

General William S. Harney on the Northern Plains*

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From a distant hill on 3 September 1855, William S. Harney observed his troops as they routed Little Thunder's band of Brulé Sioux at the Battle of Blue Water, Nebraska Territory. With the defeat of the Brulé, he prepared his soldiers to march overland through Sioux territory from Fort Laramie northeast to Fort Pierre on the Missouri River. This battle and Harney's overland march were the highlights of the 1855-1856 Sioux expedition, the first major military operation against the Lakota. For the first time, American soldiers found themselves marching and wintering on the northern plains as their commander brought war to the lands of the western Sioux. In his year on the plains, Harney gained a reputation as an Indian fighter and developed strategies for countering the Plains Indians' hit-and-run tactics of guerrilla warfare. As his soldiers suffered through a cold winter at Fort Pierre, he also recommended that the army borrow various ideas from the Sioux for the housing and clothing of troops in cold climates.

Harney's military expedition against the Sioux was the culmination of an inevitable clash between the United States and the

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Lakota, or western Sioux. By 1850, these were the two dominant powers on the northern plains, and all that was needed was an incident to ignite the ugly tempers that existed on both sides. That ill-fated event occurred on 18 August 1854, when a Mormon immigrant traveling west on the overland trail reported to the military commander at Fort Laramie that a young Miniconjou man had killed and butchered his lame cow. The Mormon demanded restitution. The next day, John L. Grattan, a green, untried West Point officer, was annihilated along with his entire command when he attempted to arrest the young Sioux at Conquering Bear's Brulé camp a short distance east of Fort Laramie.

Official reports following the massacre concluded that Grattan and his superior officer were in error. Government leaders, therefore, did not support any retaliation against the Brulé. With success on their side, the Sioux began to increase their harassment of white travelers along the Platte River. These petty raids became serious in November of 1854 when a small party of Sioux stopped the stage from Salt Lake City, killed three men, and took ten thousand dollars in gold from the coach. In order to secure the road and make it safe for American travelers, the War Department ordered a military expedition to take the field and punish the Sioux the next summer. Col. William S. Harney was assigned to command the expedition.¹

Harney, commander of the Second Dragoons, had thirty-seven years of military experience when he assumed command of the Sioux expedition under his brevet rank of brigadier general. He was a veteran of many Indian campaigns, the most notable being the Black Hawk War and the Second Seminole War, not to mention the fact that he had also spent time fighting southern plains tribes on the Texas frontier. Nor was he a stranger to the northern plains, having accompanied Gen. Henry Atkinson and Maj. Benjamin O'Fallon in 1825 on their treaty-making expedition to the upper Missouri River tribes. In appearance, Harney was the perfect dragoon. He stood over six feet tall, and his hair and beard were long and white. He was often gruff and harsh, and many soldiers, both enlisted men and officers, were glad to leave

1. Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), pp. 113-15; Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie*, Nebraska State Historical Society Publications, vol. 25 (Lincoln, 1969), pp. 313-14, 518-19.

his field headquarters when he dismissed them. Despite his manner, he was a dashing soldier who disliked military details and preferred action. His disdain for regulation did not prevent him from being proud of honors and distinctions earned on the battlefield.²

Harney possessed the requirements necessary to command the Sioux expedition, but the fact that the Department of War did not have complete control over Indian relations complicated his military preparations. In 1849, Congress had transferred the Indian Office from the Department of War to the newly created Department of the Interior.³ As a result, the army had to work with civilian agents in the settlement of any issues with the Indians. This change displeased many military officials. Even though Congress had removed the army from the direct administration and supervision of Indian affairs, soldiers remained involved in Indian issues, acting as policing agents or peace negotiators. Because of this continued involvement with Indian tribes, many officers believed that the army should maintain control of all Indian affairs. Harney was one such officer; he disliked civilian control and made no effort to conceal his hostile attitude toward civilian supervision of the Indians of the northern plains. While preparing for the 1855 campaign, Harney wrote that the government should "make the Commanders of Military posts the Indian Agents of the districts in which those posts may be located. . . it is notorious that Commanding Officers, in the Indian country, already perform the better part of the drudgery [*sic*] of Indian Agents."⁴

As a result of these deep departmental jealousies, trouble plagued the Sioux expedition of 1855 from the beginning. Headquartered at Saint Louis in the spring, Harney experienced the usual delays associated with the commencement of any military expedition. Deliveries of supplies were late, and the quality of the

2. George Balch to Dearest and best of friends [his wife], 13 May 1855, George Balch Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Calif.; Logan U. Reavis, *The Life and Military Services of Gen. William Selby Harney* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand & Co., 1878), pp. 60-68; Augustus Meyers, *Ten Years in the Ranks, U. S. Army* (New York: Stirling Press, 1914), pp. 75-76.

3. S. Lyman Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1973), p. 65.

4. William S. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 24 July 1855, Field Records, Sioux Expedition, 1855-56, Letters Sent, Department of the West, Records of United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (this collection is hereafter cited as DW, RG 393, NA).

new recruits was bad since many of them were poorly trained and in ill health. Overriding all of Harney's troubles, however, was the hostility between the Interior and War departments. This animosity did more than thwart preparations for the expedition; it actually hindered Harney's campaign plans. To begin with, Harney noted that the Indian Office still permitted traders to maintain their trading activities in guns and ammunition with the Sioux. Harney viewed this open trade in arms at a time when the army was preparing to wage war against the Sioux as completely improper. It amounted to supplying the enemy during war and increased the level of danger for his soldiers.⁵

As the contraband issue flared, Commissioner of Indian Affairs George W. Manypenny added fuel to the fire when he instructed civilian Indian agents to inform their charges that any Indian who accompanied Harney would lose his land claims and cease to receive annuities from the United States. This threat made it impossible for Harney to employ Indian scouts. Capt. Henry Heth, Tenth Infantry, attempted to hire Indian auxiliaries from Kansas reservations, but the Sac and Fox, Shawnee, and Potawatomie all told Heth that they could not accompany the expedition unless the Indian Office consented.⁶ In order to secure scouts, Harney had to recruit whites who had some experience in the West. Everything seemed to be working against Harney in the spring and summer of 1855, and even he pessimistically observed, "little can reasonably be expected from the Expedition this year."⁷

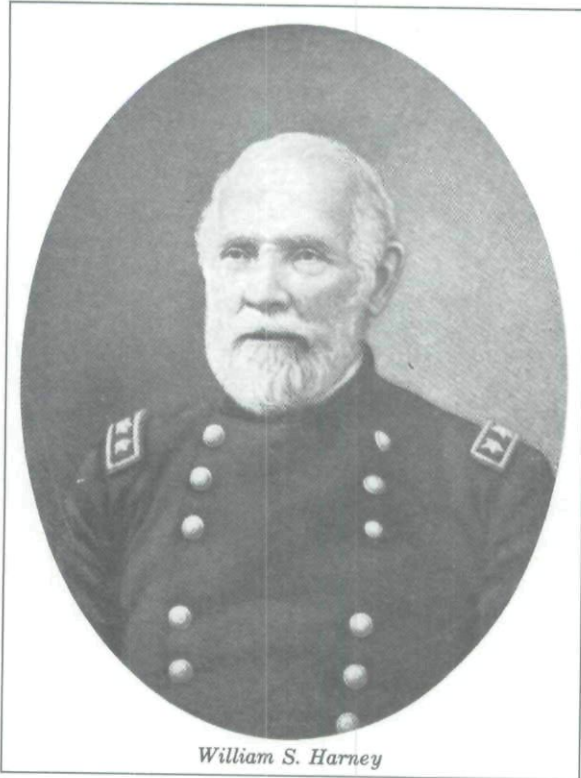
The troops in Harney's command finally moved west when infantry soldiers left Fort Leavenworth on 28 May 1855, headed for Fort Kearny, Nebraska Territory. As the soldiers walked, late spring rains fell, making the trail muddy and miserable. Several men died from cholera on this march. The men's morale, already low, sunk lower when Harney went into the field in August. Some officers quickly lost faith in their commander, claiming that on the march Harney had no regard for the rules of warfare, that he lacked common sense, and that he disregarded his men's health. As the summer drew to a close, his men also began to worry about the lateness of the year, fearing the harsh weather of the

5. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 13 May 1855, and Harney to Samuel Cooper, 26 Apr. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA; George Balch to his wife, 15 Aug. 1855, Balch Papers.

6. Harney to Indian Agent James Vaughn, 28 July 1855, Harney to Samuel Cooper, 26 July 1855, and Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 30 July 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.

7. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 2 June 1855, *ibid.*

northern plains. Harney himself did not want to lead a winter campaign, but he reasoned that a march north through Sioux territory, and particularly through the region between the Black Hills and the Missouri River, would flush some hostile bands and provide an opportunity for one or more decisive military engagements before the winter set in. Harney was not a conventional West Point officer; on the contrary, he was willing to try uncon-



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ventional tactics. His soldiers would face a late-season march on the northern plains if that was what it took to control the Sioux.⁸

On 20 August 1855, Harney and the main body of soldiers finally reached Fort Kearny, where the general finished assembling

8. Ray H. Mattison, ed., "The Harney Expedition against the Sioux: The Journal of Capt. John B. S. Todd," *Nebraska History* 43 (June 1962): 92-96; George Balch to his wife, 14 Aug. 1855, Balch Papers; Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 2 June, 3 Aug. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.

his southern land force, composed of companies of the Second Dragoons, Fourth Artillery, and Sixth and Tenth infantries. To complement this southern army, Harney had also sent six companies of the Second Infantry north on the Missouri River to the famous landmark of Fort Pierre. The Department of War had purchased the fort in the spring from the American Fur Company for use as a northern bastion in Harney's Sioux expedition. In June, the Second Infantry had taken supplies for fifteen hundred men and embarked on steamboats headed for this upper Missouri site. Accompanying the northbound troops was Lt. Gouverneur K. Warren of the Topographical Engineers who was to survey a military reserve surrounding the post. Finished with his duties, Warren left Fort Pierre on 8 August with six mixed-blooded Sioux and made an unauthorized but daring three-hundred-mile journey to Fort Kearny, where he joined the southern expeditionary forces on 22 August 1855. Warren's action provided the commander with reliable information regarding the location and disposition of the hostile Sioux who had been involved in the Grattan affair and later incidents on the overland trail. Based on the lieutenant's reports, Harney knew before he left Fort Kearny that the unfriendly Brulé were camping in the Sandhills of northwestern Nebraska.⁹

Armed with accurate data about the location of the hostile Sioux, Harney left Fort Kearny on 24 August and traveled west on the overland trail along the Platte River. The commander's general plan of attack, based on the lateness of the season, was to march infantry soldiers west of Ash Hollow and then turn them north to the White River, where they would meet another unit of soldiers coming from Fort Pierre. These two units would then enter the Black Hills and converge with the main body of cavalry, which was to travel across country from Fort Laramie to the north fork of the Cheyenne River. Harney, by following this plan, hoped to "force the Indians to the alternative of giving battle, or of deserting their families just at the opening of winter, when the latter, of necessity would be obliged to surrender or incur the risk of starving."¹⁰ In this section of land claimed by the western

9. Richmond L. Clow, "Mad Bear: William S. Harney and the Sioux Expedition of 1855-1856," *Nebraska History* 61 (Summer 1980): 134-37; Harney to Thomas, 2 June, 23 Aug. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA; Gouverneur K. Warren to Samuel Cooper, 7 Aug. 1855, in "Official Correspondence Relating to Fort Pierre," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 1 (1902): 390-91.

10. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 3 Aug. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.

Sioux, the United States considered all Sioux, except the Yank-ton, to be at war.¹¹

Faced with the prospect of a winter march on the northern plains, Harney's southern force of soldiers grudgingly continued west, following the South Platte River. They finally reached Ash Hollow and the North Platte on 2 September 1855. Near that place, Blue Water Creek flowed into the river from the north. Along this creek and several miles from the overland trail, forty-one lodges of the Brulé who had been involved in the raids against travelers on the immigrant route had made their camp. This group was Conquering Bear's band, which had been implicated in the Grattan affair, but Little Thunder was now the leader since Conquering Bear had died as a result of the initial incident. Warriors from this village had made successful raids during the summer, and their confidence was high. After all, they were camped between Fort Laramie and Fort Kearny, and no soldiers had tried to call them to account for their misdeeds.¹² On the evening of 2 September, by way of fur trader Pierre Louis Vasquez, the Sioux boldly sent word to Harney "that if he wanted peace he could have it, or if he wanted war that he could have that."¹³

By ten o'clock that night, Harney's troops were moving into combat positions. The general had decided to attack the Brulé camp at daybreak and to keep the Sioux between two military units. The cavalry was stationed north of the camp, and the main infantry unit would press from the south, hemming the Sioux in between them. On the morning of 3 September, as they watched the foot soldiers march toward their camp from the south, the Brulé lost their desire to fight. Little Thunder, meeting with Harney between the retreating Sioux and the advancing soldiers, professed his friendship. The general, in his turn, presented a list of grievances against the Brulé, including the Grattan affair, the Salt Lake stage incident, and several other summer depredations.¹⁴ If the Sioux wished to avoid a battle, Harney informed

11. Oscar F. Winship to Commanding Officer, Fort Pierre, 21 Aug. 1855, *ibid.*

12. Mattison, "Journal of Capt. John B. S. Todd," pp. 108-11; Richard C. Drum, "Reminiscences of the Indian Fight at Ash Hollow, 1855," *Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 16 (1911): 144, 151; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, pp. 114, 116.

13. Mattison, "Journal of Capt. John B. S. Todd," p. 110.

14. Drum, "Reminiscences of the Indian Fight," p. 144; Mattison, "Journal of Capt. John B. S. Todd," pp. 110-13; Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 5 Sept. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.

Little Thunder, the chief would have to produce the individuals who had committed these hostile acts. Harney was not ignorant of Indian ways; he knew that Little Thunder could not grant his request because the chief did not have the authority to speak for individual Brulé warriors. The general later wrote: "Not being able, of course, however willing he might have been, to deliver up all the butchers of our people; *Little Thunder* returned to his band to warn them of my decision, and to prepare them for the contest that must follow."¹⁵

The incident that followed, however, was not a contest. The infantry advanced from the south, firing their new Sharps rifles, which had long-range firepower. The volley from the infantry sent the Sioux madly retreating north, right into the cavalry that was positioned behind the camp to stop their retreat. After running headlong into the horse soldiers, the Sioux then broke toward the east, and the cavalry relentlessly pursued the fleeing Indians until the dragoons' horses tired. Watching the thirty-minute battle from a high hill, Harney had reason to be pleased at the outcome. His soldiers captured nearly seventy prisoners and killed eighty-six Sioux. Only four soldiers died.¹⁶ Harney spoke proudly of his men's performance, claiming that he had never seen "a finer military spirit displayed." The cavalry was brilliant, the commander noted, when it "made a most spirited charge, . . . pursuing [the Indians] for five or six miles over a very rugged country, killing a large number of them, and completely dispersing the whole party."¹⁷

Unwilling to lose the advantage over the western Sioux that this decisive victory had given him, Harney ordered his soldiers to continue implementing his general plan of operation, which included the fall march through Teton country. The soldiers who went north would winter with the other troops who were already garrisoned at Fort Pierre on the Missouri River. Some of Harney's officers considered the plan rash, expecting that the trip would cause unnecessary suffering for troops and animals. By 17 September, frost was already on the ground, and the men

15. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 5 Sept. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.

16. Ibid.; Drum, "Reminiscences of the Indian Fight," pp. 144-46; Mattison, "Journal of Capt. John B. S. Todd," pp. 111-14; Thomas Sweeny to Ell. [his wife], 17 Oct. 1855, Thomas S. Sweeny Letterbook, 1846-1860, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

17. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 5 Sept. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.

could anticipate the bitter winter ahead.¹⁸ Still, a winter campaign was not what Harney had in mind. Lieutenant Warren, who had seen a large section of the country on his ride from Fort Pierre to Fort Kearny, had reported: "A winter campaign could not often be made with success in the Dacota country, and all that should be attempted is to preserve the men and animals for early spring operations, when the emaciated condition of the Indian horses would prevent them [from] escaping and insure their easy capture."¹⁹ By wintering a portion of his troops in the heart of Sioux country, Harney planned to have the advantage in the spring. Even so, the general had serious reservations about a late-season march, but as commander he decided to take the risk in order to gain the upper hand against the Sioux. He wrote the secretary of war: "Altho' it was so late in the season that I had some misgivings about undertaking a march, deeper into their country & into a higher latitude, where the winters are so early & so severe, still I felt satisfied that I would lose much of my prestige [with the Sioux] by not doing so & that the results would more than compensate for any loss of animals & the temporary exposure of my men that might be incident to the march."²⁰

From Fort Laramie, where he had gone after the battle at Blue Water Creek, Harney sent a party back to Ash Hollow to collect the skin lodges that he had confiscated from the Sioux. Many of the Sioux survivors had been taken prisoner and would not need the lodges, which Harney had decided to use as a means of sheltering his men on the march. Designed by a people who spent both summer and winter on the northern plains, the animal-skin tepees were an improvement over the canvas tents issued by the United States Army. In using these lodges for shelter on their winter march, the soldiers participated in the ongoing cultural exchange between whites and Indians on the frontier. Even in the midst of hostilities, a continuous exchange of material culture took place between Indian and non-Indian.²¹

18. George Balch to his wife, 17 Sept. 1855, Balch Papers.

19. Gouverneur K. Warren, "Report of Lieutenant G. K. Warren, Topographical Engineer of the 'Sioux Expedition,' of Explorations in the Dacota Country, 1855," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 11 (1922): 75-76. This is an edited version of Warren's official 15 March 1856 report.

20. Harney to Secretary of War, 10 Nov. 1855, Fort Pierre, Post Records, Letters Received, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (this collection is hereafter cited as AGO, RG 94, NA).

21. George Balch to his wife, 17 Sept. 1855, Balch Papers; Oscar F. Winship to M. S. Howe, 17 Sept. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA. For an examination of a part of the ex-

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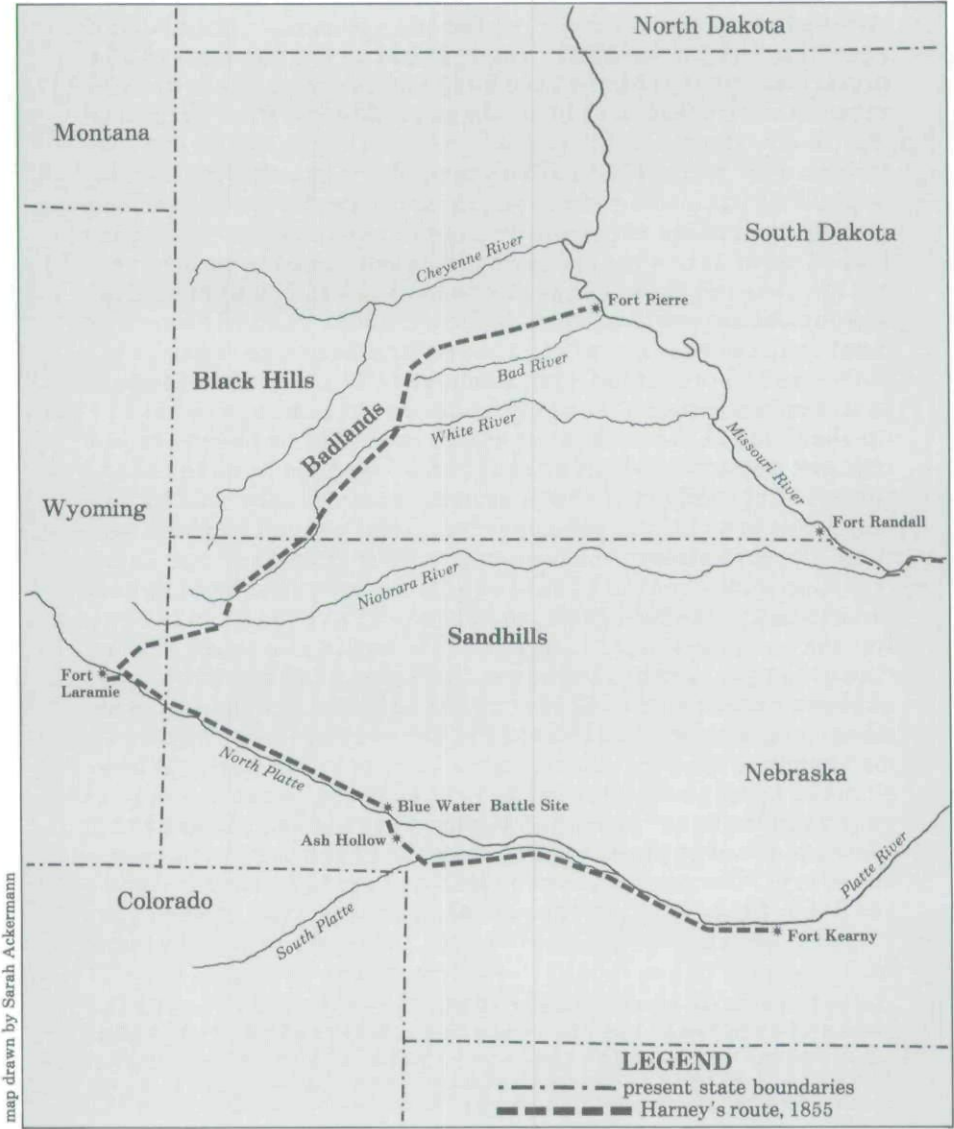
Before the soldiers left Fort Laramie to travel overland to Fort Pierre, Harney met with a large group of Sioux who had constructed camp just north of Fort Laramie. Thomas Twiss, civilian agent for the Upper Platte Agency, had promised these Sioux protection from Harney's troops. The commander met with representative leaders, and he again stressed his terms for peace. The Sioux, Harney insisted, must return the property they had stolen and surrender the individuals guilty of murdering the men on the Salt Lake mail coach a year before. The Indians listened to Harney and, obviously wanting to end the hostilities with him, agreed to comply with his demands. However, because their social and political structure prohibited any one leader from making a group decision without first having received a consensus agreement from the rest of the community, the Sioux could not immediately meet all of Harney's requirements. The commander, for his part, was not going to wait at Fort Laramie while the Sioux made up their minds. Instead, he acted decisively to demonstrate his military strength and convince any doubting Sioux of his intentions.²² Following the Fort Laramie meeting, Harney led his troops northeast through the heart of Sioux country, and the soldiers' dreaded winter march began.

Within a hundred fifty miles of Fort Laramie, Harney's scouts determined that the expedition was not likely to encounter any Indians en route to Fort Pierre. Following the White River, the expedition scouted the Sioux country from the Niobrara (L'eau-qui-court) River to the Cheyenne. After traveling one hundred miles along the White, Harney sent three companies of his command back to winter at Fort Laramie. The rest of the troops turned north and traveled through the Badlands, "a region of country very singular in its physical geography and well adapted for the concealment of Indians."²³ Here, too, the general's scouts found no Indians. The expedition finally reached Fort Pierre on 20 October 1855. No hostile Indians had been encountered, and no sol-

change that occurred between Indians and non-Indians, one can consult James A. Hanson, "Laced Coats and Leather Jackets: The Great Plains Intercultural Clothing Exchange," in *Plains Indian Studies: A Collection of Essays in Honor of John C. Ewers and Waldo R. Wedel*, ed. Douglas H. Ubelaker and Herman J. Viola, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, no. 30 (Washington, D.C., 1982), pp. 105-17.

22. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 26 Sept. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA; Harney to Secretary of War, 10 Nov. 1855, AGO, RG 94, NA.

23. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 9 Nov. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA.



diers had died. The last day in the field was a miserable one as the men traveled through a sleet storm from which their regular-issue clothing did not protect them. Lt. George T. Balch, an ordnance officer, walked the last thirteen miles, not to save his horse, he claimed, but to keep from freezing to death in the saddle. He noted that he did not want to take the field again with Harney.²⁴

The stay at Fort Pierre was also cheerless. The old trading post had deteriorated since the heyday of the fur trade on the upper Missouri. The military's attempt to renovate the fort during the summer had met with various setbacks, and the post remained dilapidated. When Harney arrived, he complained that human excrement covered the ground in some areas, making the post unsanitary. The wood, grass, and water that were essential for the survival of both troops and animals were unavailable near the post, and forage supplies assigned to the expedition were in storage at Council Bluffs because of transportation problems caused by low water in the Missouri River. Even though it was inadequate, Fort Pierre was now the headquarters of the Sioux expedition and, as such, was the center of operations for fourteen companies, six from the Second Infantry, four from the Sixth Infantry, and four from the Second Dragoons. As a result of the poor conditions at the fort, however, Harney ordered most of his men to winter at temporary cantonments north and south of Fort Pierre where they could find adequate grass and wood. Only two companies remained at the fort itself. Ten companies were housed in huts and Sioux lodges in three different encampments at distances of six, twelve, and eighteen miles north of Fort Pierre. A squadron of dragoons was sent south to the mouth of the Niobrara River to winter near the steamer *Gray Cloud*, which low water had stranded on its way to Fort Pierre. It carried potatoes, onions, and corn and promised to keep the men and horses well fed if not particularly comfortable.²⁵

In these temporary quarters, the hardships of an unusually cold northern plains winter were intensified. Living in tents or thin wooden cottages without adequate protection in temperatures of thirty-six degrees below zero, several men froze hands and feet so badly that some appendages had to be amputated.

24. George Balch to his wife, 21 Oct. 1855, Balch Papers.

25. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 9 Nov., 14 Dec. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA; Thomas W. Sweeny to Ell., Nov. 1855, Sweeny Letterbook.

Two civilians employed by the quartermaster even lost their penises due to the cold. Because of these harsh conditions, Harney feared that soldiers would leave the post without permission. To prevent desertions, the general offered a thirty-dollar reward to anyone who captured army deserters and returned them to military authorities. Harney himself spent part of the winter in a Sioux lodge like his men, and he court-martialed an officer who had let his men suffer from exposure while he had stayed dry and warm.²⁶

While Harney had not been able to anticipate the poor conditions at Fort Pierre (and the consequences of his winter march were thus greater than expected), his gamble that the benefits of the march north would compensate for the temporary discomforts of his men had proven essentially correct. The general's reputation and prestige among the Sioux had been vastly enhanced. From the battle at Ash Hollow through the long cold winter at Fort Pierre, he constantly made his presence known to the Sioux in their own country. He lumbered his command along like an ill-mannered grizzly bear, never leaving his course no matter what obstacle lay before him. The Sioux came to respect and fear such a leader, calling him "Mad Bear," and they pressed for peace. Even before he had left Fort Laramie, the Brulé and Oglala assembled there had asked for an end to the hostilities, promising to meet his demands. On 28 October, Red Leaf, Long Chin, and Spotted Tail, who had taken part in the mail-coach raid, surrendered themselves to military authorities at Fort Laramie. On 2 November, several Miniconjou leaders approached Fort Pierre under a white flag, suing for peace with Mad Bear. On the eighth, a large group of Sans Arc and Hunkpapa brought in seven stolen horses and indicated that other stolen animals were being taken to Fort Laramie.²⁷

With so many requests for peace, Harney wrote the secretary of war on 10 November, "I deem the present the most auspicious moment to attempt to bring this expedition & further military operations to a close." Harney judged the Sioux to be genuine in

26. Alfred Pleasonton to Henry Goulet, 10 Jan. 1856, and Harney to Samuel Cooper, 21 Feb. 1856, DW, RG 393, NA; Thomas W. Sweeny to Bodge, 10 Feb. 1856, Sweeny Letterbook; Clow, "Mad Bear," p. 145.

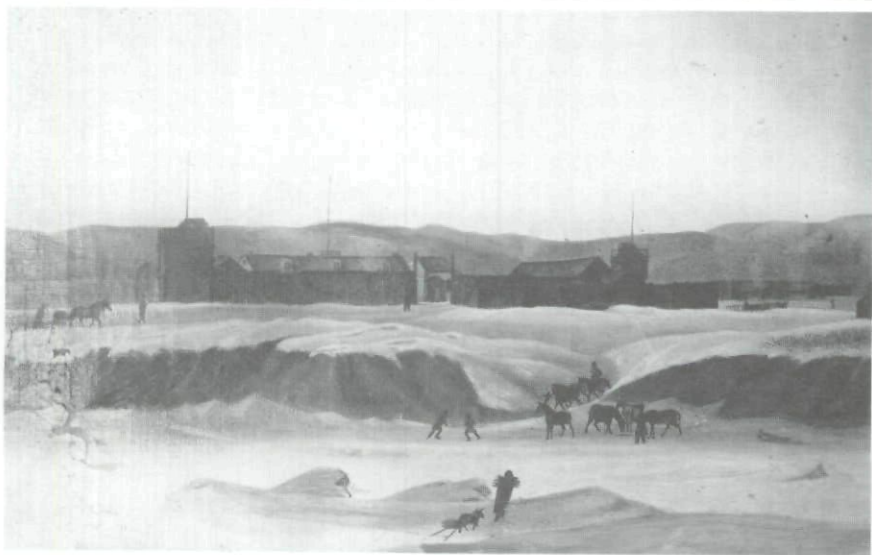
27. Thomas W. Sweeny to Barton, 10 Dec. 1855, Sweeny Letterbook; Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 9, 21 Nov. 1855, DW, RG 393, NA; Harney to Secretary of War, 10 Nov. 1855, AGO, RG 94, NA.

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their desire for peace and determined in their efforts to avoid further hostilities. He suggested to the secretary that a formal end to the expedition was better than an indecisive continuation. "In the spring," he wrote, "I will be in readiness & position to act efficiently against them & there is but one thing that I fear & that is that they will not resist." The Sioux could divide into small groups who "merely aim to keep out of the way" and thus "elude" the army, as they had managed to do as Harney marched north that fall. If the Sioux were successful in this tactic, Harney warned, the army would "have another Florida war on [its] hands & it will be for them [the Sioux] to fix the time for peace. On this immense frontier, the Indians, if they adopt that policy, will be capable of incalculable mischief."²⁸

Concluding that the time had come to negotiate, Harney acted swiftly. He told the Sioux assembled at Fort Pierre that he would meet with ten leaders from each band in the spring to discuss a

28. Harney to Secretary of War, 10 Nov. 1855, AGO, RG 94, NA.



Alfred Sully, then a captain in the Second Infantry, painted this picture of Fort Pierre as it appeared in the winter of 1856-1857, just a year after Harney's expedition had wintered there. The fort was abandoned in 1857.

peace settlement. He also sent a circular to all the absent Sioux tribes, summoning their headmen to this council at the beginning of March. Next, in a letter to the War Department he outlined his ideas for the negotiations and asked for authorization to proceed. The news spread quickly across Sioux country, and the Teton prepared to make their own winter march to comply with the summons of Mad Bear. Indian Agent Thomas Twiss, not wanting the commander and the army to get the upper hand by dictating the terms of peace, informed the Oglala and Brulé near Fort Laramie that they did not have to attend Harney's spring council. As a result, Harney ordered Twiss to remove himself from any peace negotiations, and he sent word to those bands, informing them that anyone absent from the spring meeting would be considered a hostile.²⁹

On 1 March 1856, Harney met with Sioux leaders at Fort Pierre, where Big Head's band of Yanktonais and the Oglala were the only groups not represented. The Oglala had been misled by Twiss, but the Yanktonais had refused to attend. Speaking to the assembled Sioux leaders, Harney told them that all hostile acts against the Pawnee had to stop. Earlier that year, he had discovered that most of the depredations committed against the whites had occurred between Forts Leavenworth and Kearny, which was Pawnee country. Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho had demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, in which the signatory tribes agreed to stop all future hostilities against each other, accept a specific tract of land as their own, and refrain from committing any hostile acts against the citizens of the United States. To avoid jeopardizing the terms of the 1851 treaty, the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho had gone to war against the Pawnee and each summer traveled to Pawnee territory, where they committed hostile acts against immigrant travelers in the hopes that the innocent Pawnee would then receive the blame. To prevent future raids against American travelers, Harney informed the Sioux tribes that henceforth they were to stay in their own territory and that they would be held responsible for all events that occurred in their own lands.³⁰

29. Ibid.; Alfred Pleasonton to William Hoffman, 19 Feb. 1856, DW, RG 393, NA. For a brief discussion of Harney's confrontation with Twiss, see Harry S. Anderson, "Harney v. Twiss; Nebraska Territory, 1856," *Westerners' Brand Book* 20 (Mar. 1963): 1-3, 7-8.

30. Harney to Secretary of War, 8 Mar. 1856, DW, RG 393, NA.

Harney also prohibited horse trading between the tribes and whites except at military posts and demanded that the Sioux surrender the man who had stolen the Mormon cow, the act that had started this series of events nearly eighteen months before. During the March council, Harney also forced the Sioux to select permanent headmen to govern their affairs with the whites. As his rationale for this demand, Harney pointed out to the secretary of war that much confusion among the tribes resulted from the fact that each non-Indian interest group—the president, the army, the Indian Office, the traders—appointed its own chiefs, undermining the power of all. Harney suggested that a cooperative effort between the military and the Indian Office would be mutually beneficial in strengthening the authority of selected chiefs. From this time forward, Harney told the Sioux, the Department of War and the Indian Office would acknowledge only those chiefs selected by this council. Harney was attempting to give the Sioux leaders the authority and power to control their reckless young men and support American peace efforts. The government, he reasoned, could make these chiefs important if it acted consistently toward them and gave them recognizable privileges and symbols of authority.³¹

With his various demands, the commander took a hard stand against the Sioux at the March council and that convinced even the proud Oglala that they should make peace with Mad Bear despite agent Twiss's contention that Harney had no authority over them. The Oglala arrived at Fort Pierre on 20 May 1856. To placate Harney and fulfill the provisions of the new treaty, the Oglala turned over the man who had killed the Mormon cow. At last, the Miniconjou Sioux whose actions had led to this series of confrontations with the Americans was now in the custody of the United States Army. In grand display, Mad Bear imprisoned the man but, in equally grand display, released him three days later.³² Harney was not going to miss an opportunity to flaunt his power. Even though Harney had the upper hand, the Senate failed to ra-

31. Alfred Pleasonton to William Hoffman, 5 Mar. 1856, and Pleasonton to Henry Wharton, 5 Mar. 1856, DW, RG 393, NA; U.S., Congress, House, *Presidential Message Transmitting Copies of Minutes of Council between Brevet Brigadier General William S. Harney and Sioux Indians, at Fort Pierre*, H. Ex. Doc., 34th Cong., 1st sess., 1855-1856, Serial 859, doc. no. 130, pp. 2-5; Harney to Secretary of War, 8 Mar. 1856, DW, RG 393, NA.

32. Harney to Secretary of War, 23 May 1856, DW, RG 393, NA; Thomas W. Sweeny to Bodge, 5 June 1856, Sweeny Letterbook.

tify his Sioux treaty. Bickering and jealousy between the Department of War and the Department of the Interior interfered with the ratification process and prevented any treaty settlement with the Sioux until 1868 at Fort Laramie.³³

After the May treaty ratification council with the Oglala ended, official military action against the Sioux ceased. The campaign over, Harney turned his attention toward more typical and mundane military duties, including the location of a new military post. Because it had proven so unsuitable, Fort Pierre was to be abandoned. Initially, Harney favored two garrison sites for maintaining military advantage on the northern plains, one between Fort Clarke and the mouth of the Yellowstone River in what is now North Dakota and another at the headwaters of the Little Missouri River in present-day Wyoming. In the end, Harney selected only one permanent site. Located downstream from Fort Pierre and thirty miles above the mouth of the Niobara River, the post was named Fort Randall.³⁴ Choosing this site was Harney's last major act of the Sioux expedition of 1855-1856.

Throughout the twelve-month campaign, William S. Harney as expedition commander had done more than direct a military offensive and negotiate a peace settlement with the western Sioux. The general had also occupied himself with developing workable military tactics to fight the northern plains horsemen in the future. While wintering at Fort Pierre, Harney formulated a strategy for plains conditions. He prefaced his observations of northern plains warfare by comparing the plains situation to campaigns against the Seminoles in Florida nearly two decades earlier. In Florida, Harney wrote, the Seminoles controlled the best field positions and, when pressed, could quickly retreat to others just as good. In the northern plains, "the troops [can] select and command the few positions, where the Indians can congregate, and from which they can act—Let these be occupied, and the Indians must cease to disturb the country, or they will soon cease to exist."³⁵ "Until every crevice is closed," Harney noted on another occasion, the Indian "is always reluctant to yield, but once convinced there is no escape, he gracefully submits to his fate."³⁶ Ac-

33. Robert M. Kvasnicka and Herman J. Viola, eds., *The Commissioners of Indian Affairs, 1824-1977* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 61; Anderson, "Harney v. Twiss," pp. 7-8.

34. Harney to Samuel Cooper, 22 Feb., 30 June 1856, DW, RG 393, NA.

35. *Ibid.*, 20 Jan. 1856.

36. Harney to Lorenzo Thomas, 12 Mar. 1856, *ibid.*

cording to Harney's observation, the most successful tactic to be used against the northern plains tribes was the control of the strategic locations by force.

This garrison concept was not an innovative idea in mid-nineteenth-century warfare, but Harney also recommended changes in the individual soldier's dress and offensive tactics so that the army could launch an effective winter campaign from these northern garrisons. Before any successful winter expeditions were made at northern latitudes, Harney noted that changes had to be made in the military clothing issued to soldiers. He recommended that buffalo moccasins replace the traditional military footwear after the first of December. To protect the hands, he suggested new gloves made from buckskin and flannel, with large folding cuffs to cover the coat sleeve. In addition, the troops required buffalo coats to shield them from the wind and headgear made of fur to protect their ears and faces from frost-bite.

Bitter experience had also taught the general that the regular-issue army tent was not fit for the northern plains. In its place, Harney recommended that the War Department purchase skin lodges from the plains tribes. Besides the lodges that Harney's soldiers took from the Brulé at Blue Water, the only other source for lodges that winter had been from traders who had charged extremely high prices for them. Harney suggested that the army purchase buffalo lodges directly from the tribes. He believed that one hundred lodges, each made from twelve buffalo hides, would comfortably shelter eight hundred to one thousand soldiers. In addition to the comfort and protection that the hide lodge provided, it could also be transported from one area to another with ease. Once the soldiers had proper clothing, shelter, and horses, small units composed of one hundred men could be an efficient operating force against the northern plains groups during the winter. By adopting the dress and lodging of the enemy, the soldiers could, Harney claimed, take the upper hand on the northern plains, fighting the tribes during the winter when the Indians were most vulnerable.³⁷

As Harney studied the material goods of the Sioux, he also observed their society and the fact that it was undergoing great change. Buffalo herds were declining as a food supply because of

37. Harney to Samuel Cooper, 21, 22 Feb. 1856, *ibid.*

continued non-Indian encroachment onto their range. Disease was also taking its toll among the northern plains peoples, and their numbers were decreasing. These outside forces, Harney stated, were exerting great pressures on the plains tribes and would cause them in the future to seek aid and assistance from the United States government. In short, the general was pessimistic about the future of the Sioux, and he spent time considering ways in which the government could assist them. The United States, he averred, had a duty "to requite in some degree, this unfortunate race, for their many sufferings—consequent to the domain of our people on the soil of this Continent."³⁸ When Harney returned to temporary duty on the northern plains following the signing of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, he planned and built the first government agencies on the Great Sioux Reservation, signaling the beginning of Sioux dependency on the United States for their subsistence.

During his twelve-month campaign on the northern plains, Harney demonstrated that he was an imaginative officer, one who was willing to experiment and one who knew his adversary. Both the Sioux and his own soldiers and officers questioned Harney's methods at times, but the general got results, and the Sioux were subdued in 1855 and 1856. Because of the Sioux expedition, history has secured for Harney a reputation as a great Indian fighter, but he is most often remembered for the high number of Indian casualties in the affair at Blue Water. In 1865, Maj. Gen. Samuel Ryan Curtis wrote, "since General Harney's attack of the Sioux, many years ago at Ash Hollow, the popular cry of settlers and soldiers on the frontier favors an indiscriminate slaughter, which is very difficult to restrain."³⁹ Forgotten was Harney's quick settlement of the hostilities, his careful observations of Indian culture, and his recommendations for fighting under northern plains conditions.

By the end of the Civil War, Mad Bear had become a legend on the northern plains, but the general himself had retired at the beginning of the war. In 1868, Harney returned briefly to the northern plains as a member of the peace commission seeking to end the Red Cloud war. Not surprisingly, the retired general sup-

38. Harney to Secretary of War, 8 Mar. 1856, *ibid.*

39. U.S., Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), p. 503.

ported the position of fair play for the Sioux. After the successful conclusion of the 1868 treaty negotiations, Harney was temporarily placed in command of the Sioux territory. It was his last assignment on the northern plains.⁴⁰

40. Remi Nadeau, *Fort Laramie and the Sioux Indians* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 240; William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1891), 2:436.

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