

4-29-1878

Protection of the Northern Frontier of Montana

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

APRIL 29, 1878.—Ordered to be printed.

Mr. MAXEY, from the Committee on Military Affairs, submitted the following

REPORT:

[To accompany bill S. 757.]

The Committee on Military Affairs, to whom was referred the bill (S. 757) to provide for the construction of a military post for the protection of the northern frontier of Montana, have had the same under consideration, and submit the following report:

The bill appropriates \$150,000 for the erection of a garrison on the northern frontier of Montana, to be situated at such point as may be chosen for military reasons in the region between the Missouri River and the international boundary-line.

Your committee learn from reliable authority that this action is urgently pressed upon the government by the military authorities as of immediate and pressing necessity, as extracts from their reports, letters, and telegrams herewith submitted will show.

The region is occupied by the largest aggregation of hostile and semi-hostile Indians now congregated anywhere within the Territories of the United States, besides which it is continually threatened by hostile Sioux and Nez Percé Indians, who have taken temporary refuge across the border, and are there recruiting their forces and gathering ammunition with the avowed purpose of invasion.

So imminent is this danger, that all troops in the districts of Montana, General Gibbon, and of the Yellowstone, General Miles, are continually under orders, ready to march to any threatened point at a moment's notice.

The Missouri River above the Yellowstone, on which forty-two steamers were engaged in commerce last season, and also by the main land-route into the Territory—both these lines of communication are subject to continual attack. At many points the accumulation of property in transit, mostly stores and supplies, amounts to millions. Benton, the head of navigation, is the main depot of supplies for Montana for the Army posts and Indian agencies and goods in transit to the British northwestern territories. These lines of business and towns and settlements are totally without protection. Between them and the danger there are no troops, and the country is such, that the Indians might at any time swoop down on them before troops could be summoned from existing garrisons.

The post will form a permanent garrison and depot at an exposed point of our international boundary.

The Secretary of War, upon being addressed by the chairman of your committee, returns the following letters and telegrams from General

Sherman, Lieutenant-General Sheridan, and General Terry, urging the pressing necessity of immediate action to meet a pressing danger, together with copy of General Sheridan's and Colonel Gibbon's report. In view of these communications and accompanying documents, your committee recommend the passage of the bill, amended so as to make the appropriation \$100,000 in lieu of \$150,000.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
Washington City, March 7, 1878.

SIR: In reply to your letter of the 26th ultimo, asking to be informed as to the propriety of Senate bill 757, "to provide for building a military post for the protection of the northern frontier of Montana," I have the honor to subjoin hereto the remarks of the General of the Army on the subject, viz:

"The necessity for a military post on or near Milk River has long been felt, but not attempted heretofore for the want of the necessary funds, as well as the want of troops to occupy such post. This post will be costly to build and to maintain, but seems forced on us by the rapid development of private interests in Montana and the Upper Missouri."

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

GEO. W. McCRARY,
Secretary of War.

Hon. GEORGE E. SPENCER,
Chairman Committee on Military Affairs, United States Senate.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
Washington City, April 10, 1878.

SIR: Adverting to your letter of the 12th ultimo, requesting the reference of bill (S. 757), "to provide for building a military post for the protection of the northern frontier of Montana," to the commanding officer Military Division of the Missouri, and that the Senate Committee on Military Affairs be furnished with full information as to the necessity for said post, I have the honor to transmit herewith a copy of a telegram, dated October 23, 1877, from General Sheridan upon this subject, and of indorsements by Generals Terry and Sheridan, in which reasons for the building of the post contemplated in the bill are set forth.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

GEO. W. McCRARY,
Secretary of War.

Hon. G. E. SPENCER,
Chairman Committee on Military Affairs, United States Senate.

HEADQUARTERS MILITARY DIVISION MISSOURI,
Chicago, March 30, 1878.

Respectfully returned to the Adjutant-General of the Army. I have the honor to inclose herewith a copy of a telegram addressed to the General of the Army, October 31, 1877, recommending the establishment of a military post on Milk River somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Belknap. Since the telegram was written, further evidence of the necessity of a post there has been accumulating. All the malicious and discontented Indians from the agencies have made their way to the Milk River, or across the line into Manitoba, and others will continue to follow; and unless we establish a post at or near the point designated, the influence of these malcontents may induce the numerous tribes in that region, numbering over 13,000, to hostilities and an Indian war, which will not only cost the lives of our people, but twenty times the cost of the post may be incurred.

P. H. SHERIDAN,
Lieutenant-General.

[Telegram.]

CHICAGO, October 30, 1877.

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

The necessity of establishing a new military post on Milk River, at or a little west of the old trading-post named Fort Belknap, is now so great, that I most respectfully

recommend, as one of the very first acts of Congress, an appropriation for it. There are now about 13,500 Indians up in that angle of Northeastern Montana, exclusive of the bands under Sitting Bull, just over the line in British America. These Indians are all north of the Missouri River and south of the British line, and are in name as follows: Assinaboines, Gros Ventres, Yantonnais, Bloods, Uncpapas, Minneconjoux, Gros Ventres of Prairie, Santee Sioux, River Crows, Piegans, and a few other smaller bands. A post established in the early spring, at a cost of \$100,000, may save many complications, and perhaps lives.

P. H. SHERIDAN,
Lieutenant-General.

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF DAKOTA,
Saint Paul, Minn., March 28, 1878.

Respectfully returned to headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, inviting attention to the following extract from my last annual report:

"The Indians who occupy the great reservation north of the Upper Missouri have been in an unsatisfactory state for several years past. Though nominally at peace with the United States, an unfriendly feeling toward the government seems to have prevailed, and there is no doubt that from some of the tribes many individuals have joined those bands which have engaged in open hostilities. These tribes are exposed to many evil influences; they are in close contact with the hostile Sioux, who are encamped just across the frontier; they are in constant communication with the mischievous hordes of Red River half-breeds, which vibrate to and fro across the boundary and infest the northern part of the reservation. The prospect is, that sooner or later we shall have trouble with them, and I think that it is none too soon to make preparations to meet it. I therefore recommend that a strong post—a post that will admit a garrison of at least twelve full companies—be built on the Milk River, or at the foot of the northern slopes of Bear's Paw Mountain, the question of its precise location being determined by considerations affecting the economy of its construction and maintenance. An additional reason exists for the establishment of a post in this vicinity; it would be of great importance in case the refugee Sioux should attempt to return to this country with hostile purpose."

I can only add to the above that the constantly-repeated report of trouble between the Canadian authorities and their own Indians—troubles arising out of the attempt of those authorities to restrict the killing of buffalo—would, if true, make it still more probable that the presence of troops in the Milk River will soon be an imperative necessity.

ALFRED H. TERRY,
Brigadier-General, Commanding.

[Referred to committee by Hon. Martin Maginnis, Delegate in Congress from Montana Territory.]

REPORT OF COL. NELSON A. MILES.

[Extract from Annual Report of December 27, 1877.]

In addition to the military posts already constructed, I would recommend the establishment of a large post either opposite the mouth of the Musselshell on the Missouri, or near People's Creek on Milk River; the advantage of placing it on the Missouri would be economy of troops and supplies, and it would be near enough to observe the boundary-line and create a barrier between the hostile Sioux and friendly Indians of Western Montana. The line of settlements would advance, occupying the rich valleys of the Judith Basin and Musselshell; an abundance of building material will be found in the vicinity, and a sufficient number of mechanics can be obtained in the Territory.

There should be a camp of supplies on the Little Missouri for troops moving through that section and as a protection to the direct line of communication to Bismarck.

The occupation of the Yellowstone Valley has divided the Indian country in twain, and, second to the subjugation of the Indians, the object of military occupation has been attained, in obtaining accurate and valuable information regarding the character of the country and opening the way to settlements. Although the Indians, when hostile, naturally seek the most broken country for their retreats, and one in following them would form an unfavorable impression of such districts of Montana, yet the percentage of "bad lands" is by no means great, in comparison to the vast areas of rich grazing, agricultural, and mineral lands in this Territory. The natural grasses of Montana will give more strength to horses and mules than that found in any territory between this and the Rio Grande, and, judging from the condition of the game which abounds and the excellence of the beef which has been furnished the command during the past twelve months, I am satisfied that this country will soon become one of the

best stock-growing regions on the continent. I think the reports of the medical officers will show this climate as healthful as any that troops ever served in, and the natives of this section, I think, are as vigorous and hardy a race as can be found on the globe.

The occupation of this district has given protection to 400 miles of steamboat navigation of the Yellowstone River, and thrown open to settlement, besides the Yellowstone, the rich valleys of the Bighorn, Rosebud, Tongue, Powder, and Little Missouri Rivers. The telegraph is a military necessity, and I would earnestly recommend that these posts be connected by military telegraph with as little delay as practicable. Rapid and direct mail communication is needed with the terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad at Bismarck and the construction of that great national enterprise should, in my opinion, be encouraged by every legitimate means; the military advantages to be derived from its extension, though very great, would be incomparable with the political and commercial interests developed by opening this avenue of free communication between the Eastern States and the settlements of Montana and the Pacific slope.

WAR DEPARTMENT, *Washington City, April 22, 1878.*

DEAR SIR: Agreeably to your request of the 16th instant, I have the honor to transmit copy of Colonel Gibbon's and of General Sheridan's reports, dated respectively February 27 and March 21 last, recommending the establishment of a military post in the vicinity of the Milk River.

Yours, respectfully,

H. T. CROSBY, *Chief Clerk.*

Hon. M. MAGINNIS,
House of Representatives.

Indorsements on communication of Capt. Constant Williams, Seventh Infantry, dated For Belknap, Mont., February 23, 1878, reporting condition of Indian affairs in the Milk River region.

[First indorsement.]

HEADQUARTERS FORT BENTON, MONT.,
February 24, 1878.

Respectfully transmitted.

GUIDO ILGES,
Major Seventh Infantry, Commanding Post.

[Second indorsement.]

HEADQUARTERS DISTRICT OF MONTANA,
Fort Shaw, Mont., February 27, 1878.

Respectfully forwarded to headquarters Department of Dakota, as presenting an interesting and, I judge, a truthful account of the actual condition of affairs in the Milk River region.

I now feel but little apprehension of a combination being formed between the hostile Sioux north of the line and the, at present, peaceful tribes south of it. Should, however, those only who have sought safety for their camps across the line go to war, their numbers, as will be seen from this report, are formidable enough to call forth all the force that we can bring into the field and more too. This renders all the more necessary the establishment of a strong fort in the Milk River region, by which the loyalty of the local tribes, a foot-hold and depot of supplies in that country, will be assured.

The assistance of these friendly Indians will be a matter of considerable importance to us in the event of hostilities. With such a large force immediately on our borders, this question of hostility is one which cannot be ignored or put off by us. Unless some arrangement is entered into with the Canadian authorities, the question is one which we will be called upon sooner or later to meet, and the police force across the border is in no condition to enforce the provisions of international law, which makes it the duty of the neutral government to force the hostiles to release their prisoners and surrender their plunder, as well as to prevent them from refitting and supplying themselves with ammunition. The large amount of metallic ammunition in the possession of these Indians raises a suspicion of their hostile intent; and, should they take the

war-path on this side of the line, involves the Canadian government in the responsibility for their acts.

I have good authority for the statement that Sitting Bull himself was duly informed by the Canadian authorities that if his forces crossed to this side they would make the soldiers on both sides their enemies, and that he, not willing to be responsible for the acts of any coming on this side, removed with a few lodges to the vicinity of Fort Walsh, where he still remains.

Whatever the decision of the military authorities may be, I will state that all the troops in this district, except those at Fort Missoula, are in readiness to take the field at short notice, and it will take about twelve days, after notice, to concentrate them.

JOHN GIBBON,
Colonel Seventh Infantry, Commanding District.

[Third Indorsement.]

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT OF DAKOTA,
Saint Paul, March 19, 1878.

Official copies respectfully forwarded to headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, for the information of the Lieutenant-General.

ALFRED H. TERRY,
Brigadier-General, Commanding.

[Fourth Indorsement.]

HEADQUARTERS MILITARY DIVISION OF MISSOURI,
Chicago, March 21, 1878.

Respectfully forwarded. This is a very fair specimen of Indian gossip, which it would be well not to put too much faith in. There is a lot of bad Indians north and south of the British line. Neither government can be held responsible for their action, in my opinion. I think an international understanding to prevent the wild buffalo herds of that region from crossing the line, to and fro, would be about as sensible as an understanding to control the Indians. We want a good large post at or near the point on Milk River heretofore recommended.

P. H. SHERIDAN,
Lieutenant-General, Commanding.