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REPORT

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF WAR,

IN COMPLIANCE

*With a resolution of the Senate, in relation to the establishment of a line of military posts from the Missouri to the Oregon or Columbia river.*

FEBRUARY 26, 1840.

Referred to the Select Committee on the Oregon Territory, and ordered to be printed.

WAR DEPARTMENT, February 24, 1840.

SIR: In reply to the resolution of the Senate, asking the opinion of this department "of the expediency of establishing a line of military posts, at suitable places and distances, from the Missouri river, near the mouth of the Platte, into the pass or passes of the Rocky mountains, most usually traversed to descend into the valley of the Oregon or Columbia river; the effects of such a measure in giving encouragement and protection to the American fur-trade; facilitating intercourse between the valley of the Mississippi and the great Western ocean; aiding and protecting trading caravans; overcoming and holding in check various Indian tribes in front and rear of such posts; the number and kind of force necessary for such service; the probable cost of keeping up said posts; and whether it would be necessary to increase the military force of the United States to accomplish these objects:" the undersigned has the honor to state, that, in his opinion, the establishment of such a chain of posts as that contemplated by the resolution, would be productive of the most beneficial effects upon the commerce of the whole region of country they are intended to traverse; would facilitate the intercourse between the valley of the Mississippi and the great Western ocean; would aid and protect trading caravans; and hold in check the various Indian tribes that occupy the country around them.

In order to answer satisfactorily that part of the inquiry which relates to the number and kind of force necessary for such service, and the probable cost of keeping up these posts, the undersigned ought to be in possession of more authentic information than is to be found in the War Department. The explorations undertaken by his direction are now approaching this point, and it is intended, if favored by Congress, to extend them this summer to the passes of the Rocky mountains; in the meantime, he will venture to suggest those positions which, upon a view of the existing and imperfect maps, and such information as has been obtained, appear to be the most advantageous.

It is reasonable to suppose that the route at present pursued every year by the traders, is that pointed out by experience to be most practicable, if not the shortest; and it possesses the advantage of being perpendicular to our line of defences along the frontiers of the States of Arkansas, Missouri, and the Territory of Iowa. It is along this route, proceeding in a westerly direction from the frontiers to the Rocky mountains, and connecting the navigable waters of the Missouri with those of the Columbia river, that posts ought to be established, in order to inspire with proper respect the numerous Indian tribes which wander over this great desert, and to afford an asylum and protection to the traders and hunters who traverse these plains in great numbers every year. The establishment of three posts would probably be sufficient for this purpose, for some time, and might prepare the way for the peaceable settlement of the fertile valleys west of the Rocky mountains. Fort Leavenworth, already established and lately enlarged, is situated at the commencement of this route, and will form the natural point of departure and principal depot for both lines of defence. Following, from hence, the route now used, the first post to be established may be placed at the junction of the north and south forks of the river Platte. Although the distance between these two posts, about five hundred miles, appears to be great, it is believed that they are sufficiently near to keep in check the Pawnees, Poneahs, and Kansas nations, and the small tribes which roam over this space in search of buffalo during the hunting season. Besides, it is understood that these Indians are friendly, and disposed to set a proper value upon the advantages to be derived from the protection of this Government. If any untoward event should require it, the distant posts may easily be strengthened, and their original construction ought to be such as to enable the garrisons to resist successfully the greatest Indian force that can be brought against them. Traders and hunters from the United States traverse these countries on their route to the Rocky mountains, at stated periods of the year, and escorts may be sent with the caravans to ensure their safety from post to post. From the limited knowledge of the country, in possession of the department, it is believed that this position not only possesses all the natural advantages required for a military station, but that there is no spot between it and Fort Leavenworth at all suited for the purpose.

The next post should be established on the north fork of the river Platte, near the confluence of the Laramies' fork. This station would seem to be highly important. It will be at the foot of an extensive chain, forming, as it were, the advanced guard of the Rocky mountains, called the Black hills, and at the head of the navigation of the Platte, which is navigable to this point by Mackinaw boats during the months of May and June. It will afford protection to the extensive trade which the American fur companies carry on with the Indian tribes of this region—the Shawnees and the Oglalabs, an important tribe of the Sioux nation, known by the name of the Yanctons.

With regard to the third post, two positions present themselves, the relative advantages of which can only be decided by an examination of the country. They are on either side of the dividing ridge which separates the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and about one hundred and fifty miles from each other, and each not far from five hundred miles from the fork of the Laramies. One of these positions is at the confluence of Horse creek with the Colorado of the west, commonly called by travellers Leedskeede; the

other at the junction of Wind river and that of Pope-Agie, which form the principal sources of the Bighorn, a tributary of the Yellow Stone river. Both these positions appear to possess the advantage of commanding the vast country of mountains and valleys occupied by the Crow, Snake, and Aripahoe Indians.

It may be well to limit the stations to this post for the present. They would be sufficient for the protection of the commerce in that region of country for some time to come, and to inspire the traders with confidence and renewed activity. Under their shelter, the rich and fertile valleys west of the mountains may be settled and cultivated by a population, which would pour forth its numbers to the shores of the Pacific as soon as the question of boundary shall be definitively settled between the United States and Great Britain. Whenever that event takes place, and the Government shall be disposed to extend the means of protection to traders and settlers to the mouth of the Columbia river, posts may, it is believed, be established with advantage, first, at the forks of Snake river, a principal tributary of the Columbia, near the mouth of Henry's river. This post would serve to protect traders and emigrants from the attacks of the Blackfeet Indians, who are considered the most formidable enemies of the whites, as they are of the Bannack, Snake, Flathead, and Nezperces Indians, tribes that are attracted annually to this spot by the numerous herds of buffalo that frequent it.

The next post might be established at Beaverhead, on the Missouri river upper forks. A fort here is important in relation to the sources of the Missouri, and to hold in check the Blackfeet Indians, and the small tribes around allied to them. It would be distant about three hundred miles from the third fort east of the dividing ridge, and about one hundred from that last described. The position indicated for the last post, before reaching the mouth of the Columbia river, is at Flathead lake, near the sources of the river of that name. This post would afford protection against the Cotonay, the Pendant Oreilles, and Flathead Indians.

It appears to me that this service may be performed by the troops of the regular army, until posts are pushed on far beyond the Rocky mountains. For the first three stations four hundred men will be sufficient, especially if aided by the hunters and trappers, who are constantly found in those regions to the number of between four and five hundred. It would not be difficult to organize this body of men, so as to render them efficient auxiliaries to the regular forces; and it cannot be doubted that the traders themselves, who will derive so many advantages from the establishment of these posts, will give to the commanders of them the full advantage of their superior knowledge of the disposition and movements of the Indian tribes, in order to guard them against surprise; and they ought to be of themselves sufficiently strong to resist any open attack, however formidable.

Very respectfully, your most obedient servant,

J. R. POINSETT.

Hon. RICHARD M. JOHNSON,  
*President of the Senate.*