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Expedition against Piegan Indians. Letter from the Secretary of the Interior in answer to the resolution of the House of March 4, 1870, in relation to the late expedition against the Piegan Indians

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EXPEDITION AGAINST PIEGAN INDIANS.

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. L E T T E R

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

IN ANSWER TO

*The resolution of the House of March 4, 1870, in relation to the late expedition against the Piegan Indians.*

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MARCH 8, 1870.—Referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs and ordered to be printed.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
*Washington, D. C., March 7, 1870.*

SIR: In answer to a resolution of the House of Representatives of the 4th instant, I have the honor to communicate herewith all information in this department "relative to the late expedition against the Piegan Indians."

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. D. COX, *Secretary.*

Hon. JAMES G. BLAINE,  
*Speaker of the House of Representatives.*

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D. C., March 7, 1870.*

SIR: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt, by reference from your department, of House resolution directing you to communicate to the House all the information in your department relative to the late expedition against the Piegans.

Said resolution having been referred to this office for report, I herewith submit copies of all the papers emanating from, and received at, this office relating to the matter.

The resolution, inclosed with your reference of the 5th instant, is herewith returned.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

E. S. PARKER,  
*Commissioner.*

Hon. J. D. COX,  
*Secretary of the Interior.*

HELENA, M. T., August 3, 1869.

SIR: I feel it my duty to report to you that I fear before long we may have serious difficulties between Indians and whites in this Territory, and I would urge upon you the necessity of applying for an immediate increase of military force in Montana to prevent this. There is no section of the country that has more Indians in it than Montana, taking into consideration those who permanently reside here and those who visit the Territory peaceably, or with hostile intentions. I think, taking them altogether, I can safely say that about 50,000 to 60,000 men, women, and children is the total of Indians frequently located here; and yet there is, if I am not mistaken, no section of the Indian country that has fewer troops stationed in it. At present there are not over four hundred men in the Territory, inclusive of the four companies of the second cavalry, which have recently arrived, and, as I understand, are to leave and rejoin the Department of the Platte before winter. Should they do so that would leave about two hundred men. These troops are distributed as follows: One company of infantry at Camp Cooke, which is situated on the Missouri River, seventy-five miles below Fort Benton; three companies of infantry at Fort Shaw, located on same river, sixty-five miles southwest of Benton; and three companies of infantry at Fort Ellis, near Bozeman City, one hundred miles southeast of Helena. All these companies are very weak, averaging from twenty-five to thirty men each. The cavalry battalion, under Brevet Colonel Brackett, is also stationed at Fort Ellis.

My reasons for apprehending trouble are that war parties of Indians from the Powder River country, the British possessions, and from Idaho and Washington Territories, frequently visit this Territory and often commit depredations on the whites; the whites retaliate by killing *any* Indians they may chance to meet, sometimes in the most brutal and cowardly manner. I cannot now give you a detailed account of these hostile meetings, which occur frequently.

There is a white element in this country which, from its rowdy and lawless character, cannot be excelled in any section, and the traffic in whisky with Indians in this Territory is carried on to an alarming extent. This frequently causes altercations between whites and Indians, resulting often in bloodshed, and, as they occur in sections of the Territory where the civil authorities acknowledge themselves to be powerless to act, nothing but military force can, at present, put a stop to it. The law-abiding citizens of Montana are anxious for peace and quiet with Indians, and would willingly give any assistance in their power to aid the authorities to carry out the laws, if they were backed by force. From reliable reports that I receive daily it is a wonder to me that open war with the Indians has not broken out already; but, as yet, only several skirmishes between Indians and soldiers and citizens have occurred. General De Trobriand, commanding this district, has offered me every assistance in his power to enforce the laws, but, as you see, his force is very small to do much. I intend to do all I can to arrest some of the citizens who, about ten days ago, committed the cowardly murder of a harmless old man and a boy, about fourteen years old, at Fort Benton; they were Piegans, (a part of the Blackfoot nation.) These Indians were shot in broad daylight in the streets of the town. I think I can arrest the murderers, but doubt very much if I can convict them in any court. Nothing can be done to insure peace and order till there is a military force here strong enough to clear out the roughs and whisky-sellers in the country; but I will do all I can with the limited means in

my power to prevent a war, or any serious difficulties between the whites and Indians.

With much respect, your obedient servant,

ALF. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indians.*

Hon. COMMISSIONER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D. C.*

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D. C., October 7, 1869.*

SIR: I have the honor to transmit herewith copies of communications received from General Sully, superintendent of Indian affairs for Montana Territory, giving information of extensive depredations by Indians of that Territory, of the Blackfeet and Piegan tribes.

This bureau is powerless to control and prevent these depredations, and I respectfully suggest the communications above referred to be transmitted to the Secretary of War, with the request that the military take prompt measures to check them.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

E. S. PARKER,  
*Commissioner.*

Hon. J. D. COX,  
*Secretary of the Interior.*

SUPERINTENDENCY INDIANS OF MONTANA,  
*Helena, Montana, September 27, 1869.*

SIR: I have to report two more depredations committed by the Indians, and supposed to be Blackfeet. This occurred four days ago, at a place not over seven miles from this city.

A citizen by the name of James Quint, well known to all the people here, lost some horses and mules; he started out to look for them, and not returning, search was made for him, and his body found; pierced with arrows and horribly mutilated. Nine Indians were seen a few days before, driving off the stock in that direction.

The Indians have now been at this work for over two months, and as no one, neither the military nor citizens, have made any attempts whatever to check them, they are daily becoming more bold in their operations.

I am told by those who have lost stock, that they ride up boldly in day time in the presence of citizens, and take what animals they please. Of course, this all comes to me with their complaints, thinking it is my duty to punish the Indians, and recover the stolen property. There are already over four hundred horses and mules known to have been stolen lately; that number, at \$150 each, will make an expensive claim against the government.

With much respect, your obedient servant,

ALF. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indians.*

Hon. E. S. PARKER,  
*Commissioner Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C.*

SUPERINTENDENCY INDIANS OF MONTANA,  
*Helena, M. T., September 25, 1869.*

SIR: I have the honor to inclose herewith, for your information, a letter from Alex. Culbertson, regarding the condition and feeling of the Blackfeet Indians.

I have known Mr. Culbertson a long time, and for a great many years he has lived with the Blackfeet. The information given in his letter can be relied upon.

With much respect, your obedient servant,

ALF. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indians.*

Hon. COMMISSIONER INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D. C.*

BLACKFOOT AGENCY,  
*September 2, 1869.*

DEAR SIR: Having met with Major Pease, your special agent for the Blackfoot Indians, and from whom I learned your arrival in the country, connected with Indian matters, I thought it would not be amiss for me to drop you a few lines on that subject. I have recently arrived from the interior, where I have been since last winter, with the Bloods and Blackfoot Indians. These people are perfectly friendly to the whites, and up to the time I left there they evinced no disposition to be otherwise. They were no little surprised to hear of the frequent raids made upon the whites by the Piegans. These people have always professed to be the friend and protector of the whites, living as they have in almost constant communication with Benton. I have not seen those Indians to know for what they are now committing these depredations upon the whites, but really my knowledge of their character for a great many years will not permit me to think that there exists a general hostile feeling among them. On the contrary, these depredations have been committed by a portion of the young rabble, over whom the chiefs have no control, and nothing but the strong arm of the government can control.

The non-ratification of treaties made with these Indians has had anything else but a tendency to keep them quiet. Bound by no treaty stipulations, they think they have a perfect right to help themselves to any horses falling in their way. I think, however, by keeping up this agency, with a small amount of provisions, &c., to be given by the agent as their wants may require, will go a long way toward keeping them quiet, as the fast decreasing herds of buffalo, their only dependence for food, will reduce them wholly to dependence on the government for support.

The Bloods and Blackfeet—who are distinct and live remote from each other—have no sympathy with the Piegans, and of course will take no part with them in any way. I expect, in a short time, these two tribes will visit this place, when a little straightforward talk will convince them that the government is determined on making them keep the peace.

As I intend spending the winter here, I may have the pleasure of meeting you here in person, when I can give you, in regard to these Indians, all the reliable information you may want.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

ALEX. CULBERTSON.

General A. SULLY.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
OFFICE INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
November 6, 1869.

SIR: I inclose herewith, for your information, copy of correspondence between Lieutenant General P. H. Sheridan and the adjutant general United States Army, relative to punishing the Piegan Indians in Montana for depredations committed by them, and have to request that you will report to this department any further information you may have of said Indians, and also see that the peaceable Indians are not molested by the invading troops.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

E. S. PARKER,  
*Commissioner.*

General A. SULLY,  
*Superintendent Indian Affairs, Helena, Montana.*

HEADQUARTERS MILITARY DIVISION OF THE MISSOURI,  
*Chicago, Illinois, October 21, 1869.*

GENERAL: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of a letter from the Secretary of the Interior, with accompanying reports of General Sully, Mr. Pease, and Mr. Culbertson, Indian agents in Montana, on the subject of depredations by the Piegan tribe of Indians.

We have had so few troops in Montana, on account of the expiration of enlistments, as to have been unable to do much against these Indian marauders, but the regiments are now filling up, and I think it would be the best plan to let me find out exactly where these Indians are going to spend the winter, and about the time of a good heavy snow I will send out a party and try and strike them. About the 15th of January they will be very helpless, and if where they live is not too far from Shaw or Ellis, we might be able to give them a good hard blow, which will make peace a desirable object.

To simply keep the troops on the defensive will not stop the murders. We must occasionally strike where it hurts, and if the General-in-Chief thinks well of this, I will try and steal a small force on this tribe from Fort Shaw or Ellis during the winter. It numbers about 1,500 men, women, and children, all told.

Very respectfully,

P. H. SHERIDAN,  
*Lieutenant General.*

Brevet Major General E. D. TOWNSEND,  
*Adjutant General U. S. A., Washington, D. C.*

HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY,  
*Adjutant General's Office, Washington, November 4, 1869.*

SIR: Referring to your communication of the 21st ultimo, relative to depredations by the Piegan Indians in Montana, I have the honor to inform you that your proposed action, as stated therein, for the punishment of these marauders, has been approved by the General of the Army.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

E. D. TOWNSEND,  
*Adjutant General.*

Lieutenant General P. H. SHERIDAN,  
*Com'g Mil. Div. of the Missouri, Chicago, Ill.*

Official copies respectfully furnished for the information of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

E. D. TOWNSEND, *Adjutant General.*

SUPERINTENDENCY MONTANA, HELENA, M. T.,  
*February 10, 1870.*

SIR: I have delayed any official report to you concerning the late attack of Colonel Baker's command on a camp of the Blackfeet. I did this as I had so many conflicting reports, from various sources, of this affair; and some of them apparently were so greatly exaggerated that I withheld making any report till I could get something more definite; so I directed Lieutenant Pease, United States Army, agent for Blackfeet, to proceed to a camp of these Indians, who were on the Marias River, about thirty miles from Benton, of which camp Big Jake was the chief. Herewith I have the honor to inclose you a copy of the result of his visit and interview with these Indians.

The report that Lieutenant Pease sends is entirely what the Indians say of the affair and of course it is natural to suppose it is prejudiced in their own favor. It is the Indians' side of the question, and, as I am here as their only representative, I consider it my duty to give them a hearing.

Colonel Baker's attack was a complete surprise, and the punishment he gave them was one of the most severe lessons that Indians have received. It is to be hoped this lesson will inspire them with some respect for the government, which heretofore the majority of the nation did not seem to have. In addition to this punishment, the small-pox, which they had at the time, has since spread fearfully among them. This may strike such terror among them, and make them so dejected, that they will be comparatively quiet this winter, and there may be no difficulty in making arrangements with the nation next spring that will secure peace in this section of country, at least for a year or two. I should have said, comparatively speaking, for I do not believe perfect peace can be preserved till measures are taken to stop the Indians north of the line from stealing horses and selling them in the British Possessions. However, in about two months, matters will more fully develop themselves, and we will be better able to form an opinion of what will be the future conduct of these Indians.

It is perhaps to be regretted, since it was necessary to chastise a portion of the Piegans, that Mountain Chief's band was not the band that suffered. The young men of this band have been lately notoriously the worst of the Blackfeet in committing depredations on the citizens. I know that General De Trobriand, commanding this district, so considered them, as well as myself; but they, the most guilty, escaped, and got across the line.

I refrain from making any comments on the reported unnecessary and uncalled-for cruelty on the part of the soldiers. Both sides should be heard before one can justly make up his mind on the subject.

With much respect, your obedient servant,

ALF. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indian Affairs.*

Hon. E. S. PARKER,  
*Commissioner Indian Affairs, Washington.*



BENTON, MONTANA, *February 6, 1870.*

GENERAL: I have the honor to state, since making my report of the 30th January, on the affair between United States soldiers and Piegan Indians, which took place January 3, that I have visited the camp of Big Jake, of the Piegan tribe of Blackfeet Indians, and have seen and talked with several Indians who were in the camp which was attacked by the soldiers. I have from these sources gained the following additional information:

Of the one hundred and seventy-three killed on the 23d, thirty-three were men; of these, fifteen only were such as are called by them as young, or fighting men; these were between the ages of twelve and thirty-seven; the remaining eighteen were between the ages of thirty-seven and seventy; eight of the latter were between the ages of sixty and seventy; ninety were women—thirty-five between the ages of twelve and thirty-seven, and fifty-five between the ages of thirty-seven and seventy; the remaining fifty were children, none older than twelve years, and many of them in their mothers' arms. Out of two hundred and nineteen belonging to Red Horn's camp, only forty-six survived; among them are nine young men who escaped during the attack, and five who were away hunting. The lives of eighteen women and nineteen children, (none of them more than three years of age, and the majority of them much younger,) some of whom were wounded, were spared by the soldiers. Red Horn himself was killed. At the time of the attack this camp was suffering severely with small-pox, having had it among them for two months, the average rate of deaths among them having been six daily.

The remainder of the Piegan Indians, with the exception of one band, upon hearing of the annihilation of Red Horn's band, and fearing that they might be called upon to share a similar fate, broke up their camps and fled—some of them going to the Milk River, near the Sweet-grass Hills, and others going further to the north. Nothing has been heard definitely of Mountain Chief's band, but it is reported he has gone to British lines. Big Jake and his band (Piegan\*) are on the Marias River, some thirty miles from Benton. He has with him ninety-four lodges. Big Nose, a Little Bear chief, is with him, with five lodges; together with Bear Skin, with four lodges. The small-pox is making fearful havoc among them; deaths average from five to seven daily.

Big Jake expresses himself as desirous of maintaining friendly relations with the whites, and tells me that he shall not, under any circumstances, wage war upon them, and that he will refrain from all hostilities. I am satisfied he will do as he says.

He tells me that those Indians who have gone to Milk River expressed themselves as being much frightened, and not disposed to retaliate upon the whites for the death of their friends.

It is impossible as yet to arrive at a just conclusion as to their real feelings. The punishment they have received at the hands of the soldiers has certainly spread terror among them; still it is hardly reasonable to expect that they will be satisfied without the revenge that an Indian nature craves.

Big Jake, in the course of the talk I had with him, asked me where he should trade. I told him not to trade at all at present; to wait and I would make the attempt either to give him a trade or provisions. The presence of disease among these bands will, as among all other bands of Blackfeet in this vicinity, render it almost impossible for them to subsist, as they otherwise could, by hunting.

\* I believe Big Jake is a "Blood," not a "Piegan;" but I am not certain of this.



Hitherto, availing themselves of the privilege of trading, they have supplied themselves with such necessaries as they required. Now that trade with these Indians has been stopped, and in view of their urgent requirements for provisions for their sick, I would respectfully request that I may be furnished with subsistence for them as early as is possible. Big Jake expresses himself as desirous of remaining on the Marias River—for there the buffalo were.

With much respect, your obedient servant,

W. B. PEASE, U. S. A.,  
*United States Indian Agent.*

General A. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indian Affairs, Helena, M. T.*

I certify the above is a true copy.

ALF. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indian Affairs.*

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SUPERINTENDENCY OF MONTANA,  
*Helena, M. T., February 18, 1870.*

SIR: I received your letter of February 4th a few days ago, in regard to the expediency of abandoning the Blackfoot agency on the Teton River. I have thought the matter over carefully and have come to the conclusion that, while there are several reasons why it would be well to abandon the place, yet I think there are other reasons why it would not be well, in the present uncertain state of Indian affairs, to do so.

The location of the agency, as far as regards agriculture, is very good, but it is too near that portion of the Territory likely to be settled. Up the Marias River would be, in this respect, a much better locality, and even should the agency be kept up as a permanency, I would, on this account, recommend its removal as soon as practicable to that place.

There is a small portion of the Piegans, and part, if not the majority, of the Bloods who are not disposed to be hostile, at least they so declare. How far the terrible scourge from which they are now suffering may cause them to express these pacific sentiments, it is impossible to say; but it is not reasonable to suppose that the loss they lately suffered from the military is likely to make them any more friendly. The punishment, though very severe, fell on a very small portion of the Blackfoot nation, who are reported to have, all combined, about three thousand lodges.

I have already reported to you about the small-pox breaking out among those people; but, from late reports, I find I have underestimated the number dying daily. One of the Jesuit priests, who left here to visit this nation, just after the attack of the troops, to render what assistance he could to the sick, writes to Father Van Gerph, of this city, giving a report of their sufferings, which is much more severe than what I heard. When this disease broke out among the Gros Ventres last summer, the prompt and humane action on the part of the department checked it, and relieved the sufferings of this nation. The disease has nearly disappeared in that section, and is only confined to a few Assinaboines.

The Gros Ventres were our friends, and while such could not be said of the Blackfoot nation, and a punishment of them will no doubt result in good, yet when a community are suffering fearfully, the call of humanity urges us to render assistance to these people, although they may

not be altogether our friends. Should the government, therefore, decide to assist these people with medical assistance and provisions, the agency would be useful as a hospital; and, on the other hand, should it be necessary next spring to make war against the Blackfeet, this place would be useful as a point to collect that portion of the tribe who did not wish war. I, however, now that the small-pox has broken out so badly, do not think the prospects of a war are as good as they were.

I would not, therefore, recommend the abandoning of the agency at present.

In a short time, say, at the furthest, two months, we will both be able to decide what more is best to be done. It does not cost a great deal to keep it up, and should, at any moment, it be deemed desirable to desert it, I can telegraph you to that effect.

With much respect, your obedient servant,

ALF. SULLY, U. S. A.,  
*Superintendent Indian Affairs.*

Honorable COMMISSIONER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D. C.*

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