

Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe: A Case Study of Historical Myth-Making

Author(s): Alfred A. Cave

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), pp. 637-673

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#) on behalf of the [Society for Historians of the Early American Republic](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3124761>

Accessed: 27/08/2012 09:00

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Pennsylvania Press and Society for Historians of the Early American Republic are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Early Republic*.

THE SHAWNEE PROPHET, TECUMSEH, AND TIPPECANOE: A CASE STUDY OF HISTORICAL MYTH-MAKING

Alfred A. Cave

History has not been kind to the Shawnee Prophet Tenskwatawa. Admiring and sentimental whites transformed his elder brother, the warrior Tecumseh, into an icon within a few years after his death at the Battle of the Thames in 1813. By 1820, a writer in the *Indiana Sentinel* could declare “every school boy in the Union now knows that Tecumseh was a great man. He was truly great—and his greatness was his own, unassisted by science or the aid of education. As a statesman, a warrior, and a patriot, take him all in all, we shall not look on his like again.” But whites generally also shared the judgment of Benjamin Drake, whose 1841 biography of Tecumseh labeled the Prophet a “crafty imposter,” shrewd, cunning, superstitious, fanatical, cowardly and cruel, utterly lacking in those qualities of courage, grace and magnanimity that elevated his warrior brother to greatness. As writers throughout the nineteenth century and during much of the twentieth elaborated and embellished Drake’s portrayal of the Shawnee brothers, there emerged full blown a study in opposites: Noble Tecumseh, Vicious Tenskwatawa, the Good Indian and the Bad. It is indicative of the pervasiveness of Drake’s stereotypes that a Canadian playwright sixty years after the publication of Drake’s biography presented the spectacle of a sadistic scheming Prophet who in defiance of Tecumseh’s orders burned white prisoners at the stake and dreamed not only of the extermination of all whites but of deposing Tecumseh himself.¹

Alfred A. Cave, author of *Jacksonian Democracy and the Historians* (1964), *The Pequot War* (1996), and numerous articles on the ethnohistory of early America, is professor of history at the University of Toledo. An earlier version of this paper was read at a seminar at the MacNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in September 2000 and at a seminar of the Fellows of the Humanities Institute at the University

With few exceptions, historians and biographers found the Prophet deficient not only in character but also in ability, repeating a story popular among whites in the early nineteenth century that maintained that Tenskwatawa's teachings and revelations were not his own, but had been dictated to him by his gifted older brother. In Alan Eckert's popular and highly unreliable 1992 biography of Tecumseh, the Prophet is portrayed as an ineffectual and inept tool whose physical ugliness matched the deformity of his character and soul. Eckert's Prophet is a vicious, one-eyed drunk of "disturbingly malevolent appearance." "One of his ears," the novelist wrote, "had a lobe twice as long as the other, and when he smiled, his thin lips crooked up on the right but down on the left." Superstitious and cruel, he represented the worst in Native-American culture.²

Anthropologist David Hurst Thomas notes that "the twin imagery of Noble and Bloodthirsty Savage" in the past "led to a near-universal failure to appreciate the intricacies and textures of actual Native American life." With the rise of the discipline many have termed "ethnohistory" in the second half of the twentieth century, those categories have fallen into disrepute. Thus it is not surprising that the Eckert image of the Prophet was both dated and discredited long before he published his quasi-biography.

of Toledo in October 2000. The author thanks the participants in the seminars and the anonymous *Journal of the Early Republic* readers for their very helpful comments.

¹ *Indiana Sentinel* quoted in Glenn Tucker, *Tecumseh: Vision of Glory* (Indianapolis, 1956), 325; Benjamin Drake, *Life of Tecumseh and of His Brother the Prophet; with a Sketch of the Shawanoe Indians* (Cincinnati, 1841), 88, 228-34; Charles Mair, *Dreamland and Other Poems & Tecumseh: A Drama* (1901; rep., Toronto, 1974). For another very harsh stage portrayal of Tenskwatawa, see George Jones, *Tecumseh, and the Prophet of the West: An Historical Israel-Indian Tragedy in Five Acts* (New York, 1844). A typical example of the overall prevalence of Drake's judgment of Tenskwatawa is found in a later nineteenth-century biography of Tecumseh and the Prophet, which declared the latter a man "who was neither courageous, truthful or above cruelty." Edward Eggleston and Lillie Eggleston Seeyle, *Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet: Including Sketches of George Rogers Clark, Simon Kenton, William Henry Harrison, Cornstalk, Blackhoof, Bluejacket, the Shawnee Logan, and Others Famous in the Frontier Wars of Tecumseh's Time* (New York, 1878), 113. Drake's research notes are preserved in the Tecumseh Papers/Draper Manuscripts, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. A microfilm edition of those papers is available. They reveal Draper's excessive reliance on the recollections and judgments of Anthony Shane and his wife. For an overview of the treatment of Tecumseh in American historiography, see Terry Rugley, "Savage and Statesman: Changing Historical Interpretations of Tecumseh," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 85 (Dec. 1989), 289-311. On the Prophet, Rachel Buff, "Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa: Myth, Historiography and Popular Memory," *Historical Reflections: Reflexions Historiques*, 21 (Summer 1995), 277-99, is suggestive but far from complete.

² Alan Eckert, *A Sorrow in Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh* (New York, 1992), 420, 426.

The first historian to sort fact from fabrication and restore the Prophet to a central role in the leadership of the pan-Indian movement was Herbert C. Goltz in two theses written in 1966 and 1974. Unfortunately, neither were published. R. David Edmunds's *The Shawnee Prophet* (1983) was far more influential. Edmunds demonstrated that "it was Tenskwatawa, not Tecumseh, who provided the basis for Indian resistance" through the power of his preaching. Following Edmunds's lead, other revisionists, newly sensitive to the spiritual roots of insurgency, have agreed that the Prophet's vision and eloquence inspired and defined the movement. The Prophet, they conclude, was its founder and first leader. His presumed subordination to Tecumseh reflected earlier writers' lack of understanding of the nature of the pan-Indian uprisings of the early nineteenth century.³

Curiously, with a single exception, the newer accounts of the role of the Shawnee Prophet have left one major part of the old story untouched: Tenskwatawa's presumed disgrace at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. Both textbooks and specialized histories still generally maintain that the Prophet's blundering and cowardice in that engagement cost him the respect of his followers and the leadership of the movement, which was presumably then taken over by Tecumseh who transformed it from a religious crusade into a pragmatic political alliance. The pervasiveness of this view can best be appreciated by considering this passage in Edmunds's biography of the Prophet:

The battle of Tippecanoe was less an American victory than a personal defeat for Tenskwatawa. . . . His medicine was broken. No longer would he play a major role in the struggle against the Long Knives. . . . Now Tecumseh would completely dominate the Indian resistance movement. In the years ahead, the Prophet would become an outcast, a fallen pontiff clinging to his brother's coattails.

³ David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology, and the Battle for Native American Identity* (New York, 2000), 10; Herbert Goltz, "Tecumseh, The Man and the Myth" (M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1966); "Tecumseh, the Prophet and the Rise of the Northwestern Indian Confederation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1974); R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, NE, 1983), 142. For examples of the new emphasis on the Prophet's leadership, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York, 1991), 469-516; Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore, 1995), 122-46; and John Sugden, *Tecumseh* (New York, 1998). Sugden's biography is the most comprehensive and reliable work on Tecumseh and the Prophet published to date.

Other revisionist historians also echo that long-standing judgment. A recent, well regarded popular biography of Tecumseh claims that, after the battle of Tippecanoe, the Prophet “was in effect defrocked and demoted . . . never again accepted as a holy man. . . . Within a year the religion of the Shawnee Prophet had disappeared.” Even John Sugden, whose biography of Tecumseh is fairly sympathetic to the Prophet, repeated the old but as we shall see highly questionable claim that Tecumseh, angered by Tenskwatawa’s disregard of his instructions not to begin a war with the Americans, threatened to kill him after the defeat at Tippecanoe. Only Gregory Dowd, in an article published in 1992, has ventured to suggest that Tippecanoe’s effect on the Prophet’s career has been misunderstood.⁴

This essay re-examines the Prophet’s role at Tippecanoe and the impact of that episode on his leadership. It seeks to demonstrate that Dowd’s reservations are well founded. Historians generally have been misled by the testimony of highly biased commentators, both white and Indian, who were either misled themselves or who sought to deceive. The evidence does not support the extreme characterizations of Tenskwatawa’s ineptness that still pervade the literature. A close reading of the sources combined with consideration of the subsequent course of events indicates that Tippecanoe was not decisive, that Prophetstown was soon rebuilt, and that though the Prophet played a less visible role thereafter, he remained the spiritual head of the community and served as its secular leader during Tecumseh’s absences. Although the events at Tippecanoe were disturbing, they did not in fact result in the reduction of the Prophet to a pathetic figure “clinging to his brother’s coattails.”

To place the Battle of Tippecanoe and its consequences in proper perspective, we must review the origins of the pan-Indian insurgency of 1811-13. Its deepest roots lie in the long struggle against white expansionism that found spiritual expression in the teachings of the Delaware Prophets of the mid-eighteenth century. It was inspired by the armed resistance led by Pontiac and other militants in 1763, and by the leaders of the Northern Confederacy in the 1790’s. In its more immediate

⁴ Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 116. Edmunds echoes Drake, who wrote: “With the battle of Tippecanoe, the Prophet lost his popularity and power among the Indians. His magic was broken, and the mysterious charm by means of which he had for years, played upon the superstitious minds of this wild people, scattered through a vast extent of country, was dissipated forever.” *Life of Tecumseh*, 155. The other citations in this paragraph are to Bill Gilbert, *God Gave Us This Country: Tekamthe and the First American Civil War* (New York, 1989), 372; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 357-58; and Gregory E. Dowd, “Thinking and Believing: Nativism and Unity in the Ages of Pontiac and Tecumseh,” *American Indian Quarterly*, 26 (Summer 1992), 322-27.

context, it represented a rejection of the policy of accommodation with the United States and of limited cultural assimilation (*i.e.*, acceptance of Euro-American agricultural methods and technology) followed by some village chiefs, including the Shawnee leader Black Hoof, after the defeat at Fallen Timbers. Most immediately, the new movement was born out of an aspiring holy man's visionary experience. In the spring of 1805, a thirty-year-old Shawnee named Lalawethika ("the rattle"), an unattractive, one-eyed ne'er-do-well hitherto scorned as a braggart, drunkard, womanizer, and coward, fell into a stupor so profound that his family, believing him to be dead, began preparing his body for burial. But Lalawethika suddenly awakened, crying that he had been in the presence of the Master of Life, creator of the universe, who had given him a tour of heaven and hell. He had witnessed the torments of hell, where the wicked were repeatedly burned to ashes in houses of fire. The Master of Life, he claimed, had called upon him to show Indians the road to salvation. He now possessed not only the key to personal salvation in the afterlife but also a formula for Native-American communal renewal.⁵

Echoing earlier revitalization prophets such as Neolin and Wangomand, Lalawethika declared that Indians had been corrupted by their contact with whites and for that reason had been severely punished by the Great Spirit. Whites, he declared, were not the children of the Creator but the spawn of a malevolent Great Serpent, who sought to undo the good work of the True Creator and plotted the killing of all "the real people." The Prophet demanded that Indians minimize their contacts with whites. Those married to Euro-Americans must immediately divorce their spouses. Mixed race children were to be sent to their white relatives. Some limited trade with French and English merchants could continue for a short time, but there must be no commercial dealings with Americans. As soon as possible, Native Americans must cease eating food, wearing clothes, or keeping domestic animals of Euro-American origin. Use of alcohol in particular was to be strictly forbidden, for the Great Spirit had a special loathing of drunkards. Lalawethika called for the restoration of the traditional communal economy. He decreed that "no Indian in the future was to offer

⁵ There are two accounts of Lalawethika's vision available to us. One comes from Shakers who visited the Prophet's community in Ohio in 1806 and is found in J. P. MacLean, "Shaker Mission to the Shawnee Indians," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society Publications*, 11 (June 1903), 216-29. The other is implicit in the Prophet's description of hell in his interview with Charles G. Trowbridge in 1824. See Vernon Kinietz and Erminie Voegelin, eds., *Shawnese Traditions: C.C. Trowbridge's Account: Occasional Contributions from the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor, 1939), 41-42.

skins or anything else for sale," but instead should "exchange them for such articles as they want." They were to repudiate all profit-seeking enterprises, cease emulating the economic individualism of the invader, and minimize their commerce with whites. They must also "always support the aged and the infirm." Once they did those things, the Great Spirit would restore the world that had been lost and make it possible "by means of bows and arrows . . . [to] hunt and kill game as in former days, and live independent of all white people." Moreover, as Indians regained the favor of the Great Spirit, the Americans would be stripped of their power through miraculous means and removed from the continent.⁶

The communal deliverance of Indians, the Prophet warned, required more than separation from Euro-Americans. In common with other revitalization prophets, Lalawitheka sought to identify and excise those traditional practices that offended the spirits that sustain human life. Perhaps influenced by Christian missionaries, he embraced a puritanical moral code and condemned polygamy and premarital sex, both previously condoned in Shawnee custom. He ordered all single men to marry. He demanded that wives obey their husbands and advocated the beating of lazy and recalcitrant wives. Later, in his reorganization of Shawnee communal life at Prophetstown, he eliminated the traditional Shawnee women's council that had shared power with male leaders.⁷

⁶ Kinitz and Voegelin, eds., *Shawnese Traditions*, 3; Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, Dec. 23, 1812, in Emma B. Blair, ed., *Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley* (2 vols., Cleveland, 1912), 2:274-78; Anthony Shane Interview, Tecumseh Papers, 12YY:3-13. For similar doctrines held by the Prophet's followers in the northern Great Lakes region, see Edward Augustus Kendall, *Travels through the Northern Parts of the United States in the Years 1807 and 1808* (New York, 1809), 287. The idea of a separate creation of whites is found in the teachings of several eighteenth-century Native-American revitalization prophets. See Dowd, *Spirited Resistance*, 21, 30, 41-44, 141-42, 167, 200.

⁷ As to possible Christian influences on Tenskwatawa, several Shakers had visited the future Prophet's village shortly before his first vision. A Moravian mission was located near a neighboring Delaware village. The Prophet's efforts to reduce the role of women is discussed in Timothy Willig, "Prophetstown on the Wabash: The Native Spiritual Defense of the Old Northwest," *Michigan Historical Review*, 23 (Fall 1997), 138-39. Tenskwatawa may not have been fully successful in this area. Joseph Barron, a French visitor to Prophetstown, claimed that "the wife of the Prophet, under the royal designation of 'Queen' enjoyed an influence and power behind the throne greater than the throne itself . . . she possesses an influence over the female portion of the tribe not less potent than her husband's—an influence felt, and often disastrously felt, in the councils of the nation—particularly where the subjects of wrong and injury to the white race were matters of deliberation." Barron Interview, Tecumseh Papers, 3YY:110. Judge John Law, an early historian of Indiana, also believed that the Prophet was controlled by his wife and that the women retained great power. See John Law, *The Colonial History of Vincennes* (Vincennes,

The Prophet's most radical innovations were religious. Denouncing much traditional shamanic practice as diabolical, he sought to proscribe both the medicine dance and the use of medicine bags. He demanded that the latter be destroyed. He called for the exposure and punishment of witches, a demand that would impel him to become involved in two brief, politically divisive, and mostly unsuccessful witch-hunts among the Delawares and Wyandots early in his career. In a more positive vein, the Prophet understood the importance of ritual. In place of the traditional practices he condemned, he ordained new observances, including morning and evening prayers to the Creator, a new sacred dance, public confession of sins, and a use of sacred beads vaguely resembling the Catholic rosary in a ceremony called "shaking hands with the Prophet." In common with earlier revitalization leaders, Lalewithika offered his adherents a new syncretic religion that borrowed some Christian ideas alien to Shawnee tradition, among them belief in an omnipresent and omnipotent creator, in heaven and hell, in sexual repression, and perhaps in patriarchy. But he also affirmed older ideas about access to sacred power, as his new ritual practices took the place of those that had failed of late to secure the well-being of the people. His proscription of contact with objects and persons of Euro-American origin resonated with the customary avoidance of acts that gave offense to powerful spirit-beings. His appearance and behavior when in communion with the spirit, although described by a white observer as "truly hideous," were also profoundly meaningful to traditionalists. Stephen Ruddell, a white captive raised among the Shawnees, recalled that the Prophet, clad in wildcat skins, wearing the shoulder blades of a deer, would enter "a darkened wigwam" and "would remain in his incantations whole days and whole nights without eating, drinking or sleeping . . . his powers of endurance when thus engaged were really remarkable." In recognition of the power of his visions and of his message, his followers gave "the Rattle" a new name: Tenskwatawa, "the open door that leads us to heaven."⁸

IN, 1858), 100-01. But Stephen Ruddell's son testified that his father, who knew both Tecumseh and the Prophet, had given no indication that the Prophet's wife had any particular influence. J. M. Ruddell Statement, Tecumseh Papers, 3YY:115. Charles Tucker, described as "an aged & intelligent Shawnee Chief," also reported to Draper, "I doubt that she was a woman of much influence." Charles Tucker to Lyman Draper, nd, Tecumseh Papers, 3YY:12. The evidence is thus inconclusive. It seems reasonable to assume that the Prophet endeavored to reduce the role of women but was not totally successful.

⁸ Alfred A. Cave, "The Failure of the Shawnee Prophet's Witch-Hunt," *Ethnohistory*, 42 (Summer 1995), 445-75; Forsyth, in Blair, *Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley*, 2: 274-78; John Tanner, *The Falcon: The Narratives and Adventures of John Tanner* (1830,

The Prophet's movement, as it evolved from 1806 onward, had three major thrusts: the revitalization of Native-American communal life everywhere through the elimination of practices offensive to the Great Spirit and the institution of new rituals to win his support; the establishment of a new, separatist community free of corruption; and finally the forging of a pan-Indian alliance to protect Indian lands from further white encroachments.

Shortly after his first vision, the Prophet, aided by his elder brother Tecumseh, challenged the leadership of the accommodationist Shawnee chief Black Hoof at Wapakoneta, Ohio. Their bid for power failed. Accompanied by a handful of dissident Shawnees, the brothers then established a new community at Greenville, on the edge of a prairie three miles from the ruins of Mad Anthony Wayne's old fort. Greenville in 1806 and 1807 was a vital spiritual center, attracting Native Americans from throughout the Northwest. The Prophet's village was crowded with visiting Kickapoos, Potawatomis, Ottawas, Chippewas, Sacs, Wyandots, Delawares, and Miamis, as well as Shawnees disaffected with the accommodationist policies at Wapakoneta. As Edmunds notes, the Prophet "kept them in a state of religious exhilaration. On almost every evening they assembled in the council house to listen to the Prophet's new revelation and to dance and sing in celebration of their deliverance."⁹

The reactions of white Ohioans to the Prophet's sacred community were mixed. When non-Indians visited Greenville, the Prophet's spokesmen downplayed or concealed the anti-American aspects of his message. Both Quaker and Shaker representatives who visited Greenville were favorably impressed by the Prophet's sincerity, moral rectitude, and peaceful intentions. The Shakers declared that at Greenville, "God in very deed was mightily at work among the Indians." However, white inhabitants living nearby were alarmed by the constant processions of unfamiliar Indians bound for Greenville. Rumors soon circulated that the Prophet's followers were murdering white settlers and that the Prophet himself was a British agent. Although those rumors were without foundation, they were encouraged by leaders of the rival Shawnee village at Wapakoneta, who feared the Prophet's influence with dissident Shawnees and resented his efforts to gain access to American annuity payments. The federal Indian agent at Fort Wayne, William Wells, and the territorial governor of Indiana,

rep., New York, 1994), 146; J. M. Ruddell to Lyman Draper, Nov. 15, 1884, Tecumseh Papers, 8YY:43; Shane Interview, Tecumseh Papers, 12YY:3-21.

⁹ Shane Interview, Tecumseh Papers, 12YY:19-20; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 127-32; Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 54.

William Henry Harrison, both were persuaded that the Prophet was plotting war. Understanding the need for good relations with the United States, the Prophet's spokesmen since the early days at Greenville had labored to persuade American officials of their peaceful intent. The Prophet on several occasions also wrote to Harrison urging him not to listen to rumors. But the rumors persisted. In the summer of 1807, some eighty white settlers in Ohio petitioned agent Wells for the dispersal of the Prophet's community. Although the Prophet and other Greenville leaders indignantly denied the charges leveled against them, they soon realized that their position in Ohio was untenable.¹⁰

Early in 1808, Tenskwatawa (as the Prophet now was called), Tecumseh, and their followers accepted the invitation of the Potawatomi chief and shaman Main Poc to resettle in Indiana at the junction of the Wabash and Tippecanoe Rivers. The new community was known to whites as Prophetstown. Of its prophet, one Euro-American observer later recalled that "the Indians flocked to him from every quarter; there was no name that carried such weight as his. They never ceased talking about his power, or expatiating on the miracles which he has wrought." So many Indians gathered at Prophetstown that summer that the new community soon faced a severe food shortage. In August, Tenskwatawa and several hundred of his followers called on Governor Harrison at Vincennes to ask for help. Harrison on that occasion was favorably impressed by the Prophet, whom he described as "rather possessed of considerable talents. . . . The art with which he manages the Indians is really astounding." The governor concluded that contrary to earlier reports, Tenskwatawa might well be a

¹⁰ McClean, "Shaker Mission to the Shawnee Indians," 215-29; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 54-55; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 155; William Wells to William Henry Harrison, Aug. 20, 1807; Harrison to the Shawnees, [Aug.] 1807; The Prophet to Harrison, [Aug.] 1807, June 4, Aug. [1], 1808, in Logan Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1922), 1:239-43; 249-51; 292, 299. See Douglas E. Clanin, ed., "The Papers of William Henry Harrison, 1800-1815" (microfilm, 10 reels, Indianapolis, 1999), reel 2:900-03, 916-20, 290; 3:173; 224-26. For specialists interested in the early years of Harrison's career, the Esarey edition of Harrison's papers has been supplanted by the more comprehensive work of Douglas E. Clanin and associates, issued on microfilm by the Indiana Historical Society in 1999. For the convenience of the general reader, I have cited the more accessible Esarey edition wherever possible, adding in brackets the location of the document in question in the Clanin microfilm edition. The Clanin references are to the complete text. A number of Harrison letters, some of them relevant to this study, were not included in the Esarey materials. A number of letters and other documents, not written by or to Harrison but also of importance to this inquiry, are not found in the Clanin microfilms but are available in the Esarey collection. Both collections must therefore be consulted by students of Tecumseh and the Prophet.

peaceful reformer and, potentially, both a good influence on his people and a valuable ally. He therefore rejected Wells's advice to let the Prophet's followers starve and provided some aid. In response to a visit from Tecumseh, the British at Fort Malden also provided some help. It was far from adequate. Hundreds of Indians from many nations succumbed to famine or disease at Prophetstown in the hard winter of 1808-09. The Ottawas and Chippewas were particularly hard hit. Many lost their confidence in the Prophet, believing him to be either a charlatan or a witch.¹¹

Despite the Prophet's efforts to assure American officials of his pacifism, stories about his malevolent intentions persisted. Harrison on several occasions reported to Washington that visitors to Prophetstown had predicted "the Prophet will attack our settlements." After meeting with Tenskwatawa early in the summer of 1809, he reversed his earlier favorable judgment of his character, informing the secretary of war that "I must confess that my suspicions of his guilt have been rather strengthened than diminished in every interview I have had with him since his arrival." Rumors that the Prophet and his warriors were planning to massacre all whites on the frontier were rampant over the next two years and were instrumental in Harrison's justification of his decision in 1811 to send an armed force against Prophetstown.¹²

Those rumors were false. The Shawnee brothers did not intend to attack the white settlements already established in Indiana and elsewhere in the West. In the Prophet's vision, the United States would disappear when the Great Spirit, moved by Indian reformation, rolled up the earth and restored the world. Until then, Indians were to avoid contamination by whites but remain at peace. The rumors that warned of the Prophet's malevolent intentions reflected, in part, confusion over his role in the war plans of some of the more militant Winnebagos and Sacs who lived west of the Mississippi. These Indians, who had signed no treaties with the United

¹¹ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *History of the Indian Tribes of the United States: Their Present Condition and Prospects and a Sketch of their Ancient Status* (Philadelphia, 1857), 35; John Connor to William Henry Harrison, Sept. 7, 1808, in Clanin, ed., *Harrison Papers*, reel 3:235-36; Harrison to Secretary of War, Sept. 1, 1808; Nov. 9, 1808, July 14, 1809, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:302, 321-22, 355-56; [Clanin, reel 3:228-29, 303, 446-56]; Wells to Harrison, Apr. 8, 1809, *ibid.*, 1:337-38; [Clanin, reel 3:380-82]; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 76-77, 82; Willig "Prophetstown on the Wabash," 141-42.

¹² Harrison to Secretary of War, Apr. 18, Apr. 26, May 3, July 5, 1809, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:340, 343, 345; 349 [Clanin, reel 3: 394-97, 399-400, 409-10, 446]; Hull to Secretary of War, June 16, 1809; *ibid.*, 1:348. For typical examples of rumors of an impending Indian attack, see Harrison to Eustis, May 15, 1810, *ibid.*, 1:420-22 [Clanin, reel 4:15-19]; and Hull to Secretary of War, June 16, 1809, *ibid.*, 1:348.

States, were enraged by the establishment of Fort Madison on the Mississippi's west bank in 1808, for they feared it presaged American Occupation. Believing that "the land devil has his mouth open again," they considered a preemptive attack on the American fort and accordingly sent representatives to ask aid from Prophetstown in April 1809. Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa advised them not to initiate hostilities. The Prophet assured Harrison that he had no part in "the late combination to attack our settlements," but had "prevailed upon . . . the Tribes on the Mississippi and Illinois River . . . to relinquish their intentions."¹³

But though the Shawnee brothers still hoped for peaceful coexistence with the United States, by the time of the founding of Prophetstown they had developed a political agenda that envisioned the possible use of force to prevent further losses of Indian land. In his reply to Little Turtle and the Miamis who were seeking to bar him from settling on the Wabash in 1808, Tenskwatawa explained that under the guidance of the Great Spirit he would create a new "Boundary Line between the Indians and white people" defended by his warriors. To secure that boundary, the brothers declared that only the Indian confederacy they were organizing had the right to sell land. They threatened to put to death any Indian who without their permission signed a paper granting more land to whites. The land, they declared, belonged to all Indians and could not be sold by individual village chiefs. In explaining Prophetstown's objectives to Francis Gore, the lieutenant governor of Upper Canada, Tecumseh who served as his brother's chief diplomatic representative, declared that they hoped to "collect the different nations" on lands not yet occupied by the Americans "in order to preserve their country from all encroachments." They did not intend "to take part in the quarrels of white people" but "if the Americans encroach upon them they are resolved to strike."¹⁴

Despite Tecumseh's efforts to win recognition of Prophetstown as the capital of an all-encompassing Indian confederation committed to the preservation of existing boundaries, the village chiefs of the various nations in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and elsewhere generally ignored the Prophet's claims. The Prophet and his brother failed to block further white encroachments on Indian land. Vigorously enforcing a federal Indian policy that called for securing additional Indian lands in exchange for funds to

¹³ Harrison to William Eustis, July 5, 1809, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:349 [Clanin, reel 3:446]; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 175-77.

¹⁴ Wells to Dearborn, Apr. 22, 1808, in Clarence E. Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States* (27 vols., Washington, DC, 1934-49), 7:558-60; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 67-93.

promote their “civilization,” agents of the federal government in 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1807 had already negotiated treaties amending the 1795 settlement at Greenville. Those treaties cost the Indian nations of the Northwest hundreds of square miles in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. Despite Tecumseh’s warning that Indian land belonged to all Indians and could not be sold by individual chiefs, Miami, Delaware, and Potawatomi representatives, on September 30, 1809, at Fort Wayne, in exchange for some trade goods and increases in their annuities, ceded over three million more acres in Indiana and Illinois.¹⁵

The Treaty of Fort Wayne marked a crucial turning point for the Shawnee brothers. They responded by threatening to execute Indian chiefs who agreed to the new land cession. Tecumseh now began a series of travels in search of new allies that would carry him from the Great Lakes to the southern Gulf coast. His appeal found its warmest reception in the West, among nations not yet subject to white occupation. Prophetstown’s response to the treaty alarmed the leaders of Indiana’s territorial government. Utilizing two French traders as spies at Prophetstown, Governor Harrison determined that the opposition of the Prophet and his followers to further American expansion was deep and intractable. Although he discounted the more extreme rumors and doubted that the Prophet was really strong enough to attack Vincennes, Harrison was disturbed by the possibility that he would harass those who tried to occupy the newly ceded land in Indiana. In a ten-day meeting with Tecumseh and a number of other warriors committed to the Prophet’s cause at Vincennes in August 1810, the governor sought to persuade him to accept the Fort Wayne land cessions. Tecumseh remained adamant, telling Harrison: “You have taken our land from us and I do not see how we can remain at peace with you if you continue to do so.” After the conference’s adjournment, Tecumseh and Harrison met privately. Tecumseh, seeking to avert war, told the governor that the Prophet did not trust the British and would prefer to work out an accommodation with the United States. But he warned that no peace with the Americans would be possible if the provisions of the Fort Wayne Treaty were put into effect. Harrison promised to raise the matter with the president, but doubted that the treaty could now be set aside.¹⁶

¹⁵ Teresea M. Baer, “Hero and Villain: William Henry Harrison and the Indian Land Treaties,” *Traces*, 11 (Fall 1999), 12-19,23.

¹⁶ Harrison to Secretary of War, Aug. 22, 1810, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Papers*, 1:459-69 [Clanin, reel 4:68-77]; Moses Dawson, *Historical Narrative of the Civil and Military Services of Major General William Henry Harrison* (Cincinnati, 1824), 158-59.

Harrison reported to the secretary of war that the Prophet and Tecumseh were determined “not to permit the lands lately purchased to be surveyed.” In his annual address to the territorial legislature in November, 1810, the governor complained that the Prophet was unjustly stirring up “disaffection” against the Treaty of Fort Wayne. Harrison denied that the Indians had any grounds for complaint, given the government’s “liberality and its benevolence.” The future of Indiana, the governor declared, required the elimination of Prophetstown. Though the Prophet had many Indian enemies and would therefore probably never be able “to form a Confederacy strong enough to commence hostilities,” he did pose an obstacle to economic growth. “As long . . . as he continues in his present position, it may be in his power to raise those alarms which have so mischievous an effect in retarding the population of our country.”¹⁷

In the late spring of 1811 Harrison decided to destroy Prophetstown. In his request for authorization for a preemptive strike, he informed the secretary of war that he had been warned by numerous informants that the Prophet intended to march on Vincennes and demand abrogation of the Treaty of Fort Wayne as the price of peace. To protect that land cession, Harrison asked for military reinforcements. In July he protested that “unless some decisive and energetic measure is adopted to break up the combination formed by the Prophet we shall soon have every Indian tribe in this quarter allied against us.” He complained that some whites (whom he did not name) had encouraged the Prophet’s resistance by telling him that the United States would give up the contested land “rather than go to war with the Indians.” To his distress, the War Department instructed him to negotiate in the hope of averting war. A meeting between Harrison and Tecumseh that summer was unproductive, as neither would budge on the land cession issue. Dismissing Tecumseh’s claim that the alliance he sought to build was peaceful and defensive, Harrison warned that the Shawnee diplomat’s trip to the South, begun soon after the conference, had as its “object . . . to excite the southern Indians to war against us.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Harrison to Secretary of War, Oct. 17, 1810, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:480-81 [Clanin, reel 4:241-43]; Annual Message, Nov. 12, 1810, *ibid.*, 1:487-89, 492-93 [Clanin, reel 4:259-75].

¹⁸ Harrison to Secretary of War, June 19, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, July 10, 1811; Secretary of War to Harrison, July 20, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, Aug. 6, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, Aug. 7, 1811, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:518, 534, 537, 542-46, 548 [Clanin, reel 4:574-77, 629-37, 655-56, 671-79, 684-93]. Despite his efforts in correspondence with the War Department to blame Tecumseh, the Prophet, and the British for frontier violence, Harrison understood that the root of the problem was white lawlessness. In 1807 he advised the territorial legislature that he would

In his instructions to Harrison that summer, Secretary of War William Eustis had advised that President Madison expected the governor to avoid the use of force if at all possible, but did not rule out action against “the banditti under the prophet” if that were to prove “absolutely necessary.” Harrison made the most of that opening. On August 13, he informed the secretary that, although he would do everything reasonable to comply with earlier orders that he maintain peace with the Indians, he and his fellow western governors (Ninian Edwards of Illinois and Benjamin Howard of Missouri) were agreed “on the necessity of breaking up the Prophet’s establishment on the Wabash . . . by an exhibition of force.” On August 22, the secretary of war authorized the assembling of a force of regular army and militia for use in occupying and protecting the contested land cession of 1809. Several weeks later, the secretary informed Harrison that though the Prophet’s community should be dispersed peacefully if possible, force should indeed be used in the event of resistance. In justification of his decision to attack Prophetstown, Harrison maintained that the Prophet had already initiated hostilities. Beginning the previous spring, a series of Indian raids on the Illinois frontier, most carried out by warriors loyal to the Potawatomi chief Main Poc, had intensified American fears of a general Indian war orchestrated from Prophetstown. Governor Edwards in July had written from Illinois Territory to declare peace “totally out of the question; we need not expect it until the Prophet’s party is dispersed.”¹⁹

The governors were mistaken. The Prophet and Tecumseh were not responsible for those attacks on whites. In fact, the Shawnee brothers had urged restraint, hoping for time to build a larger coalition able to negotiate

have no problem coping with foreign agitators if the courts would uphold the laws protecting Indians. He deplored the fact that they had not yet convicted “even one of the many people who have committed murder on their people.” Message to the Legislature, Aug. 17, 1807, *ibid.*, 1:233-34 [Clanin, reel 2:877-89]. A year earlier, he had called on the legislators “to lose no opportunity of inculcating, among your constituents, an abhorrence of that unchristian and detestable doctrine which would make a distinction of guilt between the murder of a white man and an Indian.” Message to Legislature, Nov. 3, 1806, *ibid.*, 1:199-200 [Clanin, reel 2:654-62].

¹⁹ Secretary of War to Harrison, July 20, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, Aug. 13, 1811, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:536-37, 554 [Clanin, reel 4:655-56, 713-17]; Secretary of War to Harrison, Aug. 22, 1811; Secretary of War to Harrison, Sept. 18, 1811 in Clanin, ed., *Harrison Papers*, reel 4:735-36, 794-96; Harrison to Secretary of War, Apr. 23, June 6, June 19, 1811, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:506-10, 512-19 [Clanin, reel 4:484-93, 538-48, 574-77]; J. Lalime to William Clark, May 26, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:511; Harrison to Clark, June 19, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:519-21 [Clanin, reel 4:570-73]; Edwards to Secretary of War, July 6, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:530. See also Clark to Secretary of War, July 3, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:528-29.

from strength or to win a war. Indian agent John Johnson after conferring with a number of Shawnee, Wyandot, and Seneca Indians at a conference at Piqua, Ohio, wrote to a local newspaper on August 27 to report that the problem was limited to Potawatomis in the Illinois country. Johnson assured his readers that none of the other Indian groups posed even the “smallest danger “to “frontier inhabitants.” But Harrison insisted that the Prophet was planning to attack and must therefore be removed through a preemptive military strike. He dismissed as “absolutely false” reports that the Potawatomi chief Main Poc, not Tenskwatawa, was responsible for the attacks on whites in Illinois, assuring the secretary of war that “the truth is they were directed by the Prophet for the purpose of forcing the Indians of the Illinois River to unite with him. He has determined to commit to the flames the first of our men he can take in person.” The War Department, lacking first-hand knowledge of the situation, was not in any position to argue with the governors.²⁰

Believing that the Prophet lacked Tecumseh’s skills as a leader, Harrison planned to take advantage of the latter’s long absence on his southern recruitment mission in the fall of 1811 and march on Prophetstown. He had earlier advised his superiors “nothing but the great talents of Tecumseh could keep together the heterogeneous mass which comprises the Prophet’s force.” In order to disrupt that force, Harrison first put pressure on the Prophet’s non-Shawnee followers, demanding that they leave Prophetstown and return to their home villages. Warning that he would “not suffer any more strange Indians to settle on the Wabash,” he ordered all tribes “who have any warriors with the Prophet to withdraw them immediately.” Those who remained he threatened with “destruction.” He demanded that the Miamis evict Tenskwatawa from their lands. Meeting with their chiefs, he enjoined them not to be “afraid to say this. You shall be supported by my warriors. My warriors are getting ready and if it is necessary you shall see an army of them at your backs more numerous than the leaves of the trees.”²¹

In a series of communications with Prophetstown in the late summer and early fall of 1811, Harrison had charged the Prophet with responsibility for the murder of whites on the Illinois frontier. He demanded that the

²⁰ John Johnson to Editor of *Liberty Hall*, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:559-60; Harrison to Secretary of War, June 25, July 3, July 10, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, Oct., 28, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:524-28, 532-35, 537 [Clanin, reel 4:586-90, 604-09, 629-37, 5:19-22].

²¹ Harrison to Secretary of War, June 25, 1811, William Henry Harrison to the Miami, Eel River, and Wea Tribes of Indians, Sept. 11, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:525, 576-82 [Clanin, reel 4:586-990, 731-34, 956-69].

Prophet surrender to white justice those responsible, several of whom, the governor declared, were known to be in residence at Prophetstown. Harrison also repeated his demand that all of the residents who were not Shawnees be expelled from Prophetstown. He complained that the Prophetstown Indians were stealing horses and demanded their return. Tenskwatawa offered to restore the horses but equivocated on other matters.²²

Dissatisfied with the Prophet's responses, and persuaded that any lack of firmness in dealing with his insubordination would embolden other, presently uncommitted Indians to join in resisting land cessions, Harrison mustered his forces and marched on Prophetstown. Tenskwatawa's response to Harrison's aggression does not corroborate the commonplace image in the historical literature of the Prophet as blundering, inept fool unfit to lead. He first attempted to avert an attack through negotiations, sending a delegation of respected chiefs to Vincennes. His negotiators repeated the earlier promise to return the stolen horses and offered assurances that the Prophet would undertake a search to locate Indians guilty of killing settlers. Harrison rejected that overture, later explaining to Washington that he had advised the chiefs that the evidence he had of the Prophet's "designs against us" was so damning that nothing less than the immediate surrender of the "murderers" would dissuade him from attacking and destroying Prophetstown.²³

Tenskwatawa then issued a call for the reinforcement of Prophetstown. Although most of the local Delawares, Miamis, and Weas remained neutral, several hundred Wyandots, Pottawatomis, Penkeshaws, and Kickapoos rallied to his defense. Harrison's efforts to turn all of the tribes of the region against the Prophet had failed. As preparations for the defense of the Prophet's sanctuary proceeded, his warriors carefully tracked, and occasionally harassed, Harrison's forces. As the invading army drew near to Prophetstown, Tenskwatawa sent a delegation to Harrison with an offer to negotiate. Over the objections of some of his officers, who recommended an immediate attack, Harrison scheduled a conference for the next day. His army encamped about a mile from Prophetstown.²⁴

²² Harrison to Secretary of War, Aug. 7, 1811, Aug. 13, 1811, Sept. 3, 1811, Sept. 17, 1811, Sept. 25, 1811, Oct. 18, 1811, Oct. 29, 1811, Nov. 2, 1811; *ibid.*, 1:548-51, 554-55, 563-64, 557-75, 589-92, 599-603, 604-07 [Clanin, reel 4:684-92, 720-21, 784-93, 86-21, 5:19-28]; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 99-104.

²³ Harrison to Secretary of War, Sept. 25, 1811, in Esarey, eds., *Messages and Letters*, 1:589-92 [Clanin, reel 4:816-21].

²⁴ Harrison to Secretary of War, Nov. 18, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:618-30 [Clanin, reel 5:47-67].

Prior to his departure, Tecumseh had advised the Prophet to avoid hostilities. But Harrison's demands were extreme and provocative. By early fall, the Prophet understood that Harrison intended to force him to disband the sacred community. If he accepted Harrison's terms, which required banning non-Shawnees from his village, the Prophet's mission would be at an end. If we accept the premise that the Prophet was a believer in his own message, and not as his enemies charged a charlatan, his resistance was neither irrational nor irresponsible. But, contrary to the impression given in most of the historical literature, we do not really know just what action the Prophet actually authorized on the eve of the battle. The deliberations within Prophetstown during the hours immediately before Tippecanoe are obscure. One version, generally accepted by historians, holds that, rather than meeting with the Americans as he had promised on November 7, Tenskwatawa decided to strike the intruders before dawn at their encampment about a mile from Prophetstown. As the Prophet's biographer David Edmunds and others have told the story, Tenskwatawa, appearing before his warriors wearing a necklace of deer hooves, holding in his hands strings of sacred beans, revealed that the Master of Life had declared that Harrison must die. They were to attack before sunrise, for in the dark their enemies would be blinded and stupefied by the Prophet's medicine, which would also provide brilliant light to guide the warriors. A hailstorm would spoil the Americans' gunpowder, but through the Prophet's power his warriors' weapons would be unaffected. Their assault must first strike Harrison's tent. Once the governor was dead, the American troops could easily be captured and enslaved. Having thus exhorted his people, the Prophet withdrew to a nearby hillside to commune with the Great Spirit in order to guarantee victory.²⁵

The evidence supporting that account is suspect. It rests, for the most part, on the second-hand stories of Indians and whites who were not present at Prophetstown when the attack was allegedly planned. Moreover, most if not all of these commentators were enemies of the Prophet. There is another, better supported account of the outbreak of hostilities that historians have generally overlooked. A few weeks after the battle, one of the Prophet's adherents, a Kickapoo chief, told British Indian agent Matthew Elliott at Amherstburg that the Prophet did not intend to attack Harrison's army, but planned to fight only if attacked. During the night, however, "two young Winnebago . . . went near some of the American Sentinels and were shot at, and fell as wounded men, but on the Sentinels

²⁵ Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 110-11; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 232; Gilbert, *God Gave Us This Country*, 270-71.

coming up to dispatch them, they arose and Tomahawked them. This insult aroused the indignation of the Indians, and they determined to be revenged and accordingly commenced the attack at Cock crowing.” The Kickapoo chief’s explanation was echoed several months later by Tecumseh, who declared at an intertribal assembly that the violence at Tippecanoe was “the work of a few of our younger men . . . had I been at home there would have been no blood shed.” The account given by the Kickapoo chief and later by Tecumseh may have been mendacious, intended to divert attention from the Prophet’s role in the attack on Harrison’s forces. But it is more likely that they were telling the truth. The decision not to negotiate but to attack was probably a spur-of-the-moment response forced by a few young warriors, not the result of a premeditated plan. The Prophet, if he ordered the attack at all, may have been swayed by the emotional pressures of the moment, and by rash counsel.²⁶

²⁶ Elliott to Brock, Jan. 12, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:616-17; Tecumseh Statement at Massassinway, *ibid.*, 2:51. The sources historians have cited over the years in support of the reconstruction of events summarized above simply assume, without any particular evidence, that the Prophet ordered the attack. In his article “Thinking and Believing: Nativism and Unity in the Ages of Pontiac and Tecumseh,” Dowd raises a question about the Prophet’s role in the outbreak of hostilities but does not pursue the matter in any depth. A close reading of the sources that presumably document the Prophet’s responsibility does not support the customary conclusion. For example, the Shane Interview, Tecumseh Papers, 12YY:27, 57, charges the Prophet with responsibility for giving warriors false assurances of supernatural aid but does not explain the exact circumstances precipitating the battle. Shane was not an eye-witness. Nor were the Indians quoted in “Meeting of P. B. Whiteman and the Shawnees,” *ibid.*, 5YY:8, another source frequently cited in support of the customary account of Tenskwatawa’s role. The Whiteman conference with the Shawnees was conducted with members of Black Hoof’s band, enemies of the Prophet who assured Whiteman they would kill him as soon as they had an opportunity. They were in no position to testify about the Prophet’s activities on the morning of the battle. Another favored source, “Shabonee’s Account of Tippecanoe,” is equally unreliable. Reprinted in the *Indiana Magazine of History* (ed. Wesley Wickar, 21 [Mar. 1921], 355-59), it was first published in 1864 in a book by Solon Robinson entitled *Me-Won-I-Toc*. Purportedly containing the reminiscences of an aging Potawatomi chief who fought for Tecumseh but later became pro-American (opposing Black Hawk), the account contains a number of obvious errors. Shabonee claimed to have been present at Tippecanoe, but his account of the battle for the most part reflected American propaganda and thus does not ring true. He reported that British officers were in residence at Prophetstown and instigated the attack on Harrison. All available evidence indicates that was not the case. He insisted that Harrison harbored no aggressive designs against the Prophet’s community. And in a passage that must have delighted his white readers, the old chief purportedly declared that at the height of the battle “I could not lift my gun. The Great Spirit held it down. I knew then that the great white chief [Harrison] was not to be killed, and I knew that the red men were doomed.” He was quoted as saying that Tippecanoe “was my last fight,” when in fact the real Shabonee fought later with Tecumseh in Canada. His account of the Prophet’s role in

This interpretation is given credibility by the fact that in the weeks preceding the battle at Tippecanoe Creek, the Prophet's forces had mounted no full scale attack on Harrison's very vulnerable army as it struggled through an unfamiliar wilderness. It may be that until the last moment the Prophet hoped to abide by his agreement with Tecumseh to avoid an armed confrontation. It is worth noting that in conversations with Michigan Governor Lewis Cass in 1816, Tenskwatawa denied that he had ordered any hostile action against Harrison. "It is true," he conceded, "that the Winnebagoes with me at Tippecanoe struck your people. I was opposed to it but could not stop it." Some years later, the former Indian agent John Johnston also claimed that "the Winnebagoes forced on the battle of Tippecanoe." He concluded that the Prophet lost control of the situation.²⁷

The battle did not go well for the Prophet's forces. American resistance was fierce, and the warriors did not prevail. Although the losses on the American side were heavier than the Indians', the Prophet's forces retreated when Harrison counterattacked. The Miami chief Little Eyes claimed that the warriors then confronted the Prophet who at first "assured them that by the power of his art half the army was already dead and the other half bewildered or in a state of distraction." The warriors, he continued, should "rush into the [American] camp and complete the work of destruction with the tomahawk." One of the Winnebago warriors immediately shouted, "You are a liar . . . you told us that the white people were dead or crazy when they were all in their senses and fought like the devil." Tenskwatawa then "appeared much crestfallen . . . held his head between his knees" and blamed his wife for spoiling his medicine by touching his sacred objects while menstruating. The warriors, angry and now untrusting, refused his plea that they mount another attack. Whatever the circumstances leading to the attack, it is reasonable to assume that the Prophet endeavored to invoke sacred power to secure victory once battle

Tippecanoe is contradictory, implying in some passages that he orchestrated the attack, claiming in others that the British were in charge, and in another that the Prophet lost control of the younger warriors. His claim that Tippecanoe ruined the Prophet's reputation has been given a weight it does not deserve. The old chief may have been telling his white benefactors what they wanted to hear, or the account may be (at least in part) a forgery. This writer inclines to the latter explanation. Another document often cited in accounts of the outbreak of the battle contains a report from the Miami chief Little Eyes that implies but does not state explicitly that the Prophet ordered the attack. Little Eyes, as we will note, related the anger of warriors who discovered the Prophet's war medicine was ineffective. See R. I. Snelling to Harrison, Nov. 20, 1811, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:643-46 [Clanin, reel 5:70-750].

²⁷ Indian Speeches, 1816, Lewis Cass Papers (William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan); Drake Memoranda, Tecumseh Papers, IYY:162.

was joined, and no doubt assured the warriors that through his magic they would enjoy the help of the Great Spirit. Little Eyes told one of Harrison's officers that, after the retreat, the Winnebagos seized the Prophet and bound him with cords. The Miami chief thought they would probably put him to death. But he was wrong. Instead, the Prophet and some of his Shawnee followers encamped at Wildcat Creek, about twenty miles from the Tippecanoe battle site. In weighing Little Eyes testimony, we need to remember that he was reputedly an ally of the Prophet, both before and after the battle. He may well have endeavored to mislead the Americans about the Prophet's actual status after Tippecanoe.²⁸

When American troopers entered Prophetstown the day after the battle, they found only one elderly and infirm woman. The rest of the inhabitants had left, most of them returning to their villages in the west. Harrison's army burned the Prophet's empty capital. In addition to wigwams and houses, over five thousand pounds of food stores were put to the torch. In a bizarre act of desecration, the Americans dug up the graveyard at Prophetstown, leaving the corpses to rot above ground. Hearing rumors that Tecumseh was approaching from the south with a thousand warriors, the army retreated to Vincennes, where the militia disbanded. One veteran later recalled: "after destroying our considerable baggage, in order to make room for the conveyance of the wounded we began our march to Vincennes expecting the Indians would follow and attack us. Such an event was greatly to be dreaded; as we were nearly out of provisions, and had upwards of a hundred and thirty wounded men to be attended to, who were painfully situated in the waggons [*sic*], especially those who had broken limbs, by their continual jolting, on an unbeaten road through the wilderness."²⁹

Shortly after the battle, a captured Potawatomi chief assured Harrison that his people now hated Tenskwatawa and would soon kill him. Several weeks later, two Kickapoo chiefs also informed the governor that they held the Prophet responsible for their misfortunes, and now were "desirous of making peace with the United States." In reporting those conversations to the secretary of war, Harrison expressed much uncertainty about their credibility. Harrison's distrust of the chiefs who claimed that Tenskwatawa

²⁸ R. I. Snelling to Harrison, Nov. 18, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, Apr. 15, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:643-44, 2:34-35 [Clanin, reel 5:70-75, 495-97].

²⁹ Log of the Army to Tippecanoe, Sept. 26 to Nov. 18, General Orders, Dec. 20, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:633-34, 675-76; *Western Sun*, Dec. 21, 1811, quoted *ibid.*, 1:676-77; statement of William Brigham, in Adam Walker, *A Journal of Two Campaigns of the Fourth Regiment of U. S. Infantry in the Michigan and Indiana Territories*, reprinted *ibid.*, 1:705; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 114; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 258, 236.

was now universally hated turned out to be well founded. The chiefs were telling the governor what they thought he wanted to hear. The facts do not support their claims. Although numerous historians have repeated stories about the Prophet's disgrace after Tippecanoe, his retreat from Prophetstown proved to be temporary, and the disaffection of his followers greatly exaggerated.³⁰

After the destruction of Prophetstown, Tenskwatawa and around forty followers, primarily Shawnee, remained at Wildcat Creek for a time, then resettled briefly on the White River. The Miami Chief Little Turtle assured Harrison that "all the Prophet's followers have left him." But the Indian agent Joseph Lalime warned Governor Howard in February "it is to be expected that they will gather again at his old place." Lalime was right. The gathering already had begun. When the Prophet and his party returned to the site of Prophetstown, they found encampments of Kickapoos, Winnebagos, and Piankeshaws ready to undertake the task of rebuilding the sacred community. On January 21, the acting governor of the Michigan Territory advised the secretary of war that Prophetstown had been reestablished, with some 550 residents from various tribes. He predicted that the Prophet would soon send Harrison his peace terms, which would prove unacceptable. He would therefore probably go to war some time in the spring. Tecumseh returned from his southern mission several weeks later. Soon thereafter, he sent word to Harrison of the Prophet's peaceful intentions. According to a British intelligence report, Tecumseh was "much dissatisfied with his brother for engaging Governor Harrison, last fall, as their plans were not fully matured."³¹

In the writings of Anglo-American historians, beginning with Drake in 1841, Tecumseh's dissatisfaction was transformed into fratricidal rage. The great warrior allegedly assaulted the Prophet, screaming that he deserved to die for his bungling at Tippecanoe. The British report is plausible. Tecumseh probably did express anger and disappointment with the

³⁰ Harrison to Secretary of War, Nov. 18, Nov. 26, Dec. 4, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:629, 649-52, 656-58 [Clanin, reel 5:47-67, 82-89, 105-09]. See also Statement of William Brigham, *ibid.*, 1:706-07.

³¹ Harrison to Secretary of War, Dec. 4, 1811, Little Turtle to Harrison, Jan. 25, 1812, *ibid.*, 1:656, 2:18-19 [Clanin, reel 5:108-09, 298-300]; Joseph Lalime to Benjamin Howard, Feb. 4, 1812, Ninian Edwards to Secretary of War, Mar. 3, 1812, Acting Governor Attwater to Secretary of War, Jan. 21, 1812, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14:536-37, 16:193-94, 10:376-77; Harrison to Secretary of War, Apr. 14, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:32 [Clanin, reel 5:487-90]; *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* (2 vols., Washington, DC, 1832-34), 1:807; William Claus to Isaac Brock, June 16, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:61-62; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 258.

Prophet's loss of control. But Drake's death threat story, although repeated in numerous later histories and biographies, is suspect. From his research notes, preserved in the manuscript collection assembled by Lyman Draper, we learn that Anthony Shane was the source of the story of Tecumseh's attempts to kill his brother. Although some historians have been impressed by the fact that he was married to a relative of Tecumseh, Shane is not in fact a reliable witness. A man of mixed ancestry, half French and half Ottawa, he had lived among the Shawnee and was fluent in their language. From 1795 onward, he made his living as an interpreter for the Americans and was closely associated with Indian agent William Wells at Fort Wayne. Those who use the account of Tecumseh's career that Shane and his wife dictated to Drake in 1822 would be well advised to consider Shane's prejudices and commitments. Despite his rather questionable claim that he understood Tecumseh, Shane in fact was an enemy. In 1813 he commanded a detachment of Shawnees that fought against Tecumseh at the battle of the Thames. He was recommended to Drake by Richard Mentor Johnson, the man who purportedly killed Tecumseh. The Shanes harbored a deep dislike of the Prophet. In some parts of the interview, the Shanes tried to downplay the Prophet's influence. In others, they assert that he led his nobler older brother astray. Their story, as it appears in Drake's notes, is not very plausible. "Tecumseh," they declared, "disbelieved in the prophecy of his brother and was twice in the act of killing him for his failures once at Greenville and afterwards at Tippencanoe . . . [where] the Prophet ran. Te[cumseh] was much angered and was with difficulty prevented from killing him for his false prophecies." Shane claimed Tecumseh never believed in his brother's religion, but went along "as a matter of policy" because "most of the Indians" did believe in him."³²

³² Drake, *Tecumseh*, 157; Tecumseh Papers, 12YY:46-47. On Shane's activities on behalf of the United States, see Benjamin Stickney to Governor Hull, July 8, 1812; Stickney to Secretary of War Eustis, Oct. 6, 1812, in Gayle Thornbrough, ed., *Letter Book of the Indian Agency at Fort Wayne, 1809-1815* (Indianapolis, 1961), 178, 188. For his services to the United States, Shane received, through an act of Congress, a grant of 320 acres on the St. Mary's River in Ohio. See *Journal of the House of Representatives*, Feb. 18, 1815, 9:789 (Library of Congress internet edition). For a summary of other evidence relating to Shane's background, see Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 413. For evidence of Tecumseh's continuing commitment to the religion of the Prophet, see the account of Tecumseh's visit to the Sac in William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1826), 1:236. Tecumseh's insistence on the destruction of medicine bags contributed to the failure of that visit, a failure that Black Hawk later lamented. See *Life of Black Hawk* (1834; rep., New York, 1994), 11. During his southern tour in 1811, many who heard Tecumseh believed that he was the Shawnee Prophet. (See Choctaw notes, Tecumseh Papers, 4YY:92.) The efforts of white historians to represent Tecumseh as a pragmatic,

That story about Tecumseh's presumed disbelief in Tenskwatawa's teachings and spiritual authority is contradicted by numerous other accounts, which portray Tecumseh as a disciple of the Prophet. All sources agree that he preached the Prophet's religion in his recruitment trips throughout the West and South. Shane's claim that he did so cynically, in order to manipulate credulous Indians, lacks credibility. Nor is there any evidence to support Shane's charge that Tenskwatawa ran away from the battle at Tippecanoe. Contemporary sources agree that he was not part of the war party that attacked Harrison's encampment, but rather sought to fulfill his role as a holy man by invoking the power of the Great Spirit from a vantage point near the battleground. Other than the Shane testimony, we have no evidence suggesting that he behaved in a cowardly manner. He did not desert Prophetstown, but, as we have seen, urged the warriors to resume the attack. Tecumseh certainly would have understood his role in the battle, even if Drake and other white historians have not. Though it may well be that Tecumseh expressed some anger toward his brother immediately after learning of Tippecanoe, the facts do not support the view that the setback there persuaded Tecumseh that the Prophet was a fraud. As we shall see, the Prophet continued to play an important role in the leadership of the movement. We must remember that the story that Tecumseh had to be restrained from killing Tenskwatawa comes from a biased source.³³

secular war leader misrepresent the nature of his appeal. The deprecation of the Prophet's religion was a major theme in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Tecumseh literature. Writers who celebrated Tecumseh as a worthy (and dead) adversary were reluctant to admit that he believed in the Prophet's message. In an entry that has influenced many later writers, Draper in his notes on Tecumseh summarized a story from *The Canadian Monthly* of December 1824 that asserted that Tecumseh "evinced little respect for the arts by which the Prophet has over-turned his unfortunate Tribe, and always spoke of him as 'his foolish brother.'" Overall, the *Monthly's* account of the movement is far from authoritative, containing many errors, including a claim that the Americans, not Tecumseh's people, initiated the attack at Tippecanoe. On balance, there is little reason to believe that its unknown author was really privy to Tecumseh's personal remarks about the Prophet. Stephen Ruddell told his son that "the Prophet exercised unbounded influence over him" and that "Tecumtha was the tool of the Prophet." Ruddell to Draper, Nov. 15, 1884, Tecumseh Papers, 8YY:43.

³³ It is not difficult to find indications that after Tecumseh's death whites who claimed to be knowledgeable spread the story that he and Tenskwatawa had been alienated by Tippecanoe. Judge Law, for example, writing many years after the event, tells us that on returning from the south, Tecumseh "accused his brother of duplicity and cowardice, and it is said by those who knew him, never forgave him to the day of his death." Law, *Colonial History of Vincennes*, 98. What is difficult is to determine just who, other than Shane, or Drake, were the original sources of the Judge's information. Another example. We find in the account of Tippecanoe published in 1864 and attributed to the Potawatomi chief

Matthew Elliott, the British Indian agent at Amherstburg in Upper Canada, writing to General Isaac Brock on January 12, 1812, reported that Harrison's raid had failed. Although the Americans burned Prophetstown, "the Prophet and his people do not appear as a vanquished enemy; they re-occupy their former ground." Elliott gave as his source "a Kickapoo Chief" who had been present at the battle. According to the chief, Indian losses at Tippecanoe had been minimal, with no more than twenty dead. "From this man's report," Elliott wrote, "the Chiefs of these tribes have determined to come here early in the Spring and make a demand of ammunition and arms."³⁴

Elliott's assessment of the Prophet's position after Tippecanoe reflected more than wishful thinking. Harrison's correspondence and other American reports, read carefully, offer confirmation. On December 11, the governor informed the secretary of war that the Prophet was still dangerous. He doubted that his Winnebago and Kickapoo followers had really deserted him and predicted that when Tecumseh returned from the South they would see "other dispositions." Accordingly, Harrison recommended that "the Miamis, Potawatamis and Kickapoos be made to drive off the Prophet and all the strange Indians from the Wabash." He doubted, however, that Indians could be relied upon to do the job. "It may be necessary," he wrote, "to employ a respectable force to drive them back and prevent those Vagabonds from turning on our settlements."³⁵

Late in January 1812, noting that the Prophet had been supported by a majority of the Potawatomis, Kickapoos, and Piankesaws, the governor

Shabonee this statement: "He [Tecumseh] no longer declared that Elskatawwa was a Prophet and possessed of supernatural powers and knowledge. He called him by a most degrading epithet, that means for more than 'fool.' 'Whicklar.'" "Shabonee's Account of Tippecanoe," 362. If that quotation were contemporary or even accurate, it would be highly significant. But we have noted before compelling reasons for doubting the authenticity of this source. It must be borne in mind that both Stephen Ruddell, in his reminiscences to his family, and Tecumseh's contemporary friends (the British at Malden) believed that the Prophet remained a close and trusted associate to the bitter end. If the disaffection was as great as the testimony of Shane and some others claimed some years after the fact, why was the Prophet left in charge of the rebuilt Prophetstown during Tecumseh's absence in 1812? Why are there no references to his demotion in the contemporary sources?

³⁴ Though the Kickapoo account probably underestimates Indian casualties, authorities are agreed that Harrison's losses were higher. See Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 236. Sugden discounts the lower estimates and thinks around 50 a reasonable estimate of Indian deaths. Harrison lost 68 dead and 120 wounded. By whatever estimate we use, the vast majority of the Prophet's several hundred warriors left Tippecanoe unscathed.

³⁵ Elliott to Brock, Jan. 12, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:616-17; Harrison to Secretary of War, Dec. 11, 1811, *ibid.*, 1:684-88 [Clanin, reel 5:139-45].

expressed renewed doubt about the accuracy of Indian reports concerning their current disaffection. Harrison knew full well that he had not inflicted on the Indians the crushing defeat he claimed in his public pronouncements. So did most of his contemporaries. In none of the contemporary reports from Indian agents, traders, and public officials on the aftermath of Tippecanoe can we find confirmation of the later claim that Harrison had won a decisive victory. Without exception, they agreed with Illinois Governor Ninian Edwards that “the Prophet is regaining his influence.” As to Native-American testimony, it is indicative of Tenskwatawa’s continuing reputation that when an earthquake of massive proportions hit New Madrid, Missouri, on December 16, 1811, a local inhabitant wrote the *New York Herald* “the Indians say that the Shawnee Prophet caused the earthquake to destroy the whites.”³⁶

It is true that Governor Harrison in his pronouncements on the Battle of Tippecanoe sometimes claimed that “the Indians have never sustained so severe a defeat since their acquaintance with white people.” Historians and popular writers have too often taken that self-promotional hyperbole about Tippecanoe at face value. Harrison’s boast must be placed in context. Soon after receipt of the earliest reports of the battle, the governor’s critics had charged that many of the Americans had died needlessly because Harrison disregarded his officers’ pleas to attack the Prophet the day before. The governor and his friends therefore sought to protect his image and reputation, and in the process created a myth of triumph in the wilderness that would pay great political dividends. Benjamin Drake’s presidential campaign biography of Harrison, published a year before his work on Tecumseh, was but one of many literary celebrations of the mythical Tippecanoe. In a typical restatement of the myth, one of Harrison’s twentieth century biographers declared “the effect of Tippecanoe on the West was immense. It was not merely that Tecumseh’s great confederation had been destroyed and the English had been checkmated. It was more than that . . . [it was] the culmination of what had

³⁶ Harrison to Secretary of War, Jan. 29, 1812, *ibid.*, 1:20-21 [Clanin, reel 5:308-09]; Governor Edwards to the Secretary of War, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 16:193-94. See also William Wells to Secretary of War, Feb. 10, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:21-22; Snelling to Harrison, Jan. 18, 1812, Harrison to Secretary of War, Feb. 26, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:15-17, 27 [Clanin, reel 5:289-91, 398-400]; Captain Starks to Colonel D. Bissell, Jan. 6, 1812, Thomas Forsyth to Governor Howard, June 9, 1812, Thomas Forsyth to Governor Edwards, July 13, 1812, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14:506, 570-71, 250; *New York (NY) Herald*, Feb. 26, 1812; Harrison to Secretary of War, Jan. 29, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:20-21 [Clanin, reel 5:308-09].

gone before . . . the conquest [of the Old Northwest] ended in triumph on the Wabash."³⁷

The persistence of that myth is puzzling. Even a cursory review of well documented facts about Tippecanoe suggests a very different conclusion. As Thomas C. Cochran's *Concise Dictionary of American History* noted nearly half a century ago, Harrison in fact "had struck an indecisive blow, with about one fourth of his followers dead or wounded," his army in retreat, and the frontier "as defenseless as before the campaign." Curiously, historians of the American Indian have often been among those deceived by misrepresentations of the battle's outcome: they commonly portray Tenskwatawa's conduct at Tippecanoe as "disastrous." Even those who recognize that Tippecanoe was not a great American victory still generally maintain that it destroyed the Prophet's power.³⁸

³⁷ Harrison to Secretary of War, Dec. 4, 1811, Harrison to Charles Scott, Dec. 13, 1811, Harrison to Charles Scott, Dec. 13, 1811, Harrison to Secretary of War, Dec. 24, 1811, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 1:658, 671, 666-72, 683-85 [Clanin, reel 5:105-09, 146-64, 198-206]. For various public resolutions and testimonials celebrating Harrison's generalship, and a few statements critical of his conduct, see *ibid.*, 1:662-713. For a more extensive collection of documents bearing on this issue, consult reel 5 of Clanin, Harrison Papers. For a good overview of the charges against Harrison, see Freeman Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe: William Henry Harrison* (New York, 1939), 105-09. For a typical example of the celebration of Tippecanoe as one "of the brightest pages of Western History," and of Harrison as the savior of civilization in the wilderness, see Law, *The Colonial History of Vincennes*, 97. This theme permeates Charles S. Todd and Benjamin Drake, *Sketches of the Civil and Military Services of William Henry Harrison* (Cincinnati, 1840). As to twentieth-century biographers, James A. Green, *William Henry Harrison: His Life and Times* (Richmond, 1941), 133 (quotation), and Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe*, 103-04, accept at face value both Harrison's claims and the very questionable account of Shabonee, as does Homer J. Webster, *William Henry Harrison's Administration of Indiana Territory* (Indianapolis, 1907), 282. Warren Miles Hoffnagle, *The Road to Fame: William Henry Harrison and National Policy in the Northwest from Tippecanoe to River Raisin* (Columbus, OH, 1959), 16-22, declares that Tippecanoe destroyed the Prophet's influence. Dorothy B. Goebel, *William Henry Harrison* (New York, 1926), 124-25, is more critical of Harrison. There is no up-to-date biography.

³⁸ "Tippecanoe," Thomas Cochran, ed., *Concise Dictionary of American History* (New York, 1962), 947; James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of the Indians of the United States* (New York, 1999), 155. For other examples of acceptance of the Tippecanoe myth, see William Christie Macleod, *The American Indian Frontier* (New York, 1928), 521; Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman, OK, 1983), 109; Arrel Morgan Gibson, *The American Indian: Prehistory to Present* (New York, 1980), 287; William T. Hagan, *American Indians* (3rd ed., Chicago, 1993), 62; Colin G. Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History* (Boston, 1999), 219; Herman J. Viola, *After Columbus: The Smithsonian Chronicle of the American Indian* (Washington, DC, 1990), 130; and Bill Gilbert, *God Gave Us This Country: Tekamthe and the First American Civil War* (New York, 1989), 272.

They are mistaken. For the Prophet, Tippecanoe was a setback, but not the disaster commonly portrayed in the historical literature. One recent writer, historian John Sugden, points out that given the fact they were outnumbered, the Prophet's warriors did an admirable job of inflicting casualties on the invader.³⁹ Many of the Prophet's supporters, as Harrison himself noted, soon returned to the Wabash. A number had gathered there to await the Prophet even before Tecumseh returned from the South. Prophetstown was rebuilt on a new site near the ruins of the old less than three months after Harrison's raid. Historians commonly credit Tecumseh with accomplishing that task in the face of suspicion, even hatred, of the Prophet. But the process was well underway before Tecumseh's return. It appears that those later historians who accepted at face value stories about the Prophet's disgrace were taken in by an elaborate deception that did not fool Harrison and his contemporaries. They had evidence indicating that disenchantment with the Prophet and his teachings for the most part was feigned. That evidence was not restricted to reports of the reoccupation of the Prophetstown site. In a dispatch to the secretary of war dated January 7, 1812, Harrison noted that a Wea Indian informant had warned that "the Disposition of the Kickapoos and the Winnebagos was by no means as they wished us to believe . . . many of them still retained their confidence in the Prophet." He concluded that the Kickapoos who had told him that they no longer believed in the Prophet were "not sincere."⁴⁰

Though white commentators have often ridiculed Tenskwatawa's claim that his menstruating wife had ruined his war medicine, the fact is that in its cultural context Tenskwatawa's explanation was quite credible. The evidence available to us suggests that, for many of his followers, the momentary shock and anger of defeat at Tippecanoe was soon followed by acceptance of the Prophet's explanation and renewed faith in his message. Other informants, as we have seen, add credibility to the Wea account. Shortly after the New Year, the governor received orders from the War Department directing him to negotiate a peace with all the Indians of the region, including the Prophet and his followers. The government hoped to prevent the rebuilding of Prophetstown. But Harrison expressed doubt that "either the Prophet or Tecumseh can be prevailed upon to go" to any conference he might call, and accordingly asked, in a letter to the secretary of war on February 19, if he should provide a hostage to guarantee their safety. Clearly, he still regarded the Prophet as a powerful and dangerous

³⁹ Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 236.

⁴⁰ Harrison to William Eustis, Jan. 7, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:4-5 [Clanin, reel 5:240-45].

leader, not as a discredited charlatan. As he had predicted, Harrison's efforts to persuade the brothers to take part in a peace delegation to Washington came to naught. They rejected all overtures. From Fort Wayne, Indian agent Benjamin Stickney reported "the Prophet and Tecumseh returned the wampum that had been sent to them, and of course refused to meet." Hearing rumors that large numbers of Indians were making their way toward Vincennes, the governor expressed fear that they came not to negotiate but to attack. A series of Indian assaults on isolated frontier settlements in the spring of 1812 led Harrison to advise Washington that efforts to negotiate should cease. He recommended instead "war of extirpation."⁴¹

The incidents that inspired that recommendation had not been orchestrated by the Prophet or by Tecumseh, but instead appear to have been individual revenge slayings carried out most often by Potawatomis. In May, alarmed that those killings would provoke a renewed attack on Prophetstown, Tecumseh joined delegates from other midwestern tribes. In attendance were representatives of the Shawnee, Kickapoo, Piankeshaw, Winnebago, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Eel River, Wea, Ottawa, Wyandot, and Chippewa nations. British and American observers were also present. Tecumseh spoke for the Prophetstown community. Without exception, the delegates deplored the recent attacks on white settlers. They were agreed also in holding the Potawatomis responsible for those attacks. They disagreed on the role of the Prophet. The Potawatomi chiefs declared the killers "a few Vagabonds" who had been misled by Tenskwatawa. Since the Prophet had worked to "detach them from their own chiefs and attach them to himself," those warriors could no longer be considered as "belonging to our nation." "The Potawatomis," they declared, "will be thankful to any people who will put them to death, wherever they are found." For his part, Tecumseh did his best to offer assurances that the Prophet and his followers hoped to "live in peace" with the white people of Indiana. He blamed the violence at Tippecanoe on "a few of our younger men." He added, however, a word of warning to the Americans. Although

⁴¹ Secretary of War William Eustis to Harrison, Jan. 12, 1812, Harrison to Secretary of War, Feb. 19, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:14, 25 [Clanin, reel 5:272-90, 378-79]; Stickney to Harrison, Apr. 18, 1812, in Thornbrough, *Letter Book*, 105; Harrison to Secretary of War, Feb. 26, 1812, Harrison to Secretary of War, Apr. 22, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2: 26, 41 [Clanin, reel 5:398-400, 527-30]. On Indian attacks, see Wells to Secretary of War, Mar. 1, 1812, *ibid.*, 2:27; Harrison to Secretary of War, Mar. 4, 1812, in Clanin, ed., Harrison Papers, reel 5:412-14; Harrison to Secretary of War, Apr. 14, 15, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2: 32-35 [Clanin, reel 5:487-90, 495-97].

his people would “never strike the first blow,” they would resist any further efforts to drive them from the Wabash. “We will die like men.”⁴²

Although all of the Indian delegates, including Tecumseh, had proclaimed their desire for coexistence with Indiana’s white settlers, the governor had insisted that as a condition of peace they apprehend and surrender the warriors responsible for the recent attacks on white settlers. On that matter, he received no satisfaction. Moreover, soon after the conference’s adjournment, several informants warned that the Prophet was still a force to be reckoned with. On June 3, Harrison accordingly advised the secretary of war that “the major part of the Winnebago Tribe are at Tippecanoe with the Prophet and Tecumseh. . . . They have been joined by many small bands from the Illinois River and the east of Lake Michigan—making a force at least equal to that which they commanded last summer, . . . their intentions . . . [are] entirely hostile.” Harrison and Edwards believed that the activities at the rebuilt Prophetstown were part of a larger British scheme to incite Indian attacks on the United States.⁴³

Tecumseh was, in fact, soon in touch with the British. Their Indian agent at Fort Malden, Matthew Elliot, repeatedly had warned him that His Majesty’s government expected their Indian friends to refrain from attacks on the Americans while England remained at peace with the United States. In a message to Elliot dated June 8, Tecumseh cast the Americans in the role of aggressors, explaining the “Long Knives” attack at Tippecanoe as their response to Potawatomi attacks on the frontier. Prophetstown was punished for crimes the people there had not committed. He reiterated his desire for peace but declared that he would lead a general Indian uprising if “we hear of any of our people being killed.” To prepare to make good on that threat, over eight hundred warriors had already assembled at the rebuilt Prophetstown. The Prophetstown leaders had dispatched envoys to the west and to the north, bearing black wampum and red-painted tobacco, both symbolic of war. Contrary to the assertion in later histories that the movement was no longer inspired by the Prophet, contemporary accounts report that the envoys proclaimed Tenskwatawa the Messenger of the Great Spirit and promised that those who rallied to the cause would be endowed with supernatural power. Not all responded favorably. The Oto of the Great Plains told the messenger of the “Shawnoe Prophet . . . that they could

⁴² Speeches of the Indians at the Massassinway, May 15, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:50-53; Harrison to Eustis, Mar. 4, 1812, in Clanin, ed., Harrison Papers, reel 5:412-14.

⁴³ Harrison to Secretary of War, June 3, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:58-59 [Clainin, reel 5:616-24].

make more by trapping beaver than by making war against the Americans.” Even so, one recent estimate finds that by the summer of 1812, the Prophet through the recruitment efforts of his emissaries (of whom Tecumseh was the most notable) commanded the support of around 3,500 warriors, centered primarily in Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin but including some adherents from nations as distant as the Creek of Alabama and the Sioux of the Great Plains.⁴⁴

Most accounts of this phase of the movement assume that after Tippecanoe, “the Prophet lost influence, and the Shawnee revitalization quickly changed into a series of military alliances under the leadership of Tecumseh.”⁴⁵ That statement is misleading at best. There is no contemporary evidence to support the claim that after Tippecanoe the religion of the Prophet ceased to be an important part of Tecumseh’s appeal to prospective allies. It is true that some supporters of the insurgency—the Potawamotomi chief Main Poc, for example—did not obey the Prophet’s spiritual strictures. But the notion that Tecumseh himself repudiated the Prophet’s religion or that he regarded him as a fool is to be found only in the highly suspect testimony of the Shanes and in a few other reminiscences that were dictated, usually second hand, long after the event.

Too much has been made of Tecumseh’s visibility outside Prophetstown and of his brother’s seclusion. Alliance building had been important to the brothers long before Tippecanoe. Diplomacy was Tecumseh’s forte; Tenskwatawa generally remained at home to commune with the Great Spirit and preach to the faithful who flocked to Prophetstown to hear his message. Even before Tippecanoe, Tecumseh, possessed as he was of talents as a diplomat and warrior the Prophet lacked, had come to play a more prominent role than in the earlier days when the movement did not contemplate armed resistance. The change in emphasis was forced upon the Shawnee brothers by Harrison’s determination not only to annex additional land but to drive all non-Shawnees from

⁴⁴ Tecumseh to Elliot, June 8, 1812, in Esarey, *Messages and Letters*, 2:60-61; A Declaration of Melessello a Sack Indian to John Johnson, July 3, 1812, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14:578-80; William Wells to Secretary of War, Mar. 1, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:27; Governor Edwards to Secretary of War, June 23, July 21, 1812, RG 107, National Archives Microfilm M271, frames 9415, 9431; Benjamin Stickney to William Henry Harrison, June 30, 1812; Stickney to John Johnson, July 6, 1812, in Thornbrough, ed., *Letter Book*, 149-52; 154-55; “Narrative of the Expedition of Mr. Hunt,” in John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810 and 1811* (1819; rep., Lincoln, NE, 1986), 227. Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 271-74.

⁴⁵ Rugley, “Savage and Statesman: Changing Historical Interpretations of Tecumseh,” 290.

Prophetstown. Those who maintain Tenskwatawa played no significant role after Tippecanoe do not account for the fact that during Tecumseh's absences he continued to serve not only as prophet but as civil head of the community. The sources agree that those arrangements continued after Tippecanoe. There is no contemporary document from any American or British official reporting that the Prophet had been deposed or demoted from either his religious or civil responsibilities. To the contrary, they all testify to his continued prominence. Whatever loss of influence Tenskwatawa may have suffered as a result of Tippecanoe (and most secondary accounts clearly have greatly exaggerated its impact), he remained a person to be reckoned with in the eyes of both foes and allies.

In June, Tecumseh led a delegation to Fort Malden. Stopping briefly at Fort Wayne, he demonstrated his continued adherence to the Prophet's teachings by refusing to eat any of the food offered him by the Americans except potatoes, which he considered an Indian food acceptable to the Great Spirit. At the time news was received of the American declaration of war against England, Tecumseh was in Upper Canada. He quickly emerged as the preeminent leader of England's Indian allies, rendering invaluable service in harassing the American forces, cutting the supply line to Detroit and paving the way for Hull's disastrous capitulation in August 1812.⁴⁶

The Prophet, in command on the Wabash, continued the campaign of deception, informing American officials that he distrusted the British and intended that Prophetstown remain at peace with the United States. In furtherance of that ruse, on July 12, less than a week after learning of the outbreak of the second Anglo-American war, Tenskwatawa and about a hundred Winnebago and Kickapoo followers appeared at Fort Wayne. The Prophet assured the new Indian agent, Benjamin Stickney, that he and his brother were now prepared to accept all of the land cession treaties they had previously challenged. Only their resentment of Harrison's high-handed behavior had prevented an earlier agreement. The Prophet, Stickney noted, made "strong professions of peace and friendship" with the United States and condemned the British for treating Indians like "dogs." Former agent Wells warned Harrison that Stickney was being duped by the Prophet. In fact, Stickney shared Wells's misgivings. Both warned that the Prophet and Tecumseh were in fact planning a general Indian uprising. Stickney later determined that Tecumseh had urged the Prophet to send the

⁴⁶ Stickney to Governor Hull, June 20, 1812, in Thornbrough, ed., *Letter Book*, 142-43.

women and children at Prophetstown to safety in the West and then attack Vincennes.⁴⁷

The suspicions voiced by Harrison and Wells were well founded. The Prophet and his warrior brother, no longer believing that peace with the United States was a viable option, now were waiting for the right time to strike. As Tecumseh forged their alliance with other tribes and with the British, Tenskwatawa summoned the western tribes to a meeting at Prophetstown late in the summer—"when the corn is made"—to plan an attack on the Americans. On September 10, warriors from Prophetstown struck Fort Harrison. Insurgent Indians, mostly Potawatomis, attacked Fort Wayne in September and again in October. Neither fort was taken. Counter-attacking American forces burned Indian villages and fields throughout the territory. In November Prophetstown, now abandoned, was put to the torch a second time. The Prophet accompanied by some of his followers then fled to Canada. In January he accompanied Tecumseh on a return to Indiana, where the brothers spent the next three months urging the scattered and demoralized Indian population to accompany them to Canada and there join in the fight the Long Knives. On February 11, Harrison reported that he had learned "from a party of Potatawatamis . . . that the Prophet was in the neighborhood of his former residence with about 300 Winnebagoes and about 200 of the other Tribes and that he was daily gaining strength." In the spring of 1812, the Shawnee brothers and their recruits joined the British forces in Upper Canada.⁴⁸

The story of Tecumseh's valiant and tragic defeat and death in the Battle of the Thames in 1813 has been told and re-told many times, but the Prophet's role in Canada is far more problematic and obscure.

⁴⁷ Stickney to Governor Hull, June 20, 1812, *ibid.*, 142-43; John Johnson Interview, Tecumseh Papers, 11YY:9-11; Sugden, *Tecumseh*, 374; Chambers to Proctor, Aug. 12, 1811, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:93.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Stickney to Secretary of War Eustis, July 19, 1812, in Thornbrough, ed., *Letter Book*, 161-65; Wells to Harrison, July 22, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:77-78 [Clanin, reel 5:690-95]; Stickney to the Secretary of War, July 19, 1812, Stickney to Harrison, July 23, 1812, in Thornbrough, ed., *Letter Book*, 161-65; 167-69; Wells to Harrison, July 22, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:76-78 [Clanin, reel 5:690-95]; Ninian Edwards to Secretary of War, July 21, 1812, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 16:244-47; Zachery Taylor to Harrison, Sept. 10, Sept. 13, 1812, Harrison to Shelby, Sept. 18, 1812, Harrison to Secretary of War, Sept. 21, 24, 1812, Hopkins to Gov. Shelby, Nov. 27, 1812, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:124-28, 134, 137-38, 143-47, 149-51, 232 [Clanin, reel 5:141-47, 160-66, 6:183-87, 203-02, 230-35]; Report of Auguste LaRoche and Lewis Chevalier, Apr. 4, 1813, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 14:554; Harrison to the Secretary of War, Feb. 13, 1813, in Esarey, ed., *Messages and Letters*, 2:360 [Clanin, reel 7: 467-82]; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 117-28.

Tenskwatawa survived the battle and was evacuated with the retreating British army. The British, who disliked the Prophet, initially tried to ignore his claim to be his brother's successor as war chief. However, efforts to replace him with the fallen warrior's son Pachetha failed to win the support of the former Prophetstown residents, so the British had no choice but to accept him in that role. That evidence of the continued loyalty of his core community from the Wabash suggests once again the error of assuming that Tippecanoe had destroyed the Prophet's credibility.⁴⁹

In 1816, Michigan Governor Cass, reporting on Tenskwatawa's activities in Canada, noted that some two hundred warriors, "collected together from different nations . . . have adhered to him under all vicissitudes with unbroken fidelity." Although many of the warriors who had rallied to the cause in the summer of 1813 deserted even before Tecumseh's death, the Prophet's influence still extended beyond his own immediate community. Cass reported that the British in Canada used him as their "principle instrument": "no proposition is made except through him." The British were never happy with the Prophet, whom they described querulous, egotistical, and demanding. He proved a poor replacement for Tecumseh on the battlefield. Not much of a warrior, the Prophet made little real contribution to the British war effort. But given his stature among those who remained in Canada, the British had no other viable option. Much is made in the historical literature of the Prophet's failure to hold the broader pan-Indian movement together after Tecumseh's death. But there is no reason to believe that Tecumseh would have succeeded where his brother failed. Tecumseh's reputation was preserved by his death. By the end of 1813, military defeat and the British retreat from Upper Canada had alienated most of the allies recruited by the Shawnee brothers the year before. But while recent recruits soon made peace with the United States, the evidence indicates that many of the Prophet's older followers (that is, those who had been with him on the Wabash) remained committed to his vision and to resistance.⁵⁰

At peace talks with tribes in Detroit in the late summer of 1815, American negotiators offered an amnesty and repatriation to all Indians who had fought on the British side. Uncharacteristically, the United States

⁴⁹ Documentation regarding Tenskwatawa's difficulties with British authorities in Upper Canada may be found in the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Record Group 10. For a good overview of the Prophet's Canadian years, see Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 142-64.

⁵⁰ Lewis Cass to the Secretary of War, Apr. 24, 1816, in Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers*, 10:629.

asked for no new land cessions. But the Americans were not willing to recognize Tenskwatawa's status as head of a community: he was welcome to return, but must place himself under the jurisdiction of his old enemy, the Ohio Shawnee chief Black Hoof. Unwilling to accept subordinate status, the Prophet refused to sign the peace agreement. Finding their former Indian allies a drain on the public treasury, British officials in Canada sought to force the recalcitrant back into the United States by cutting their subsidies and rations. Humiliated and hungry, many left, returning to former homelands in the Old Northwest. The Prophet sought and failed to negotiate arrangements to relocate his community on the River Raisin in Michigan. Governor Cass warned his superiors in Washington, that the Prophet was still dangerous and advised that he not be permitted to bring his followers back to the United States. Many of those followers, in defiance of the wishes of the United States government, returned to the Wabash, hoping to rebuild the sacred community. Tenskwatawa, himself fearful of being arrested or even killed if he were to cross into the United States, did not join them. In the end, their faith in the Prophet proved greater than his courage. His leadership effectively ceased not at the Battle of Tippecanoe, but with his absence from the new Prophetstown.⁵¹

The Prophet remained in Canada for over a decade but found no real role there. In 1825 under Cass's patronage, he returned to the United States and served as a spokesman for Jacksonian Indian removal. His advocacy of abandonment of the lands Tecumseh had fought to preserve has raised eyebrows, but it was not incompatible with his teaching that the Great Spirit had proscribed continued involvement with whites and their culture. Nevertheless, he never had much influence with the Ohio Shawnee, and his arguments favoring removal generally were ignored. The aging Prophet finally settled in a Shawnee community in Kansas, where he died in 1836 in obscurity and poverty.⁵²

How should we assess the Battle of Tippecanoe and its impact on the career of the Shawnee Prophet? Echoing the conventional wisdom, the current edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* reports that Harrison's victory "thoroughly discredited the Prophet and destroyed the Indian Confederacy."⁵³ The testimony of contemporaries, including Governor Harrison and the British Indian agent Matthew Elliott, tells a different

⁵¹ "Journal of the Proceedings of the Commissioners Appointed to Treat with the Northwest Indians at Detroit, Aug. 3-Sept. 8, 1815," *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, 2:17-25; Lewis Cass to the Secretary of War, Apr. 24, 1816," Carter, *Territorial Papers*, 10:630; Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 143-64.

⁵² Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 164-90.

⁵³ "The Prophet" *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Internet Edition).

story. Though the Prophet's scholarly critics are correct in speaking of his lack of prowess as a warrior, they are simply wrong in assuming that Tenskwatawa after Tippecanoe suffered such disrepute that he "no longer played a major role in the struggle against the long knives."⁵⁴

Why has the story of the Prophet's disgrace persisted in the face of the evidence? Fascination with the contrasting images of the great war chief and the contemptible religious charlatan, first fully drawn in Drake's biography of Tecumseh, has all too often led to a misreading of sources. Tecumseh is easily idealized, for he was indeed handsome, heroic, generous, and, after 1813, dead—the white man's ideal Indian. He fulfills most admirably the needs of those who wish to celebrate (or mourn) Native Americans. But his one-eyed, fanatical, anti-white, anti-Christian prophetic brother is harder to understand. A brooding, reclusive visionary, skilled neither as a warrior nor as a diplomat, he did not meet white expectations of an Indian leader.⁵⁵ Tenskwatawa's influence affronts Euro-American sensibilities, hence the need to take that influence from him as quickly as possible. Thus, rumors about the aftermath of Tippecanoe that knowledgeable contemporary observers, American and English alike, did not take seriously became, for later generations, unquestioned facts.

Lack of understanding of Shawnee culture and of the nature of Native-American revitalization movements explains in part why historians until recently have not understood the Prophet's appeal. But the reasons for their persistent disregard of the testimony of the most reliable observers were not entirely rational. Belief in the Prophet's presumed disgrace at Tippecanoe has had great emotional appeal for many writers. It is more than a good story. Numerous white commentators who have admired Tecumseh have been puzzled and disturbed by his relationship with Tenskwatawa. Unable to understand the spiritual roots of Tecumseh's resistance to Anglo-American expansionism, his biographers have commonly deplored Tenskwatawa's role in Tecumseh's life. In their perusal of the Draper

⁵⁴ Quoted in Edmunds, *Shawnee Prophet*, 116.

⁵⁵ The Prophet was not a "white man's Indian." Whites who had some personal acquaintanceship with Tenskwatawa generally disliked him. C. C. Trowbridge, who admitted that he "knew him but slightly," said that residents of Detroit in the 1820s considered the Prophet "somewhat shaky as to the value of truth" and therefore generally shunned him. C.C. Trowbridge to Lyman Draper, July 12, 1882, Tecumseh Papers, 5YY:1. Benjamin Drake, in summarizing the impressions of his informants, all of them either white or of mixed race (Shane), noted that they "characterized the Prophet as a liar, a boaster, & a coward, but witty, lazy, independent—a capital specimen of an Indian demagogue." Drake Memoranda, Tecumseh Papers, YY1:162. All too often, historians have taken those statements at face value, not recognizing the bias of their sources.

manuscripts, often they have been impressed by the comments of Stephen Ruddell, a white captive who claimed to have known Tecumseh well. Tenskwatawa, Ruddell charged, misled and spoiled Tecumseh. "The Prophet," Ruddell declared "was a bad Indian" because "he taught the Indians to believe that the Great Spirit would protect them." Ruddell's son later added this comment: "Tecumseh would have been a greater & better man" had the Prophet had no "influence . . . over him."⁵⁶ The malevolence of the Prophet thus could be invoked, very conveniently by those who felt the need to explain how a man as admirable as Tecumseh could have been part of a movement ridden with what appeared to them as superstition and fanaticism.

The assumption that Tenskwatawa lost his following after Tippecanoe is supported by rumor but not fact. Those hundreds of tribesmen from Prophetstown and elsewhere who, according to both American and British reports, remained loyal to the Prophet even after defeat at the Thames and the death of Tecumseh, would hardly have agreed with the historians' deprecation and demonization of their leader, or with their characterization of sentiment within the Prophet's core group. It is telling that Tenskwatawa's contemporary Shawnee descendents in eastern Oklahoma revere his name and have adopted "Prophet" as the family surname.⁵⁷ As to his reputation among descendents of his non-Shawnee followers, evidence of their remembrance of him is provided in a story told by the Winnebago and recorded by the anthropologist Paul Radin early in the twentieth century. The story relates that when the Prophet returned from visiting the Creator in heaven, no one would listen to him, saying "he is just getting crazier all of the time." Even his brother Tecumseh believed that he was a fraud and told him to shut up. The Prophet finally won their attention by placing a small war club on the ground, and promising that if anyone could lift it up, he would say no more about his visions. No one could budge it. Tecumseh immediately became his disciple.⁵⁸ The persistence of that mythic account demonstrates that the Prophet possessed qualities,

⁵⁶ Stephen Ruddell interview, Tecumseh Papers, 5YY:54; J. M. Ruddell to Lyman Draper, Sept. 5, Nov. 15, 1884, *ibid.*, 8YY:40, 43; Stephen D. Ruddell to Lyman Draper, Aug. 5, 1884, *ibid.*, 8YY:29.

⁵⁷ Noel William Schutz, "The Study of Shawnee Myth in Ethnographic and Ethnohistorical Perspective," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1975), 38; James H. Howard, *Shawnee! The Ceremonialism of a Native American Tribe and its Cultural Background* (Athens, OH, 1981), 198. The descendents of those Shawnee who opposed both the Prophet and his brother have accepted the heroic image of Tecumseh, but not of Tenskwatawa.

⁵⁸ Paul Radin, *The Winnebago Tribe* (Washington, DC, 1923), 70-72.

THE SHAWNEE PROPHET, TECUMSEH, AND TIPPECANOE 673

inspirational to his followers even in adversity, which have eluded most scholars just as they eluded most of his white contemporaries.