
General Josiah Harmar's Campaign Reconsidered: How the Americans Lost the Battle of Kekionga

Michael S. Warner*

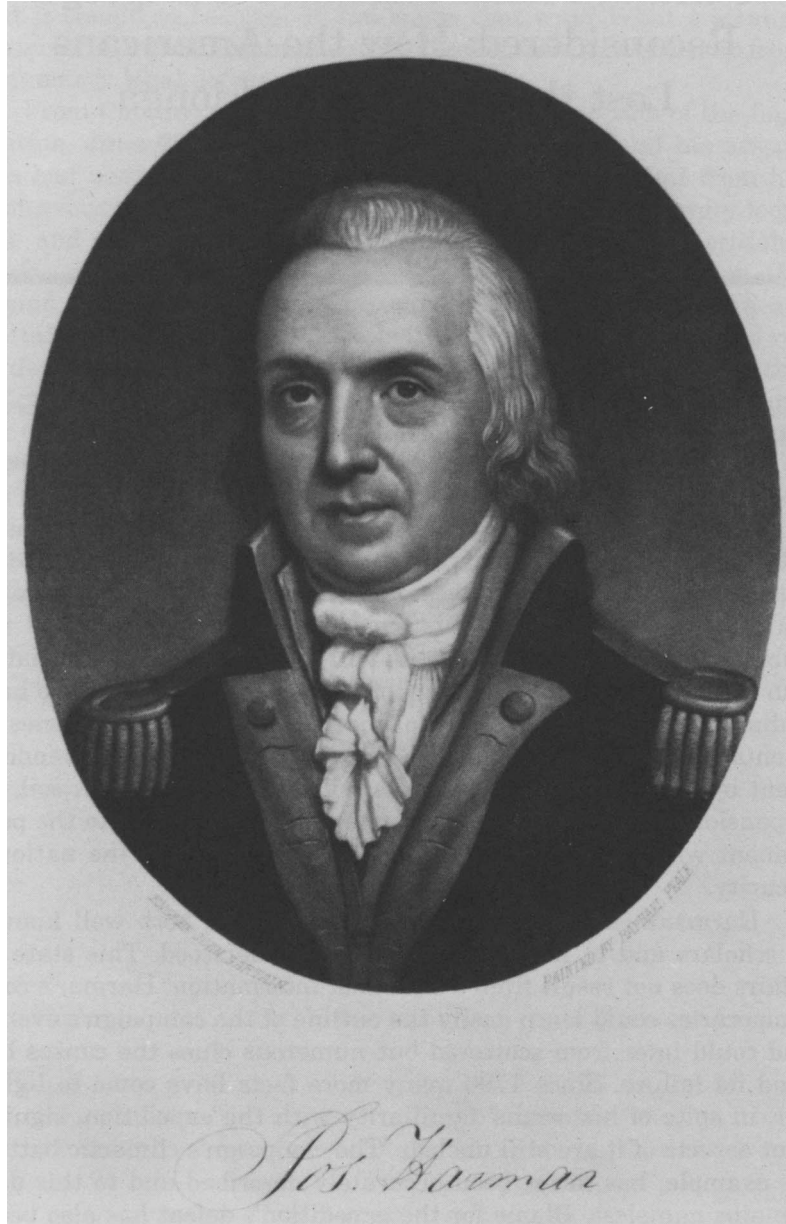
Some jealousies took place, and reproaches ensued. Complaints, indeed, forever follow misfortune, as that is but too often the companion of misconduct.

Humphrey Marshall, *The History of Kentucky*, 1812.

General Josiah Harmar's campaign against the "Indian banditti" along the Maumee River in 1790 marks a watershed in the settlement of the Old Northwest and also in the evolution of America's military institutions. His expedition, the Constitutional republic's first attempt to impose its will by offensive arms, initiated four years of warfare on the part of the federal government to halt Indian depredations on the Ohio frontier. It was one in a series of events that led to the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, to the abandonment by Great Britain of the forts still held on American soil, to expansion of the peacetime military establishment, and to the permanent widening of the federal role in maintaining the nation's security.

Harmar's campaign remains, paradoxically, both well known to scholars and in many ways not well understood. This state of affairs does not result from a dearth of information. Harmar's contemporaries could learn easily the outline of the campaign's events and could infer from scattered but numerous clues the causes behind its failure. Since 1790 many more facts have come to light; yet, in spite of historians' familiarity with the expedition, significant aspects of it are still unclear. The campaign's climactic battle, for example, has never been accurately described and to this day remains nameless. Blame for the expedition's defeat has also been varyingly apportioned. Historians have long recognized that con-

* Michael S. Warner is a doctoral candidate in history, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.



Reproduced from "Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny,"
(*Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Vol. VII; Phila-
delphia, 1860), [236].

ditions imposed upon Harmar by his superiors and by his army made his failure likely; nevertheless, in the final analysis success or failure for the expedition rested with Harmar's men, who had, but lost, the opportunity to snatch victory from defeat.

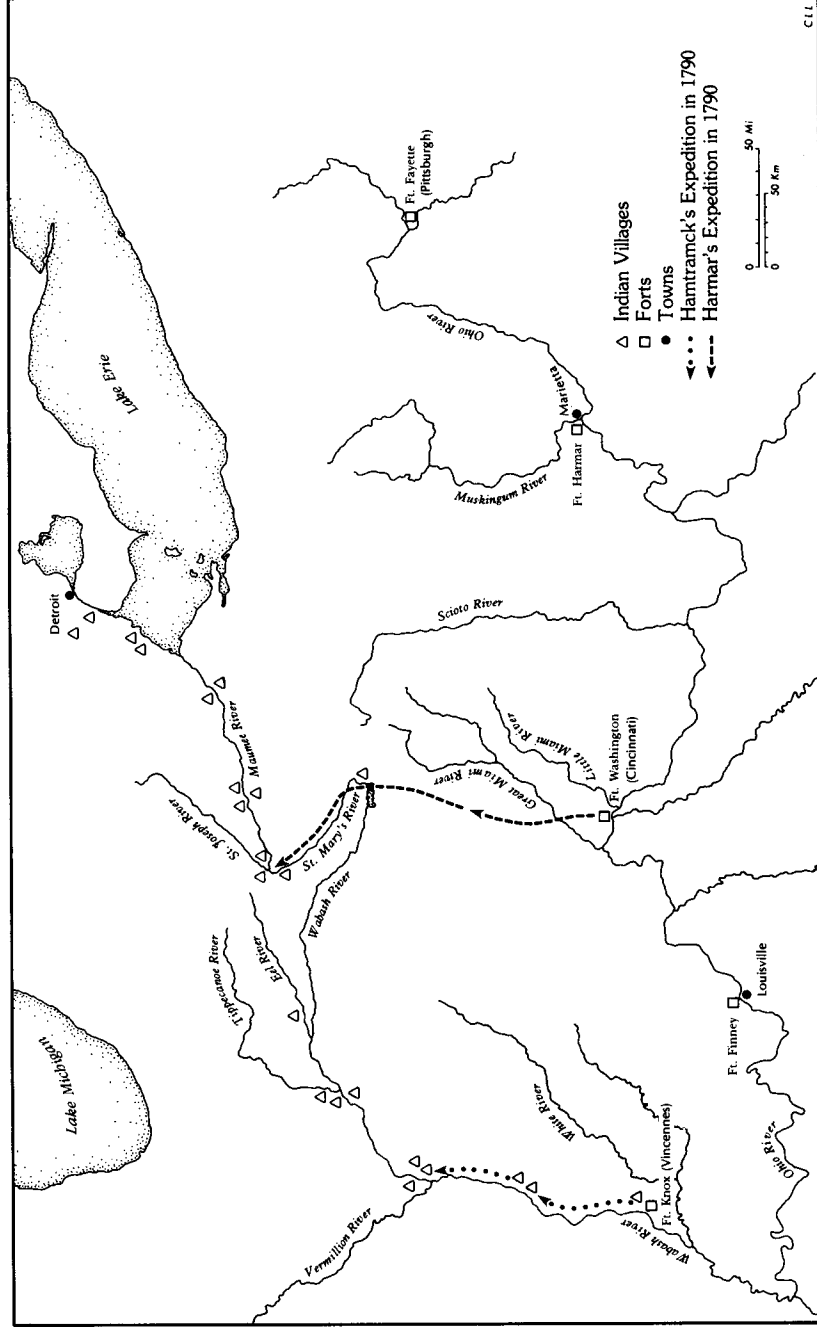
Several years of smoldering hostilities and mutual provocations between Indians and whites in the West provided the background for Harmar's campaign. In the spring of 1790 increasing pressure from settlers, land speculators, and military personnel led the Washington administration to agree with its frontier agents that an Indian war was inevitable and that the United States must take the offensive and punish its tormentors. In July General Arthur St. Clair, governor of the Northwest Territory, met with Brigadier General Harmar, commander of the infant United States Army. Going considerably beyond their orders, they planned a two-pronged attack on the Indian towns along the Wabash and Maumee rivers. Harmar was to command the larger force, which would march on October 1 for the towns located near present-day Fort Wayne in the Maumee valley.¹

A thirty-seven-year-old veteran of the Revolution, Harmar had by 1790 spent six arduous and frustrating years patrolling the Ohio River valley with his largely forgotten regulars. From his base at Fort Washington (present-day Cincinnati) he called upon the army's scattered posts that summer and gathered the bulk of his command, 320 officers and men. To this skeleton force St. Clair added what was to be the real muscle of the expedition, 1,200 militia troops from Kentucky and from Pennsylvania's western counties.²

When militia began arriving at Fort Washington in September, 1790, they proved a sore disappointment to Harmar and his officers. Instead of the rough-and-ready frontiersmen that Secre-

¹ Perhaps the best of several good descriptions of the context and planning of Josiah Harmar's campaign is contained in Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York, 1976), 100-108. Kohn maintains that Secretary of War Henry Knox believed a force of four hundred mounted troops could chastise the two-hundred-odd troublesome Indians. Harmar and St. Clair knew that they faced at least a thousand braves. Finding ambiguity in his instructions, St. Clair planned with Harmar a two-pronged expedition involving over 1,800 men and designed to establish a permanent post on the Maumee River. Major John F. Hamtramck was to march up the Wabash River from Vincennes at the same time as Harmar's force moved toward Kekionga. Hamtramck was to take with him three hundred militia and the federal garrison of Fort Knox, and he planned to burn the towns of the Wabash tribes. A shortage of supplies forced him to return to Vincennes before he reached his objective.

² The best primary sources for the planning of the campaign are the documents in the *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* (serial set 07), I, 94-113 (hereafter cited as ASPI); and also General Harmar's papers, as copied by Lyman C. Draper, manuscript 2W, p. 268-328, Lyman C. Draper Collection (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison). Harmar's original journal and other Harmar papers are housed in the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.



THE OLD NORTHWEST, C. 1790

Map prepared by Cathryn L. Lombardi.

tary of War Henry Knox (and even Harmar) had expected, the rabble that mustered in Cincinnati lacked discipline, experience, and in many cases even muskets. For the dwindling days before the march the federal officers worked hastily to stiffen the militia and repair their weapons. Harmar settled a dispute over command of the three Kentucky battalions and gave overall charge of the irregulars to Colonel John Hardin. Finally, on September 26, the militia set out, followed three days later by Harmar and his federals. To the west United States Army Major John Hamtramck prepared to march a much smaller expedition against the Wea and Kickapoo towns on the Wabash River in an attempt to draw the Indians' attention from Harmar.³

Harmar's reunited force moved again on October 3. Combined, they numbered 1,453 regulars and militia. The army marched cautiously toward the Maumee towns, shadowed much of the way by Indian scouts.⁴ Harmar hoped to catch the hostile Miamis and Shawnees, along with the British and French traders whom he considered "the real villains," before they could evacuate their settlements. Seeking to surprise his enemies, Harmar on October 14 detached Hardin with six hundred men to march rapidly to the main village of Kekionga. The colonel and his troops reached the Indian town two days later but were too late. The Indians and traders had fled just in time, leaving many of their homes in still-smoldering ruins. About noon on October 17 Harmar arrived with the main force and set about the work of destroying the remaining towns and supplies.⁵

Harmar's army spent the next three days burning and looting the six Indian towns about the confluence of the St. Mary's, St. Joseph, and Maumee rivers. The troops found and destroyed large hidden stores of corn and vegetables and killed a few braves who came too close. Believing he might find and defeat a larger force of Indians, Harmar on October 18 sent Colonel Robert Trotter and a mixed force of three hundred regulars and militia to the northwest on the trail of the fleeing Indian families. Trotter followed the scent for a day, accomplished little, and mistakenly returned to camp that evening.⁶

³ The single most useful record of the campaign itself is contained in the depositions presented at Harmar's 1791 court of inquiry. *American State Papers: Military Affairs* (serial set 016), I, 20-36 (hereafter referred to as ASPM). The references in this paragraph are to pp. 21, 24.

⁴ David H. Morris, "A Sketch of General Harmar's Campaign in 1790," Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840.

⁵ ASPM, 25.

⁶ Colonel Robert Trotter was to spend three days away from the main force, following the trail of the Indians who had deserted Kekionga. He led a disorganized march, fired on a few Indians, and went back to camp that evening after mistaking a cannon shot for a signal to rejoin the army. Harmar had fired the piece to call his dispersed militia back to camp for the night. ASPM, 26.

Annoyed, Harmar dispatched Hardin on the same errand the next day. During this time the Indians had closely watched the army's movements. Led by the capable chiefs Blue Jacket, Le Gris, and Little Turtle and armed with British muskets, they spoiled for a fight but dared not attack Harmar's camp. Hardin's bumbling on the nineteenth gave them an opportunity for revenge. After marching about eight miles, and having forgotten one of his companies along the way, Hardin led his men into an ambush near the Eel River. His force had crossed a morass and had begun to reform when it was swept by the sudden, massed fire of perhaps a hundred Indians. All but a handful of the Kentuckians bolted for the rear, in their haste disordering United States Army Captain John Armstrong's efforts to form his soldiers for a bayonet charge.⁷ The warriors pursued the fleeing militia and overran and killed most of the regulars. Armstrong himself hid in the swamp that night and staggered back to camp the following day with his account.⁸ Discretion proved the better part of valor for the militia. Although a few were killed, most either headed home to Kentucky or regrouped under Hardin for an unmolested march back to camp.

After Hardin's ambush at the Eel River, the army completed its destruction of the Indian towns and stores and prepared to depart. They marched out of Kekionga early on October 21, encamping that night at aptly named Nine Mile Run about nine miles from the three rivers. A handful of the expedition's proficient scouts remained behind, posted on the hills south of the Maumee River to observe the Indians returning to their ruined villages. A scout named Daniel Williams brought word that evening that perhaps 120 Indians had drifted back.⁹

Hardin learned of Williams's report, and seeing an opportunity to redeem his militia and deal the Indians a parting blow, he pleaded with Harmar for permission to march a detachment back to Kekionga that night. Harmar caviled but finally acceded, agreeing to reinforce Hardin with sixty federals under Major John P. Wyllys. Colonel Horatio Hall and Major James McMullan of the Kentucky militia liked the plan and agreed to go along. At 2:00 a.m. on the twenty-third—a crisp, starry, autumn night—the detach-

⁷ Several descriptions of the Eel River ambush exist. Although contradicted in places by other accounts, the two best are the deposition of Captain John Armstrong, ASPM, 27; and an account by an anonymous veteran, "Harmar's Expedition," published in *The Western Review and Miscellaneous Magazine*, II (April, 1820), 179-82. Also useful is Benjamin Drake's interview with veteran Thomas Irvin, October, 1840, manuscript 4U, pp. 6-9, Draper Collection.

⁸ Biography of Captain John Armstrong, in Charles Cist, comp., *The Cincinnati Miscellany; or, Antiquities of the West . . .* (2 vols., 1845-1846; reprint, New York, 1971), I, 39-40. This account is reprinted in turn from Cist's column of November, 1844, in the *Cincinnati Western General Advertiser*. Cist's own account of the ambush in volume II of the *Cincinnati Miscellany*, pp. 182-85, adds detail and color.

⁹ Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840; Irvin interview, 8.

ment started north. Wyllys's federals and Major James Fontaine's forty mounted Kentucky riflemen marched with three hundred picked militiamen. It is not certain whether Hardin or Wyllys held overall command of the force. The trip back to Kekionga took several hours. After delays caused by unsure guides and footweary militia the expedition reached the low hills along the Maumee shortly before sunrise, probably around 6:30 a.m.¹⁰

The dispersed and fragmentary nature of the primary sources has long prevented a comprehensive, scholarly exposition of the resulting "Battle of Kekionga," which proved to be the climax of Harmar's expedition. Among the existing accounts those of the "Fort Wayne school" come closest to accuracy; yet, even these versions cannot be reconciled at significant points with eyewitness and contemporary statements.¹¹ The following synthesis of the scattered and disparate materials presents the most accurate account of the battle possible from the available evidence and provides the basis for an assessment of the failure of Harmar's campaign.

October 22, 1790, dawned a warm, sunny Indian summer day.¹² Near the Maumee ford Hardin, Wyllys, and the other officers held a final conference and then divided. Whether their plan was set in camp or devised on the spot remains unknown. In theory their scheme looked more than adequate. In an article analyzing Anglo-American methods of Indian warfare John K. Mahon claims that experienced Indian fighters liked to surround and surprise their foes, preferably at dawn, and make them fight in defense of their homes and families. Such tactics forced the Indians to fight on the whites' terms where the superior firepower and discipline of the soldiers would tell to greatest effect.¹³ Hardin's and Wyllys's plan

¹⁰ ASPM, 35-36.

¹¹ The "Fort Wayne school" consists of those historians who visited the Kekionga battlefield, primarily Benson J. Lossing, who toured the field on the eve of the Civil War; Wallace Brice; and Bert Joseph Griswold. They agree on most details of the battle, and their accounts parallel the one presented in this article with one notable exception. All three scholars incorrectly placed the site of Wyllys's rout at the Maumee River ford. While some of his men were almost certainly killed or wounded as he crossed the Maumee, eyewitness and contemporary accounts are near unanimous in saying that Wyllys reached the opposite bank, advanced almost to the St. Joseph River, and then encountered the fatal ambush. Griswold—and probably Brice as well—saw documentary and even physical evidence (in the form of bayonets and muskets found in the St. Joseph) that corroborates this interpretation. Though difficult to find, the accounts of the "Fort Wayne school" are worth reading, for they offer detail and color lacking in most historical sketches of the battle. See Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* (New York, 1869), 41-45; Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne* (Fort Wayne, 1868), 121-30; and Bert Joseph Griswold, *The Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana* (Chicago, 1917), 102-13.

¹² Harmar kept a daily journal on the expedition, and in it he recorded each day's weather. See Harmar's journal, manuscript 2W, Draper Collection.

¹³ John K. Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare, 1674-1794," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLV (September, 1958), 254-74.

followed this doctrine. Hardin, with Hall, would lead a blocking force south around the village and post themselves on the west bank of the St. Joseph. Wyllys, Fontaine, and McMullan would ford the Maumee and drive the Indians through Kekionga toward the St. Joseph into Hardin's waiting muskets on the opposite shore.¹⁴

Certain facets of the scheme remain unclear to historians, and one suspects that these ambiguities also existed in the minds of the commanders that morning. Who would command the stronger wing? How were the elements of this wing—Wyllys's regulars, McMullan's militia, and Fontaine's horsemen—to maintain contact with one another? Hardin and Hall were to loop around to the left, cross the St. Mary's River, then march through Le Gris's small village to the west bank of the St. Joseph. They contemplated a hike of a mile or more through hostile woods and fields. How was this to be done without the Indians discovering them, and how were Wyllys and McMullan to know when Hardin had reached his post? What was to be done if surprise was lost? The historian has only informed speculation to supply answers to these and other questions.

Though apparently sound in principle, then, the Americans' plan left much to chance and improvisation. It soon went awry. The deponents at Harmar's court of inquiry in 1791 testified that Hall and Hardin had almost reached their position when a stray shot alarmed the Indians in Kekionga and sent them scattering. As Little Turtle's braves were seasoned hunters and warriors, it probably would have taken more than one distant, random report to startle them. Surely a flurry of shots erupted. Militiaman Thomas Bourne was with Hardin's corps that morning, and he remembered a pair of Indians firing at his unit as it crossed a "river." Perhaps he meant Spy Run Creek to the west of Le Gris's village and the St. Joseph. At least one Kentuckian fell wounded, and the men returned fire and gave chase, pursuing the braves "1/2 to 3/4 mile" to the west bank of the St. Joseph.¹⁵

Observers agree that the firing alarmed the Indians in and around Kekionga. Wyllys's and McMullan's wing saw them "flying in all directions" from the ruined village. The moment demanded a swift decision, and the commanders waiting along the Maumee agreed that a spoiled plan was better than none. By fulfilling their assigned role they might still trap many Indians as well as supporting Hardin and Hall. Accordingly they charged "en masse" out of the woods and down into the Maumee River ford before them.¹⁶ Braves on the opposite bank fired on McMullan's men and probably

¹⁴ ASPM, 28; Irvin interview, 8.

¹⁵ Thomas Bourne, interview by Lyman C. Draper, October 31, 1844, manuscript 4U, pp. 1-2, Draper Collection.

¹⁶ ASPM, 28.

on Wyllys's, killing and wounding several. One soldier, John Smith, remembered lying bleeding in the shallow stream until the firing stopped, when he dragged himself to cover on the south bank.¹⁷ Shooting as they came, Wyllys's, Fontaine's, and McMullan's men reached the north bank and formed in line for the sweep to the St. Joseph. The regulars held the left flank, McMullan's militia the right, with Fontaine's horsemen in the center.¹⁸

The three units advanced together. Before them small bands of Indians fled Kekionga, heading from left to right across the soldiers' front. Scenting victory, the militia gave chase. Less disciplined than the regulars, McMullan's command surely broke apart into knots of men following and fighting the equally disorganized Indians. As they did so, they caused McMullan's side of the sweep line to sheer away, to the right, from Wyllys's advancing federals.¹⁹

It probably took no more than a couple of minutes for Wyllys and McMullan to lose contact. Neither commander, apparently, heeded the danger this caused; neither halted his men to regroup and redirect their march so as to find the opposite flank. The confusion and smoke and noise, the urgency of reaching the St. Joseph, and the thrill of finally driving substantial numbers of their red foes before them doubtlessly helped to pull the two flanks apart. Once separated from the militia, disaster soon overtook Wyllys's corps. Veteran Samuel Abbey recalled that the regulars pursued the Indians across "a small prairie" to the edge of a hazel thicket near the St. Joseph.²⁰ A small hill or rise, perhaps also covered with hazels, dominated Wyllys's right, and Harmar and others agree that this was where the braves chose to make their stand.²¹ Fontaine's horsemen had accompanied Wyllys, riding ahead of the infantry. Seeing Indians running for the thicket, Fontaine ordered a charge and plunged ahead himself. His men held back, however, and Fontaine was mortally wounded in a hail of musket balls as he sabred a group of braves.²² The horsemen scattered and played no further role in the battle. Militia troops later saw Fontaine's scalped body lying on the battlefield.²³

Wyllys came up too late to support Fontaine, and suddenly his men, too, were raked by a deadly fire from their front and right.

¹⁷ Hugh Scott, interview by Benjamin Drake, August 26, 1840, *ibid.*, p. 99, Draper Collection. See also Brice, *History of Fort Wayne*, 128-29.

¹⁸ ASPM, 26, 28. See also "Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny" (*Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Vol. VII; Philadelphia, 1860), 351.

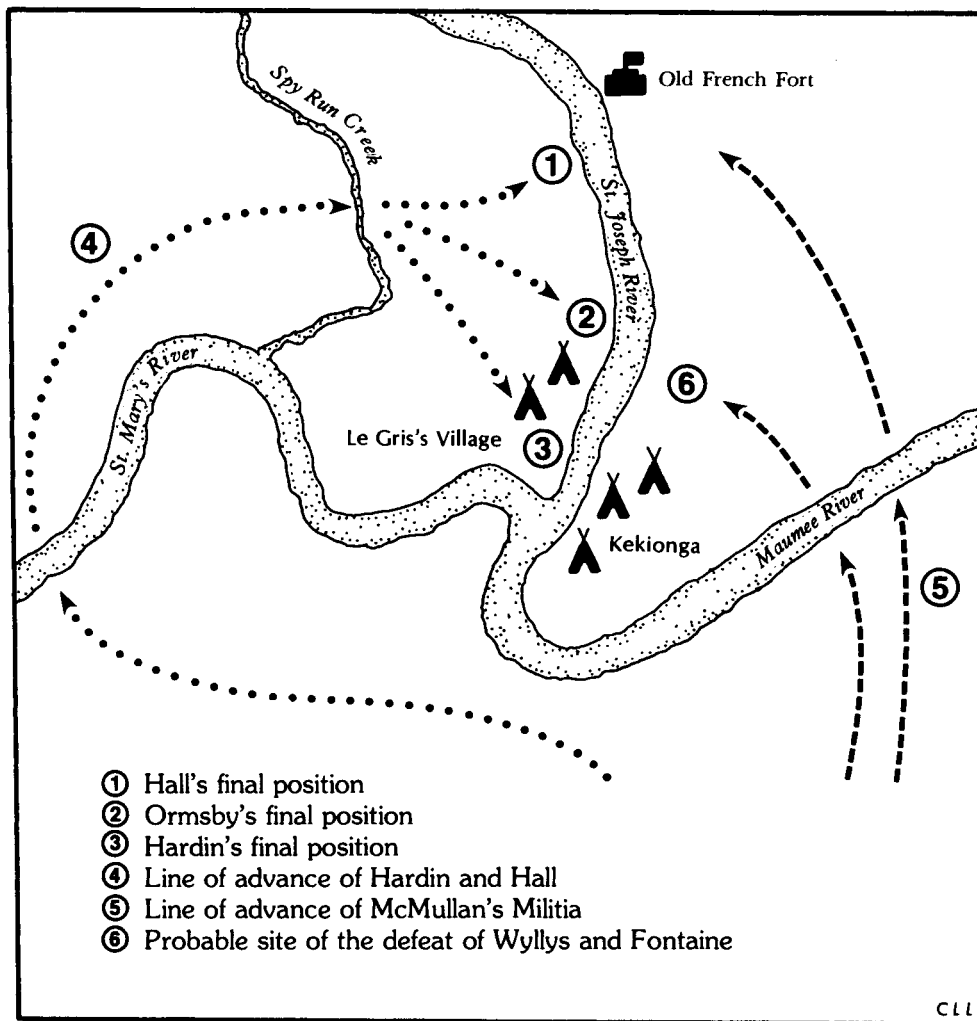
¹⁹ ASPM, 25, 26, 28.

²⁰ Samuel Abbey, interview by Benjamin Drake, April 20, 1844, manuscript 4U, p. 169, Draper Collection.

²¹ "Extracts from Brigadier-General Harmar's letter to the Secretary of War," *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States*, January 15, 1791. See also Abbey interview, 169.

²² "Harmar's Expedition," 181. See also Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840.

²³ Carlisle, Pennsylvania, *Gazette*, December 15, 1790.



THE BATTLE OF KEKIONGA, OCTOBER 22, 1790

Map prepared by Cathryn L. Lombardi.

With a ferocious and uncommon disregard for their own safety the Indians, perhaps under the command of Little Turtle, charged or worked forward to fight hand to hand with the regulars. Historian Mann Butler, writing in the 1830s, noted the comparative quiet of this deadly struggle. After the first volley the bayonet, tomahawk, and scalping knife decided the issue.²⁴ Wyllys died early, and as the Indians drove the Americans back, one warrior donned the major's big, cocked hat and wore it for the rest of the battle. Leaderless and nearly annihilated, the surviving federals had no choice but to retreat across the St. Joseph covered by the muskets of Hardin and Major Stephen Ormsby on the opposite shore. At the river's edge and even in the shallow stream the Indians pressed their assault. Bourne recalled shooting a brave as he tomahawked a bluecoat on the other bank; other accounts told of Indians bayoneted in the running water.²⁵ Only a handful of regulars (perhaps nine) survived the battle.

Why did McMullan fail to come to Wyllys's rescue? Accounts maintain that the militia quickly lost tactical cohesion; yet, the Kentuckians did render some support for a few returned and attacked Wyllys's tormentors from behind. For their pains they received a volley from Major Ormsby's militia, across the St. Joseph, who had trouble distinguishing white from Indian in the havoc of battle.²⁶ Another factor might have been the relative "silence" of the bitter hand-to-hand struggle that Wyllys's men fought. A thicket and a small hill separated the regulars from the bulk of McMullan's militia, who had fighting of its own to do and could hardly be expected to prevent a rout that the men could neither see nor hear. Whatever the reason, McMullan's force gave Wyllys no significant support.

The Kentuckians, however, were not idle. They drove a number of Indians before them into the St. Joseph. In places the initial plan worked. Hall's or Hardin's men had taken positions on the opposite bank and shot down many Indians when, in desperation, they forded the stream.²⁷ Elsewhere the warriors found gaps and crossed unscathed.²⁸ McMullan stayed behind on the east bank. Those Indians who made their way across the St. Joseph fought scattered and probably disorganized actions with Hardin's and Hall's militia. Hardin, recalled Bourne, found himself flanked by Indians in the woods to his left, and fearing envelopment, he or-

²⁴ Mann Butler, *A History of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1836), 193.

²⁵ Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840.

²⁶ "Harmar's Expedition," 182; ASPI, 106; Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840.

²⁷ Letter in the *Richmond Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser*, December 1, 1790; Irvin interview, 9.

²⁸ Scott interview, 99.

dered his men back. The confusion this withdrawal caused gave the warriors new opportunities to assail the Kentuckians. Bourne's group was pursued for perhaps three miles of its retreat, but others left the field without trouble.²⁹

Further up the St. Joseph, by the site of an old French fort, Colonel Hall crossed the river with his men and rejoined McMullan.³⁰ They returned to Kekionga and waited perhaps half an hour, cleaning and reloading their muskets, until no sign of the Indians remained.³¹ Unharried, they set off on their return march. The fight had lasted from about 9:00 a.m. to midday.³²

Harmer learned of the battle about 11:00 a.m. when a breathless horseman rode into camp with word that the detachment had met disaster. Regular officers testified at Harmer's court of inquiry that panic then swept the militia camp. Harmer ordered Major James Ray of Kentucky to march to the relief of Hardin and Wyllys, but Ray found only thirty men willing to go along. With this pathetic force he started, but he had not gone three miles before he met Hardin's men returning with their wounded and, probably, with the remnants of Wyllys's command as well. Hardin bade Ray wait there, and soon Hall and McMullan came up behind. The men reached camp sometime in the afternoon, and stragglers found their way back to the army over the next few days.³³

Fifty or more regulars died in Wyllys's rout, and about one hundred militia fell. The number of militia casualties, observed historian Jack J. Gifford, belied the later attempts of federal officers to paint the Kentuckians as ill-disciplined cowards.³⁴ No reliable statistics provide the number of Indian casualties, but the ferocity of Wyllys's last stand and of the combat along the St. Joseph lend credence to Harmer's estimate of one hundred Indians killed.³⁵ The American dead remained unburied on the battlefield. Harmer feared that his weakened packhorses and his frightened and allegedly near-mutinous militia would not stand a march back to Kekionga to bury them.³⁶ That night John Smith, wounded at the Maumee ford, hid along the river's south bank and watched excited Indians stripping the bodies of his comrades left lying in the stream.³⁷ When Anthony Wayne's army swept through Ke-

²⁹ Bourne interview, 2; Scott interview, 99; "Harmer's Expedition," 182.

³⁰ Lossing, *Pictorial Field-Book*, 43.

³¹ ASPM, 28; Irvin interview, 9.

³² "Harmer's Expedition," 182; Carlisle, Pennsylvania, *Gazette*, December 15, 1790.

³³ ASPM, 25, 26, 35.

³⁴ Jack Jule Gifford, "The Northwest Indian War, 1784-1795" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, University of California at Los Angeles, 1964), 116.

³⁵ Philadelphia *Gazette of the United States*, January 15, 1791.

³⁶ ASPM, 21, 26, 29.

³⁷ Brice, *History of Fort Wayne*, 128-29.

kionga in 1794, his men finally buried the bones of many who had fallen there in 1790.³⁸

Harmar and his army had had enough. They marched homeward as fast as their tired animals would move them. As they neared Fort Washington, the Kentucky militia grew surly and insolent; but cooler heads prevailed, and the army reached Cincinnati relatively intact on November 3.³⁹

Harmar dispatched two reports to Secretary of War Knox claiming victory but admitting severe losses.⁴⁰ Others immediately recognized the expedition's failure. Resentful Kentucky militiamen accused Harmar of cowardice, drunkenness, and general incompetence, and rumors about him spread like wildfire. Hardin, never popular among the Kentuckians, also received his share of calumny, but he cleared his name at an informal hearing the following month.⁴¹ Congress reacted to the failure with outrage. The Washington administration hardly reacted at all, preferring to let Harmar bear the torrent of criticism that poured forth even in the East.⁴²

Knox and St. Clair immediately saw the need for a second expedition. Harmar had injured the Indians but only enough to enrage them and bring on a wider war the following spring. Embittered, Harmar requested a court of inquiry, which met in September, 1791, and exonerated him though it proved impotent against the popular opprobrium heaped upon his reputation. He resigned from the army later that year.⁴³ The stage had been set for St. Clair's disastrous march into Ohio in October of 1791.

The causes of Harmar's defeat at Kekionga ran much deeper than Wyllys's and McMullan's failure to support one another in the climactic battle. The expedition marched under constraints and circumstances that would have daunted the ablest general and the finest troops. Karl von Clausewitz, the Prussian military theorist, held as one of his cardinal maxims that victory requires a clear and attainable objective. Harmar's goal, though sensible to himself

³⁸ Cist, *Cincinnati Miscellany*, I, 184.

³⁹ ASPM, 25, 35; Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840.

⁴⁰ Philadelphia *Gazette of the United States*, January 15, 1791; ASPM, 104.

⁴¹ Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, December 4, 11, 1790. The December 11 edition of the *Gazette* also contained a lengthy excerpt from "Smollet's history of England" concerning General Edward Braddock's defeat in the French and Indian War. The excerpt emphasized Braddock's low opinion of his militia troops and his Indian foes and attributed his defeat to his contempt for these parties. Printed in a Kentucky journal so soon after Harmar's campaign, it could have been interpreted as implying criticism of Harmar.

⁴² Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 107. Judge and land speculator John Cleves Symmes feared the defeat would discourage emigrants from the East; see Beverly W. Bond, ed., *The Correspondence of John Cleves Symmes, Founder of the Miami Purchase* (New York, 1926), 134.

⁴³ Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 107; Gifford, "The Northwest Indian War," 124-25.

and his superiors, was in reality ambiguous. Knox and St. Clair agreed that the expedition would “chastise” the hostile tribes by striking at their towns. In essence, their plan aimed to cow the warlike young braves by burning the homes and crops of their families. Knox, at least, seems to have recognized the weakness of this proposition; he wrote in September, 1790, that the expedition would either force the Indians to terms or bring wider warfare the following spring.⁴⁴ Frustration and a desire for revenge for years of provocation surely played a role in St. Clair’s and Harmar’s decision to strike at the Indians’ most vulnerable point. Anger, however, makes a poor counselor, and no one in 1790 seemed to know how to use force to bring peace to the Ohio frontier.

Later Anthony Wayne found that the way to force the Indians to terms was to demonstrate Great Britain’s impotence in the Old Northwest. Secretary Knox foreclosed the discovery of this fact in 1790 when he ordered St. Clair to warn the British garrison at Detroit of Harmar’s approach. St. Clair’s letter to Major Patrick Murray of the Royal Army, dated September 19, 1790, confirmed what the Indians already knew—that an expedition would soon march—and relieved the British of worry for the safety of their post.⁴⁵ They continued to arm and provision their Indian allies and took no diplomatic steps—at least none that are known—to bring peace by negotiation instead of warfare.⁴⁶ The researcher, of course, can only speculate about what might have happened had St. Clair never sent his letter. It seems likely that Harmar’s potential threat to Detroit would have compelled the British to warn him of the consequences of an assault on that town. In so admonishing the Americans the British would provide the Washington administration an opportunity for dialogue that might have led to steps by Great Britain to restrain and calm the Indians.

⁴⁴ Knox to St. Clair, September 14, 1790, in William Henry Smith, ed., *The St. Clair Papers: The Life and Public Services of Arthur St. Clair* (2 vols., Cincinnati, 1882), II, 181-83.

⁴⁵ John Parker Huber, “General Josiah Harmar’s Command: Military Policy in the Old Northwest, 1784-1791” (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1968), 209-10. St. Clair to Major Patrick Murray, September 19, 1790, in Smith, ed., *St. Clair Papers*, II, 186-87.

⁴⁶ By mid-August many Indians knew that an expedition against the hostile tribes was pending. See Hamtramck to Harmar, August 20, 1790, manuscript 2W, p. 294, Draper Collection. The extent of British support for the warring tribes remains uncertain. American authors have tended to indict the British for inciting and funding Indian violence. See Consul Willshire Butterfield, *History of the Girtys* (Cincinnati, 1890), 246-47; and Thomas Byrd, *Simon Girty: The White Savage* (New York, 1928), 186-87. The arguments of these writers seem credible, yet convincing evidence of extensive British support around the time of Harmar’s expedition is lacking. The journal kept by British officer Henry Hay, Major Murray’s agent at Kekionga during the winter of 1789-1790, shows that the English maintained close ties with the warring tribes, sought to keep them allied with one another against the Americans, and made few if any efforts to dissuade them from attacking the Ohio settlements. Milo M. Quaife, *Fort Wayne in 1790: The Journal of Henry Hay* (Indiana Historical Society Publications, Vol. VII, no. 7; Greenfield, Ind., 1921).

Apart from its ambiguous aim, the expedition itself suffered from several weaknesses. Harmar, fretted Knox, might have been one of them. Knox's counsels to the general reveal the secretary's worries. He urged Harmar to move swiftly, strike hard, and above all, remain sober.⁴⁷ His anxiety perhaps arose from the fact that Harmar had never commanded a force so large let alone one intending to march deep into Indian country. Harmar's officers might have caused Knox similar consternation. Virtually all had served in the Revolution, but their martial skills had surely deteriorated in the nine years of peace and frontier duty that stretched between Yorktown and 1790.⁴⁸

John P. Huber, in his doctoral dissertation on Harmar, praised the quality of the expedition's militia officers. While many of the senior commanders had served against the Indians and the British, their performance in 1790 makes it difficult to credit Huber's acclaim for them.⁴⁹ Hardin, though unquestionably brave, foolishly led his detachment into the Eel River ambush (after forgetting an entire company) and withdrew in what was probably unseemly haste at Kekionga three days later. His men disliked and distrusted him.⁵⁰ At Kekionga McMullan's inability to control his men helped cause Wylls's rout. Fontaine's impetuous bravado caused his own death and the dispersal of his mounted riflemen at the battle's pivotal moment. These officers demonstrated bravery and spirit but no military genius.

Scholars have noted the poor quality of the militia rank and file ever since Harmar's court of inquiry. Some of the irregulars proved courageous and capable; yet, United States Army Captain Ebenezer Denny's comment that half were useless rings true. Their overall decrepitude amazed Harmar's officers. Many were substitutes; old men, boys, and infirm specimens "good for nothing" but to swell the army's numbers.⁵¹ Many arrived at Fort Washington unarmed or carrying broken muskets. Knox had expected seasoned frontiersmen to volunteer for the march. Harmar's contractor, Robert Elliot, reported in August that the Kentucky counties enthusi-

⁴⁷ Knox to Harmar, August 24, September 3, 1790, manuscript 2W, pp. 310, 324-26, Draper Collection. United States Army veteran Samuel Abbey gives evidence that Knox's fears for Harmar's sobriety were not groundless. The soldier stated that he once saw a drunken Harmar fall out of his chair at Fort Washington. Abbey interview, 169.

⁴⁸ William H. Powell, comp., *List of Officers of the Army of the United States from 1779 to 1900 . . .* (1900; reprint, Detroit, 1967), 35-37. See also Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army . . .* (2 vols., 1903; reprint, Urbana, Ill., 1965), I, 501.

⁴⁹ Huber, "General Josiah Harmar's Command," 206-207.

⁵⁰ Scott interview, 99. Scott remembered that the militia "generally reprobated" Hardin's conduct at the Kekionga battle.

⁵¹ *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States*, January 15, 1791; "Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny," 344. See also ASPM, 21, 23, 24. For examples of the federal officers' attitudes toward the militia, see ASPM, 24, 27, 28.

astically supported the expedition and might exceed their recruiting quotas.⁵² Why did these expectations prove false?

Harmar's unpopularity in Kentucky might have made men with martial talents reluctant to go on the expedition.⁵³ Experienced Indian fighters such as Isaac Shelby, Benjamin Logan, and Charles Scott stayed home.⁵⁴ Kentuckians disliked army officers, and some, apparently, believed the campaign was doomed from the start. In a letter to George Washington a federal agent wrote that wild rumors of mutiny and privation in Harmar's army swept the state even before the expedition started north.⁵⁵

The principal disincentive to militia enlistments was almost certainly the low pay promised by the federal government. Militia privates received the same pay as regulars—three dollars a month.⁵⁶ A man who left his family and farm at harvest season to serve for sixty days could thus count on hardship, danger, and six dollars for his trouble. The United States Army recruited its soldiers not on the frontier but in the poorest districts of the eastern cities, often from jails and gin mills. The regulars were thus no closer to social respectability than the militia substitutes, but they at least had some training and discipline. One Kentucky historian noted that able frontiersmen willingly joined Fontaine's mounted riflemen, who received twenty dollars a month, but would not consider serving as infantrymen.⁵⁷

Given enough time, Harmar might have turned most of the militia troops into passable soldiers. He had very little. The Kentuckians began arriving at Fort Washington a bare two weeks before the army marched, and the mediocre Pennsylvanians arrived with only a few days to spare. Harmar had scant time to impress upon the militia and their officers the supreme importance of tactical cohesion on the battlefield. Without training and competent tactical leadership—according to Mahon the two key elements of

⁵² Knox assumed that many of the militia would arrive at Fort Washington armed with rifles, and he urged Harmar to persuade some of the riflemen to carry muskets (which were better for a fight at close quarters) on the campaign. Knox to Harmar, August 24, 1790, manuscript 2W, p. 190, Draper Collection. For Elliott's comments see Robert Elliot to Harmar, August 15, 1790, manuscript 2W, p. 310, *ibid.* For an idea of what sort of militia the federal officers expected, see ASPM, 21.

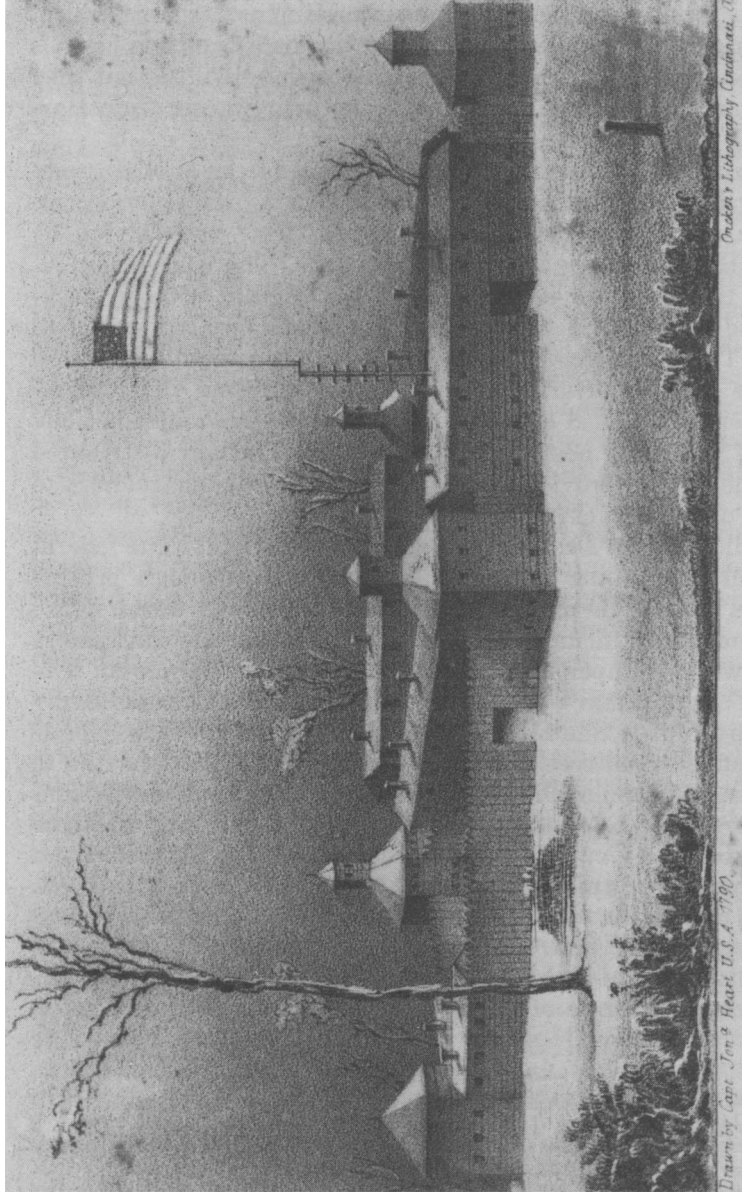
⁵³ Richard G. Stone, Jr., *A Brittle Sword: The Kentucky Militia, 1776-1912* (Lexington, 1977), 24-25. Samuel Abbey claimed that Harmar was unpopular with his own troops as well. Abbey interview, 169.

⁵⁴ Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 108. Logan and Shelby were to be offered commands in the expedition, but they either declined or were simply never contacted by the Washington administration. Knox to Harmar, September 3, 1790, manuscript 2W, p. 327, Draper Collection. Cist found it surprising that Washington relied on Harmar and St. Clair when true military talent "could have been found on the frontiers . . . in many distinguished Indian fighters." Cist, *Cincinnati Miscellany*, I, 182.

⁵⁵ James O'Fallon to George Washington, September 25, 1790, ASPI, 115.

⁵⁶ Knox to the county lieutenants, July 15, 1790, manuscript 2W, p. 278, Draper Collection.

⁵⁷ Stone, *Brittle Sword*, 24-25.



FORT WASHINGTON, AS SKETCHED BY AN OFFICER STATIONED THERE BETWEEN 1789 AND 1792

Reproduced from Charles Cist, *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1851* (Cincinnati, 1851); courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

successful Indian fighting⁵⁸—the expedition entered combat at Ke-kionga and the Eel River at a grave disadvantage.

In addition to these weaknesses, Harmar's force was too large and slow to surprise anyone yet too small and too green to survive against the forces it might have encountered. Knox estimated that 2,100 warriors might oppose the army.⁵⁹ Regardless of this figure's accuracy or inaccuracy, the Ohio Indians proved in 1791 that they possessed enough strength to annihilate an army larger than Harmar's.

The expedition's humble packhorses proved to be another problem. After Harmar's return to Fort Washington, the general complained to the War Department of horses "lost" and "stolen by Indians." His officers echoed these concerns. The expedition returned to the fort with as few as half its original 600-odd packhorses, and by as early as October 22 perhaps two hundred had escaped.⁶⁰ This loss, deep in hostile country, dangerously restricted the army's mobility. Harmar and his officers fretted that the remaining horses, fatigued and probably overburdened, might not last the retreat.⁶¹ As they neared Fort Washington Harmar distributed some of the army's provisions and baggage among his soldiers to be carried on their backs.⁶²

Why did Harmar's expedition have such problems? The federal government rented the expedition's packhorses through private contractors who, in turn, rented the beasts from their owners. The contracts naturally included a clause guaranteeing the contractors and the owners compensation for horses lost on the march. The "appraisal" for Harmar's packhorses, claimed United States Army Ensign Bartholmew Shamburgh, was so high that it made it profitable, or at least not costly, for the expedition's civilian drivers to "lose" horses.⁶³ Given such an incentive, the drivers evidently connived with militia sentries to allow horses to wander off at night or to be "stolen" by cunning and perhaps invisible Indians. Each morning parties of troops combed the vicinity around their encampment for strays, and Harmar issued repeated but futile orders calling for more vigilance by the drivers and sentries.⁶⁴

In contrast to its problems with packhorses, Harmar's expedition lost virtually none of its beef cattle,⁶⁵ nor did the mounted

⁵⁸ Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare," 274.

⁵⁹ ASPI, 112-13.

⁶⁰ *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States*, January 15, 1791; Huber, "General Josiah Harmar's Command," 214.

⁶¹ Major Ferguson, the expedition's artillery commander, worried that the army would have to send to Fort Washington for horses to haul his three small guns back to the post. ASPM, 21. Harmar fretted that the losses among the packhorses would have to be made good with horses from the army's mounted riflemen. *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶² Troy, Ohio, *Times*, January 29, 1840.

⁶³ ASPM, 27, 29.

⁶⁴ "Military Journal of Major Ebenezer Denny," 347-48. See also ASPI, 105.

⁶⁵ ASPM, 24.

riflemen complain of losing their animals. The cattle, penned near the horses, would seem just as vulnerable to "Indians" and just as likely to stray; yet, few wandered off. These facts appear to confirm Shamburgh's observations about the packhorses and the drivers' willful carelessness.

A pair of physical, or geographic, factors must also be noted in an assessment of Harmar's defeat. The crow flies almost 130 miles from Fort Washington to Kekionga; Harmar's men must have walked and ridden at least 150 miles on their trip to the Indian towns. In his study of Harmar's command Huber asked why the army was not ferried up the Great Miami River as far as the site of modern Piqua, Ohio.⁶⁶ Such a trip might have saved time, put the soldiers about eighty miles from Kekionga, and left both men and horses in better shape for the campaigning to come. Water travel (though on what river remains uncertain) was contemplated by the campaign's architects; but Knox informed Harmar that the contractors were to bear the expense if he went by river whereas the federal government would pay if he marched overland.⁶⁷ This economizing by the administration probably decided the issue. In addition, there was a very early frost in the autumn of 1790. Harmar's journal records the first on October 6. This bothered the general for it meant that the expedition's animals had their forage reduced substantially and earlier than had been foreseen.⁶⁸

The historian easily finds causes for the failure of a venture that did in fact fail. It is much more difficult to show what might have brought success. The auguries of failure for Harmar's expedition are so clear that they must have been visible to contemporaries; yet, Harmar suffered no catastrophe (unlike St. Clair a year later), and he argued with some merit that his campaign had attained its objective. How did Harmar avoid the disaster that seemed a likely result of his march?

One of Harmar's best moves was sending Major Hamtramck with a diversionary force against the Wabash River tribes. He probably did not conceive this idea—George Rogers Clark had used a similar stratagem to good effect before, and St. Clair prescribed it in 1788.⁶⁹ Original or not, the move distracted the hostile tribes and kept them from combining to attack Harmar. Hamtramck accomplished nothing of positive value; yet, one historian contends that perhaps six hundred warriors remained on the Wabash in the hope of ambushing his force.⁷⁰ Had they instead reinforced Little

⁶⁶ Huber, "General Josiah Harmar's Command," 239.

⁶⁷ Gifford, "The Northwest Indian War," 99.

⁶⁸ Rowena Buell, ed., *The Memoirs of Rufus Putnam, and Official Papers and Correspondence* (New York, 1903), 111; ASPM, 25; *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States*, January 15, 1791.

⁶⁹ Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 102-103.

⁷⁰ Bert Anson, *The Miami Indians* (Norman, Okla., 1970), 114-15.

Turtle, Harmar's expedition might have met a much rougher reception.

Harmar's caution also merits praise. Gifford and Huber noted that he was never surprised. The Indians apparently never found an opportunity to assault his camp or his marching columns. James Smith of Kentucky, in his treatise on Indian fighting written in 1812, prescribed an oblong "box" as the best order of march in Indian country. In his later analysis of Indian warfare, Mahon concurred. Both authors also recommended encampments set up in such a way as to reply to an attack from any direction. Harmar's orders of march and encampment, published with the proceedings of his court of inquiry, seem close to these prescriptions.⁷¹

Though faulted by contemporaries and some historians, Harmar's decision to send a detachment back to Kekionga on October 22 appears shrewd in retrospect. Persuaded by Hardin, Harmar sought to give the returning Shawnee and Miami warriors a check to deter them from harrasing his return to Fort Washington. The action's overall plan was good. Had it worked, the fight at Kekionga might be remembered as a telling blow to the Indians on the Ohio frontier. The scheme failed because it asked too much of its militia components, but Hardin and Wyllys still inflicted heavy casualties and probably prevented the tribesmen from pursuing the army.

The evidence also leads one to believe that Harmar recognized the weaknesses of his force and the perils it faced. When the general erred at all, it was on the side of caution. His rapid return march reduced the dangers that his men faced while deep in Indian country. As James Ripley Jacobs noted in his history of the United States Army, after marching at least three hundred miles, fighting two battles, and wrecking six enemy towns, Harmar's army returned to its base a reasonably cohesive unit.⁷²

These accomplishments, of course, are hardly proof of military genius. They are merely what should be expected of a competent commander. Harmar did nothing rash, but his sins of omission hang like a cloud over his campaign and, not without justice, were perceived by contemporaries as the proximate cause of the expedition's failure. In addition, historian Richard H. Kohn argues that Harmar must share blame with Governor St. Clair for committing the prestige of the United States to a venture uncertain of purpose and constructed of half measures. While Harmar's eagerness to in-

⁷¹ Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare," 266; James Smith, *A Treatise on the Mode and Manner of Indian War* (Paris, Ky., 1812). See ASPM, 31-33, for Harmar's orders of march and encampment. See also Gifford, "The Northwest Indian War," 119; and Huber, "General Josiah Harmar's Command," 242.

⁷² James Ripley Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U.S. Army, 1783-1812* (Princeton, N.J., 1947), 62.

jure the foes who had given him six years of frustration is understandable, it cannot excuse his undertaking such a dangerous and yet tentative campaign.

Harmar's generalship failed at several crucial moments. Having reached the Maumee towns and set his army to its labors of destruction, he still sought battle with the Indians. He put his militia troops at considerable risk on October 18 and 19 by sending them far from camp in the hope that they would find and defeat the fleeing tribesmen. Huber asserts—and surely Harmar should have recognized the fact—that the only terms on which the Indians would accept battle at this point was by ambush. If so, why should the army have sought combat with them? To have stood by impotently while the Americans burned their towns would have proved a great embarrassment to Blue Jacket, Le Gris, and Little Turtle. Instead of confronting the chiefs with this dilemma, Harmar foolishly gave them opportunities on October 18 and 19 to beat his troops and thereby to save face. This, combined with the loss at Kekionga three days later, cast the campaign as a defeat for the Americans.

In their assessments of Harmar's campaign both Theodore Roosevelt and Huber noted that Harmar apparently placed little trust in the abilities of his regular officers and soldiers. Despite his disappointment with the militia, he kept at least 80 percent of the regulars with him at all times.⁷³ Not until October 22 did he trust one of his own officers—Major Wyllys—with command of a detachment.⁷⁴ He led none of the detachments himself.

Harmar committed his worst mistake in refusing to return to the Eel River and Kekionga battlefields to bury the army's dead. His officers later claimed that he neglected this duty of honor after the Kekionga fight because he feared his tired packhorses would not stand the strain. He apparently never considered returning to the Eel River site at all. On both occasions strong detachments could probably have performed the task of burial in safety without weakening the main camp to the point of imperiling it.⁷⁵ By not returning Harmar impressed his men with his excessive caution and his seeming disregard for their fates. Inevitably these perceptions festered in the minds of the militia and gave rise to rumors of Harmar's timidity and incompetence. Kentuckian Hugh Scott, a nineteen-year-old militia private in 1790, remembered decades later

⁷³ Huber, "General Josiah Harmar's Command," 241; Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, Vol. III, *The Founding of the Trans-Alleghany Commonwealths, 1784-1790* (New York, 1894), 308.

⁷⁴ ASPM, 28.

⁷⁵ Thomas Irvin, though he was not in the best position to have known, claimed that a detachment of six hundred men could have returned in safety on October 23 to bury the dead at Kekionga. Irvin interview, 9.

that "the troops did not consider Harmar fit to command, and many of them deemed him a coward."⁷⁶

It was recognized immediately in Kentucky and in the East, both by the Washington administration and others, that General Harmar's expedition against the Maumee tribes failed. Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania opined: "The ill-fortune of the affair breaks through all the coloring . . . [It] look[s] finely on paper, but were we to view the green bones and scattered fragments of our defeat on the actual field, it would leave very different ideas on our minds. This is a vile business and must be much viler."⁷⁷ Examination of the circumstances of Harmar's campaign and the events of the battle of Kekionga show that failure, while probable, was not inevitable. Had McMullan and Wyllys supported one another along the east bank of the St. Joseph or had Fontaine's horsemen charged with him and broke up the Indians' stand instead of scattering themselves, the ill-starred campaign could have ended with a victory. Such a blow to the Indians would not only have boosted American morale and inversely lowered that of the hostile tribes it might even have led to fruitful negotiations.

When Harmar and his commanders adhered to the tactics and methods found effective by eighteenth-century Indian fighters, they succeeded, or at least they gained potentially decisive advantages over their foes. When they strayed from these maxims, whether through negligence, ignorance, or evil chance, they failed. The army and its officers erred because they had not been taught how not to imperil themselves and their plans. Harmar had time to provide only the most rudimentary schooling to his green troops and to his earnest but less than competent subordinates. In this lies the single most significant cause of the defeats at Kekionga and the Eel River, and for it Harmar can not be directly faulted.

Harmar's own mistakes, however, turned bloody but honorable defeat into shameful rout in the minds of his men, his superiors, and his Indian enemies. By needlessly exposing his men to ambush and by refusing to return to the battlefields to bury his dead, he enabled the Indians to boast of victory, and he bewildered and angered his army. His expedition marched homeward wounded and dazed, leaving behind an equally bloodied but exultant foe. Harmar failed to recognize what Leo Tolstoy claims Napoleon understood at the close of the battle of Borodino, that he who thinks he has lost has in fact been defeated despite the damage he may have done to his adversary. Not unjustly, Harmar's disregard for the safety and morale of his men cost his country the campaign and himself his career.

⁷⁶ Scott interview, 99. Deponents at Harmar's court of inquiry also alluded to these rumors. ASPM, 21, 26.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Randolph C. Downes, *Frontier Ohio, 1788-1803* (*Ohio Historical Collections*, Vol. III; Columbus, Ohio, 1935), 25.