 47–49. The legislature had also passed a neutrality resolution on 16 May.
 30. On 10 May 1861 the Missouri State Guard was surrounded and captured by Union Capt. Nathaniel Lyon. No shots were fired and no resistance offered, but when a local column of Union Home Guards marched the 892 prisoners through St. Louis, an angry crowd gathered. Shooting began. Twenty-eight people were killed and seventy-five wounded. This incident, or "massacre" as pro-Southerners called it, set off Missouri's civil war. See Duke, *History of Morgan's Cavalry*, pp. 44–50; James W. Covington, "The Camp Jackson Affair: 1861," *Missouri Historical Review* 55 (April 1961): 197–212.
 31. *Paris Western Citizen*, 31 May 1861; KSG SOs 126, 127, Personnel Records, Kentucky NG.
 32. Interested in buying additional weapons, Magoffin also sent purchasing agents to the North and South.
 33. Buckner activated four infantry, one artillery, and one cavalry company to move from Paducah to Columbus.
 34. *Louisville Daily Courier*, 12 Jun 1861.
 35. *Ibid.*, 15 Jun and 1 Jul 1861.
 36. Christopher Phillips, *Damned Yankee: The Life of General Nathaniel Lyon* (Columbia, Mo., 1990), p. 193, quote; Pirtle Journal, 11 and 15 May 1861, FHS.
 37. Pirtle Journal, 15 May 1861, FHS.
 38. *Daily Louisville Democrat*, 28 May 1861.
 39. KSG SO 127, Personnel Records, Kentucky NG; Pirtle Journal, 21 and 15 May 1861, quotes, FHS.
 40. *Louisville Daily Courier*, 27 and 30 May 1861.
 41. *Ibid.*, 28 May 1861.
 42. Pirtle Journal, 10 May 1861, FHS; E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1926), p. 87; *Louisville Daily Courier*, 22 May 1861; *Frankfort Commonwealth*, 29 May 1861, quote.
 43. At first, \$5,000 in training funds had been authorized (15 June), and \$30,220 for powder, caps, muskets, balls and shot, lead, and musket repair. By July the military board would undo this decision.
 44. Ltrs, L. G. Hughes to Magoffin, 21 Sep 1861, and M. S. Kouns to Magoffin, 3 Sep 1861, Governor's Military Correspondence, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Ky.
 45. Pirtle Journal, 18 May 1861, FHS.
 46. *Ibid.*, 3 Jun 1861, FHS.