

# The Many Social Selves of an Indiana Soldier

David W. Voyles, M.D

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**ABSTRACT:** Archivist and Civil War historian Stephen E. Towne introduces the edited letters of Dr. David W. Voyles, Assistant Surgeon for the 66th Indiana Infantry Regiment, to his wife Susan. Voyles wrote the letters from early in his enlistment in fall 1862 until his mustering out for health reasons in early 1864. Towne examines the social selves that Voyles exhibits in his letters, among them the spouse, father, soldier, moralist, and patriot. Towne also considers Voyles's letters written before and after his military service, held in the National Archives and the Indiana State Archives, which show Voyles as an ambitious and proud professional, and as a politically motivated government informant, seeking to expose Democratic conspiracies on the home front.

**KEYWORDS:** Civil War, Civil War letters, David William Voyles, William James, "social selves"

In his important work, *The Principles of Psychology*, American philosopher William James famously wrote, "Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an

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image of him in their mind.”<sup>1</sup> An example of multiple “social selves” might be the woman who is a laboratory scientist to her colleagues, a generous supervisor to her assistants, and a mentor to her students. She goes home to be a wife, a mother, a volunteer in her public school’s parent-teacher organization, a soprano in her church choir, and a coach of her daughter’s basketball team. She is herself a daughter, a niece, a sister, and cousin. In short, many people carry images of this one woman.

So was it with Civil War regimental surgeon David W. Voyles. As he shows in his private letters, edited by Mary Marlatt, Voyles had many social selves. All the letters included here were written to his wife, Susan, and therefore highlight the primary persona of the husband. He showed himself to be the loving spouse eager to be home with wife and child. At other times in his dealings with his wife, he appeared the paternalistic micro-manager, directing from afar how daughter Hettie should be fed or denying his consent for Susan to leave the confines of her parents’ house to return to her own home while he was away in the Union army.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere he took the role of brother, brother-in-law, or son to criticize his relatives. When he was ill, as it appears he often was, Voyles became the self-pitying invalid. At other moments, when healthy, he assumed the part of the happy soldier who reported that he found army life agreeable and judged himself “not fit for anything else but soldier.” As a physician, he sniped at his medical colleagues in the army and pitied soldiers who were “compelled to rely on the poorest of medical skill.”

Elsewhere in his letters, Voyles took up the mantle of the Christian moralist, preaching to Susan that the rebellion and war were the work of the deity “teaching us by some affliction that our national sin is truly great.” That sin was human chattel slavery, which he abhorred. A vehement anti-slavery Republican from southern Indiana, Voyles, in early February 1863, commended President Abraham Lincoln’s recent Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that all men and women enslaved in those parts of the South still controlled by the rebels would be hereafter free. The proclamation was, in his view, “the most effectual war measure yet.” In an undated fragment, probably written later in his service, he waxed eloquently

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York, 1890), 1:294.

<sup>2</sup> For studies of strictures on Indiana women whose husbands went to war, see Nicole Etcheson, *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community* (Lawrence, Kan., 2011), 50–73; and Etcheson, “No Fit Wife: Soldiers’ Wives and Their In-Laws on the Indiana Home Front,” in *Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front during the Civil War*, Ginette Aley and J. L. Anderson, eds. (Carbondale, Ill., 2013), 97–124.

about the new chapter beginning in the history of the country. The war would produce “the true birth of Free America,” when slavery would be abolished completely and forever, and freedom would be accorded to “all men, regardless of the color of his skin, the grade of his intellect; or of the place or circumstances attending his birth, those sacred rights due to every being claiming the image and likeness of his Creator.”<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Voyles showed himself to be a temperance man, averse to alcohol.

The persona that emerges most powerfully through Voyles’s letters is that of the patriot. He enlisted to preserve the national union, and he voiced frustration and despair when the war effort faltered. In early December 1862, while his regiment still licked its wounds from the drubbing it had taken during the summer at the Battle of Richmond, Kentucky, he confessed that, while he hoped he was wrong, “I regard the effort to subdue the rebellion a failure so far, and I am disposed to think the Country is lost.” Nonetheless, he wrote, he would not resign his commission but would continue the fight. His gloomy forebodings may have come during his sick spells, which were frequent. He would soon pen hopefully that he was “still in the faith that the war will end this summer.” He was a hard-liner, writing that he hoped deserters would be shot and that he looked forward to the implementation of conscription. He voiced anger at what he deemed disloyal speech and actions both at home in Indiana and in the ranks; he applauded the punishment of a soldier for criticism of Lincoln’s war policies, and hoped that military coercion would curb treasonous speech on the home front.<sup>4</sup> He reported that he and his army comrades were furious with Northern rebel sympathizers who weakened the war effort and encouraged the Confederates. The army, he threatened, “can be lead [sic] to the north in battle array ... to visit a terrible retribution”

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<sup>3</sup> Antebellum and wartime southern Indiana is generally considered to have been overwhelmingly Democratic and hostile to anti-slavery sentiments. However, recent research fascinatingly reveals communities of anti-slavery adherents and Republicanism. See Mark A. Furnish, “A Rosetta Stone on Slavery’s Doorstep: Eleutherian College and the Lost Antislavery History of Jefferson County, Indiana,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 2014). See also Furnish, “Black Hoosiers and the Formation of an Antislavery Stronghold in the Central Ohio Valley,” *Ohio Valley History* 16 (Fall 2016), 6–27.

<sup>4</sup> For a study of coercion of soldiers who voiced dissenting views, see Jonathan W. White, *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge, La., 2014). For a study of military efforts to control speech in Indiana, see Stephen E. Towne, “Killing the Serpent Speedily: Governor Morton, General Hascall, and the Suppression of the Democratic Press in Indiana, 1863,” *Civil War History* 52 (March 2006), 41–65.

on home traitors.<sup>5</sup> He repeated to Susan that he would not be a “coward” and resign his commission before victory was sure.

These and other social selves, to use James’s language, emerge clearly in Voyles’s private letters to his wife. Other personas come out in correspondence not included here. Official records preserved in the National Archives and the Indiana State Archives, including letters written by Voyles, show additional sides to his character. The regimental correspondence of the 66th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment in the Indiana State Archives contains records relative to the appointment and promotions of the commissioned officers. Included are letters of recommendation written on behalf of Voyles in summer 1862, when the regiment was first organized. Voyles’s first letter among them dates from July 29, when he rather haughtily wrote to Governor Oliver P. Morton that he would condescend to being appointed a regimental surgeon. “The only claim which my modesty will allow me to specify,” he averred, “is that I don’t *drink* whisky.” Two weeks later he wrote to the governor twice to angle for the chief surgeon post of the 66th. “I understand that you have already designated me as an assistant,” he wrote. “I cannot accept a second position, from the fact that no first class physician has to my knowledge accepted that post.” Professional pride would not allow him to serve under another. “I was not an applicant for the [assistant surgeon] post ... and must beg leave therefore, to decline the appointment.” A week later, however, he was still trying and wrote to Morton’s private secretary, William R. Holloway, to voice his dismay that the *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, the governor’s mouthpiece, announced that Nathaniel Field had been appointed surgeon and that he would be first assistant surgeon. “I am exceedingly loth to enter the service in any other capacity than that of surgeon,” he sniffed. His reasons were that four companies of troops from Washington County were going into the 66th and wanted him for their surgeon; he had “only consented to become an applicant” for them. He would be sacrificing a lucrative practice to enter service. Finally, the 66th was the only regiment he would deign to enter; he did not wish to go as an assistant and would not go as a second assistant

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<sup>5</sup> Historian Mark E. Neely Jr. highlights the vehemence of Union army resolutions targeting disloyalty at home and the state legislatures of Illinois and Indiana in the winter and spring of 1863 and pronounces them “downright chilling. I know of no similar threats from large numbers of organized military forces against civil power in all of United States history.” Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 42–45.

surgeon.<sup>6</sup> In the end, however, the politically prominent Field received the surgeon's appointment and Voyles swallowed his pride to take the assistant post. During this episode we see a perhaps overly proud man competing for place. In the end, poor health compelled Field to resign his post; he recommended Voyles, who possessed "remarkable energy and industry, having the entire confidence of the regiment."<sup>7</sup>

After Voyles himself resigned his surgeon's commission due to "failing health," he returned to his home in Washington County, Indiana.<sup>8</sup> There he witnessed the growth and open emergence of anti-war conspiracy in his neighborhood. In early August, Voyles wrote to state authorities to warn of the growing menace. He related that Horace Heffren—the Democratic state representative for the county, newspaper editor, attorney, and former Army officer who had resigned his commission to protest the Emancipation Proclamation—had publicly acknowledged in a recent speech that he was leader of a secret organization plotting violence. The organization was spread throughout Indiana and neighboring states. Heffren, Voyles reported, stated that opponents of the Democratic Party "were standing upon the verge of a Volcano, which will burst forth in a short time and blow all men to h-ll who stood on the abolition side of the struggle." Voyles further stated that Heffren's followers spoke openly of a "strike ... which will be simultaneous in all the North Western States that all R[ail]R[oad]s will be cut to delay the transportation of troops, the Telegraph cut," and more.<sup>9</sup> Knowing well that conspirators planned an uprising in Indiana, Governor Morton and military commanders immediately published Voyles's letter (omitting his name) in the chief Republican newspaper in the state in an effort to ward off violence and upheaval.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>David W. Voyles to Oliver P. Morton, July 29, August 13, and August 12, 1862; Voyles to William R. Holloway, August 21, 1862, all in 66th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regimental Correspondence, Adjutant General of Indiana Records, Indiana State Archives, Indiana Archives and Records Administration, Indianapolis (hereafter cited Indiana State Archives).

<sup>7</sup>N. Field to Morton, March 17, 1863, 66th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regimental Correspondence, Indiana State Archives.

<sup>8</sup>Voyles to Laz Noble, February 27, 1864, 66th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regimental Correspondence, Indiana State Archives.

<sup>9</sup>D. W. Vogle [sic] to Laz Noble, August 3, 1864, Case File of Harrison H. Dodd, NN-2716, box 1808, Record Group 153, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C. Voyles's report was copied and forwarded to the headquarters of the Northern Department, Columbus, Ohio. The copyist misspelled Voyles's name as "Vogle." See Towne, *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War*, 259.

<sup>10</sup>*Indianapolis Daily Journal*, August 5, 1864.

As a follow-up, Adjutant General of Indiana Laz Noble wrote to Voyles to alert him to the use of his letter. The physician replied on August 10 to say that his letter “was written with a view to the public good, and in whatever manner it can be best used to secure these ends is intirely [sic] satisfactory to me.” He added that he was “already threatened by these traitors with death, but I defy them.” He further stated that the local conspirators were “becoming very restless, whether from fear of punishment, or that the time for them to make the strike is near at hand ... I know not. But they are unusually active, and during the last week have become strictly silent.”<sup>11</sup> Within days, true to Heffren’s word, on August 16, an attempted uprising occurred in Indianapolis, but the plotters lost their nerve when troops suddenly arrived in the state capital and aborted the effort.<sup>12</sup>

In this episode, Voyles took on the persona of a government informant, providing useful information to government leaders to ward off a feared insurrection. This additional social self conformed closely to those he had already exhibited: soldier, patriot, anti-slavery advocate, and Republican Party partisan. His informant role played to an audience made up of the small circle of state and military officials who worked to counteract the significant menace of violent upheaval in the state. It was undoubtedly for such service to the government (and to the Republican Party) that in following years various Republican governments rewarded Voyles with support of his candidacies for elective office and several patronage appointments.

I commend Mary Marlatt’s edition of Voyles’s private letters to readers. The work adds to our knowledge of the individuals who served during the Civil War and opens up new vistas for understanding the past.

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<sup>11</sup> Voyles to Laz Noble, August 10, 1864, Adjutant General of Indiana Miscellaneous Civil War Correspondence, 024596, 1984653 27-T-1 6 of 8, Indiana State Archives.

<sup>12</sup> See Towne, *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War*, 261–63.