

7-13-1876

Message from the President of the United States, transmitting, in compliance with a Senate resolution of July 7, 1876, information in relation to the hostile demonstrations of the Sioux Indians, and the disaster to the forces under General Custer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>



Part of the [Indian and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

S. Exec. Doc. No. 81, 44th Cong., 1st Sess. (1876)

This Senate Executive Document is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [darinfox@ou.edu](mailto:darinfox@ou.edu).

## M E S S A G E

FROM THE

# PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES,

TRANSMITTING,

*In compliance with a Senate resolution of July 7, 1876, information in relation to the hostile demonstrations of the Sioux Indians, and the disaster to the forces under General Custer.*

---

JULY 13, 1876.—Read, ordered to lie on the table, and be printed.

---

*To the Senate of the United States :*

I have the honor to transmit herewith a report from General W. T. Sherman, together with the most recent reports received from Brig. Gen. A. H. Terry, as a response to the resolution of the Senate of the 7th instant, a copy of which is attached to this message.

U. S. GRANT.

EXECUTIVE MANSION, *July 8, 1876.*

---

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,  
*July 7, 1876.*

*Resolved,* That the President be requested to inform the Senate, if not incompatible with the public interests, whether the Sioux Indians made any hostile demonstrations prior to the invasion of their treaty-reservation by the gold-hunters; whether the present military operations are conducted for the purpose of protecting said Indians in their rights under the treaty of eighteen hundred and sixty-eight or of punishing them for resisting the violation of that treaty; and whether the recent reports of an alleged disaster to our forces under General Custer in that region are true.

Attest:

GEO. C. GORHAM,  
*Secretary,*  
By W. J. McDONALD,  
*Chief Clerk.*

---

WAR DEPARTMENT,  
*Washington, July 8, 1876.*

To the PRESIDENT:

To enable you to answer the inclosed resolution of the Senate of July 7, I have the honor to submit the following brief statement of facts as exhibited by the records of this Department:

The Sioux or Dakota Nation of Indians, embracing various tribes, as the Yanktons, Yanetonnais, Brulés, Ogallallas, Minneconjous, Sans Ares, Two Kettles, &c., have long been known as the most brave and warlike savages of this continent. They have for centuries been pushed westward by the advancing tide of civilization, till in 1868 an arrangement or treaty was made with them by a special commission named by Congress, whereby for certain payments and stipulations they agreed to surrender their claim to all that vast region which lies west of the Missouri River and north of the Platte, to live at peace with their neighbors, and to restrict themselves to a territory bounded east by the Missouri River, south by Nebraska, west by the 104th meridian, and north by the Forty-sixth parallel, a territory as large as the State of Missouri. The terms of this treaty have been liberally performed on the part of the United States, and have also been complied with by the great mass of the Sioux Indians. Some of these Indians, however, have never recognized the binding force of this treaty, but have always treated it with contempt, have continued to rove at pleasure, attacking scattered settlements in Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and Dakota, stealing horses and cattle, and murdering peaceful inhabitants and travelers.

On the 9th of November, 1875, United States Indian Inspector E. C. Watkins made an elaborate report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, in which he uses this language :

I have the honor to address you in relation to the attitude and condition of certain wild and hostile bands of Sioux Indians in Dakota and Montana that came under my observation during my recent tour through their country, and what I think should be the policy of the Government toward them. I refer to Sitting Bull's band and other bands of the Sioux Nation under chiefs or "head-men" of less note, but no less untamable and hostile. These Indians occupy the center, so to speak, and roam over Western Dakota and Eastern Montana, including the rich valleys of the Yellowstone and Powder Rivers, and make war on the Arickarees, Mandans, Gros Ventres, Assinaboines, Blackfeet, Piegans, Crows, and other friendly tribes on the circumference.

From their central position they strike to the East, North, and West, steal horses, and plunder from all the surrounding tribes, as well as frontier settlers and luckless white hunters or emigrants who are not in sufficient force to resist them.

After describing at great length their character and supposed numbers, given at a few hundred, he says :

The true policy, in my judgment, is to send troops against them in the winter, the sooner the better, and whip them into subjection. They richly merit punishment for their incessant warfare, and their numerous murders of white settlers and their families, or white men wherever found unarmed.

The force estimated as necessary to whip them was one thousand men.

This communication was submitted by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Hon. Edward P. Smith, to the honorable Secretary of the Interior, Z. Chandler, who in turn submitted it to the then Secretary of War, General Belknap, for his "consideration and action."

In a subsequent communication of the Secretary of the Interior, of December 3, 1875, to the Secretary of War, occurs this language :

I have the honor to inform you that I have this day directed the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to notify said Indians (Sitting Bull and others outside their reservation) that they must remove to the reservation before the 31st day of January, 1876; that if they neglect or refuse so to remove, that they will be reported to the War Department as hostile Indians, and that a military force will be sent to compel them to obey the orders of the Indian Office.

On the 1st day of February the Secretary of the Interior further notified the Secretary of War :

The time given him (Sitting Bull) in which to return to an agency having expired, and the advices received at the Indian Office being to the effect that Sitting Bull still refuses to comply with the directions of the Commissioner, the said Indians are hereby turned over to the War Department for such action on the part of the Army as you may deem proper under the circumstances.

During all the stages of this correspondence, the General of the Army and his subordinate commanders were duly notified, and were making preparations for striking a blow at these hostile savages, an enterprise of almost insurmountable difficulty in a country where, in winter, the thermometer often falls to forty degrees below zero, and where it is impossible to procure food for man or beast. An expedition was fitted out under the personal command of Brig. Gen. George Crook, an officer of great merit and experience, which, in March last, marched from Forts Fetterman and Laramie to the Powder River and Yellowstone Valleys, struck and destroyed the village of Crazy Horse, one of the hostile bands referred to by Indian Inspector Watkins, but the weather was found so bitter cold, and other difficulties so great arose, that General Crook returned to Fort Laramie in a measure unsuccessful so far as the main purpose was concerned. These Indians occupy parts of the Departments of Dakota and Platte, commanded by Generals Terry and Crook, respectively, but the whole is immediately commanded by Lieutenant-General Sheridan, who has given the matter his special attention. Preparations were then made on a larger scale, and three columns were put in motion as early in May as possible, from Fort Abe Lincoln, on the Missouri River, under General Terry; from Fort Ellis, in Montana, under General Gibbon; and from Fort Fetterman, under General Crook. These columns were as strong as could be maintained in that inhospitable region, or could be spared from other pressing necessities, and their operations are not yet concluded, nor is a more detailed report deemed necessary to explain the subject-matter of this inquiry.

The present military operations are not against the Sioux Nation at all, but against certain hostile parts of it which defy the Government, and are undertaken at the special request of that bureau of the Government charged with their supervision, and wholly to make the civilization of the remainder possible. No part of these operations are on or near the Sioux reservation. The accidental discovery of gold on the western border of the Sioux reservation, and the intrusion of our people thereon, have not caused this war, and have only complicated it by the uncertainty of numbers to be encountered. The young warriors love war, and frequently escape their agents to go on the hunt, or war-path, their only idea of the object of life. The object of these military expeditions was in the interest of the peaceful parts of the Sioux Nation, supposed to embrace at least nine-tenths of the whole, and not one of these peaceful or treaty Indians have been molested by the military authorities.

The recent reports touching the disaster which befell a part of the Seventh Regular Cavalry, led by General Custer in person, are believed to be true. For some reason as yet unexplained, General Custer, who commanded the Seventh Cavalry, and had been detached by his commander, General Terry, at the mouth of Rosebud, to make a wide detour up the Rosebud, a tributary to the Yellowstone, across to the Little Horn and down to the mouth of Big Horn, the place agreed on for meeting, attacked *en route* a large Indian village, with only a part of his force, having himself detached the rest, with a view to intercept the expected retreat of the savages, and experienced an utter annihilation of his immediate command. The force of Generals Terry and Gibbon reached the field of battle the next day, rescued fifty-two wounded men and buried two hundred and sixty-one dead men, including Lieut. Col. Geo. A. Custer, Captains Custer, Keogh, Yates; Lieutenants Cook, Smith, McIntosh, Calhoun, Hodgson, Rully, Porter, Sturgis, all of the

Seventh Cavalry; and Lieutenant Crittenden of the Twentieth Infantry, Lieutenant Harrington, Assistant Surgeon Lord, and Acting Assistant Surgeon De Wolff, are missing.

The wounded were carried back to the mouth of the Big Horn, in the Yellowstone River, which is navigable, and where there were two steamboats, one of which was sent down the river to Fort Abe Lincoln with the wounded, and to communicate these sad facts.

General Terry is therefore at the mouth of the Big Horn, refitting, and will promptly receive re-enforcement and supplies, and will resume his operations immediately.

Meantime General Crook had also advanced from Fort Fetterman, and on the 17th of June, eight days before General Custer's attack, had encountered this same force of warriors on the head of the Rosebud, with whom he fought several hours, driving the Indians from the field, losing nine men in killed; one officer and twenty men wounded. General Crook reports his camp as on Tongue River, Wyoming. Re-enforcement and supplies are also en route to him, and every possible means have been adopted to accomplish a concert of action between these two forces, which are necessarily separated, and are only able to communicate by immense distances around by their rear.

The task committed to the military authorities is one of unusual difficulty, has been anticipated for years, and must be met and accomplished. It can no longer be delayed, and everything will be done by the Department to insure success, which is necessary to give even an assurance of comparative safety to the important but scattered interests which have grown up in that remote and almost inaccessible portion of our national domain.

It is again earnestly recommended that the appropriation asked for repeatedly by General Sheridan, of \$200,000, be made, to build two posts on the Yellowstone, at or near the mouths of the Big Horn and Tongue Rivers.

Inclosed herewith please find copies of General Terry's report, just received by telegraph since the preparation of this letter.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. D. CAMERON,  
*Secretary of War.*

[Telegram.]

PHILADELPHIA, July 8, 1876.

General W. T. SHERMAN, *Washington, D. C. :*

The following just received from Drum, and forwarded for your information :

CHICAGO, ILL., July 7, 1876—1.10 a. m.

General P. H. SHERIDAN, U. S. A.,  
*Continental Hotel :*

The following is General Terry's report, received late to-night, dated June 27: It is my painful duty to report that day before yesterday, the 25th instant, a great disaster overtook General Custer and the troops under his command. At 12 o'clock of the 22d instant he started with his whole regiment and a strong detachment of scouts and guides from the mouth of the Rosebud; proceeding up that river about twenty miles he struck a very heavy Indian trail, which had previously been discovered, and, pursuing it, found that it led, as it was supposed that it would lead, to the Little Big Horn River. Here he found a village of almost unlimited extent, and at once attacked it with that portion of his command which was immediately at hand. Major Reno, with three companies, A, G, and M, of the regiment, was sent into the valley of the stream at the point where the trail struck it. General Custer, with five companies, C, E, F, I, and L, attempted to enter about three miles lower down. Reno forded the river, charged down its left bank, and fought on foot until finally completely over-

whelmed by numbers he was compelled to mount and recross the river and seek a refuge on the high bluffs which overlook its right bank. Just as he recrossed, Captain Benteen, who, with three companies, D, H, and K, was some two (2) miles to the left of Reno when the action commenced, but who had been ordered by General Custer to return, came to the river, and rightly concluding that it was useless for his force to attempt to renew the fight in the valley, he joined Reno on the bluffs. Captain McDougall with his company (B) was at first some distance in the rear with a train of pack-mules. He also came up to Reno. Soon this united force was nearly surrounded by Indians, many of whom, armed with rifles, occupied positions which commanded the ground held by the cavalry, ground from which there was no escape. Rifle-pits were dug, and the fight was maintained, though with heavy loss, from about half past 2 o'clock of the 25th till 6 o'clock of the 26th, when the Indians withdrew from the valley, taking with them their village. Of the movements of General Custer and the five companies under his immediate command scarcely anything is known from those who witnessed them; for no officer or soldier who accompanied him has yet been found alive. His trail from the point where Reno crossed the stream, passes along and in the rear of the crest of the bluffs on the right bank for nearly or quite three miles; then it comes down to the bank of the river, but at once diverges from it, as if he had unsuccessfully attempted to cross; then turns upon itself, almost completing a circle, and closes. It is marked by the remains of his officers and men and the bodies of his horses, some of them strewn along the path, others heaped where halts appear to have been made. There is abundant evidence that a gallant resistance was offered by the troops, but they were beset on all sides by overpowering numbers. The officers known to be killed are General Custer; Captains Keogh, Yates, and Custer, and Lieutenants Cooke, Smith, McIntosh, Calhoun, Porter, Hodgson, Sturgis, and Reilly, of the cavalry. Lieutenant Crittenden, of the Twelfth Infantry, with Acting Assistant Surgeon D. E. Wolf, Lieutenant Harrington of the Cavalry, and Assistant Surgeon Lord are missing. Captain Benteen and Lieutenant Varnum, of the cavalry, are slightly wounded. Mr. B. Custer, a brother, and Mr. Reed, a nephew, of General Custer, were with him and were killed. No other officers than those whom I have named are among the killed, wounded, and missing.

It is impossible yet to obtain a reliable list of the enlisted men who were killed and wounded, but the number of killed, including officers, must reach two hundred and fifty. The number of wounded is fifty-one. The balance of report will be forwarded immediately.

R. C. DRUM,  
*Assistant Adjutant-General.*  
P. H. SHERIDAN,  
*Lieutenant-General.*

*Supplementary report from General Terry, received at War Department at 12 o'clock m.*

PHILADELPHIA, July 8, 1876.

General W. T. SHERMAN, U. S. A.,  
*War Department, Washington, D. C. :*

CHICAGO, ILL., July 8.

General P. H. SHERIDAN,  
*Continental Hotel, Philadelphia, Pa. :*

General Terry's report continues as follows: At the mouth of the Rosebud I informed General Custer that I should take the supply-steamer *Far West* up the Yellowstone to ferry General Gibbon's column over the river; that I should personally accompany that column, and that it would, in all probability, reach the mouth of the Little Big Horn on the 26th instant. The steamer reached General Gibbon's troops, near the mouth of the Big Horn, early in the morning of the 24th, and at 4 o'clock in the afternoon all his men and animals were across the Yellowstone. At 5 o'clock the column, consisting of five companies of the Seventh Infantry, four companies of the Second Cavalry, and a battery of Gatling guns, marched out to and crossed Tullock's Creek. Starting soon after 5 o'clock in the morning of the 25th, the infantry made a march of twenty-two miles over the most difficult country which I have ever seen. In order that scouts might be sent into the valley of the Little Big Horn, the cavalry, with the battery, were then pushed on thirteen or fourteen miles farther, reaching camp at midnight. The scouts were sent out. At half past four, on the morning of the 26th, they discovered three Indians, who were at first supposed to be Sioux, but when overtaken they proved to be Crows who had been with General Custer. They brought the first intelligence of the battle. Their story was not credited. It was supposed that some fighting, perhaps severe fighting, had taken place, but it was not believed that disaster could have overtaken so large a force as twelve companies of cavalry. The infantry, which had broken camp very early,

soon came up, and the whole column entered and moved up the valley of the Little Big Horn. During the afternoon efforts were made to send scouts through to what was supposed to be General Custer's position, and to obtain information of the condition of affairs; but those who were sent out were driven back by parties of Indians, who, in increasing numbers, were seen hovering in General Gibbon's front. At twenty minutes before 9 o'clock in the evening the infantry had marched between twenty-nine and thirty miles. The men were very weary, daylight was failing; the column was therefore halted for the night at a point about eleven miles in a straight line above the mouth of the stream. In the morning the march was resumed, and after marching nine miles Major Reno's entrenched position was reached. The withdrawal of the Indians from around Reno's command and from the valley was undoubtedly caused by the appearance of General Gibbon's troops. Major Reno and Captain Benteen, both of whom are officers of great experience, accustomed to see large masses of mounted men, estimate the number of Indians engaged at not less than 2,500; other officers think the number was greater than this. The village in the valley was about three miles in length and about a mile in width; besides the lodges proper, a great number of temporary brushwood shelter was found in it, indicating that many men besides its proper inhabitants had gathered together there. Major Reno is very confident that there were a number of white men fighting with the Indians. It is believed that the loss of the Indians was larger. I have as yet received no official reports in regard to the battle, but what is stated herein is gathered from the officers who were on the ground there, and from those who have been over it since.

ALFRED H. TERRY,  
*Brigadier-General.*

R. C. DRUM,  
*Assistant Adjutant-General.*