

A Neglected Cause of the Sioux Uprising

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IN TERMS of lives lost, property destroyed, and tragic consequences for both Indians and whites, the Sioux (or Dakota) Uprising in Minnesota in the summer of 1862 has few, if any, parallels in American history. Those who have investigated the war, whether soon after or in later times, probably would find common ground with John G. Nicolay, one of President Lincoln's private secretaries. In Minnesota at the time on a treaty-making assignment, he noted that from "the days of King Philip to the time of Black Hawk, there has hardly been an outbreak so treacherous, so sudden, so bitter, and so bloody, as that which filled the State of Minnesota with sorrow and lamentation. . ."¹

Aside from its severity, the Sioux rebellion has another distinction as well. Although the 1,500 or so Indians most involved would be defeated and dispersed by the early fall of 1862, the incident was destined to be the first of many that would plague the frontier until the final Indian surrender at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890. Thus the outbreak in Minnesota was the initial and most destructive campaign waged by the Plains Indians during this period. Perhaps this helps to explain why there has always been a keen interest in the motivation behind the uprising.

The overall causes of the conflict are well known, and some of them will only be briefly discussed. Most of them stem from the constant demands for Indian lands made by westward-moving settlers and consequent treaties to "legalize" the land take-overs. The government negotiated a series of treaties with the Sioux which, including those signed in 1858, resulted in the loss of practically all of their Minnesota lands except for a ten-mile-wide reservation on the south side of the Minnesota River from west of New Ulm to Big Stone Lake. This area did not include a good hunting ground, so the Sioux, a nomadic and proud people, now found themselves largely dependent for food and money on the form of annuities provided by the government under the terms of the various treaties. While some Sioux were converted to Christianity and engaged in farming as they were encouraged to do, most of them refused to conform, insisting that the treaties were unfair, that white settlers were encroaching upon their lands and abusing them and their women, and that the government's agents were making no attempt to protect them. In short, the Sioux remained "suspicious and anxious," and by the early 1860s the "frontier had become extremely combustible."² As seen elsewhere in this issue, the explosion

¹Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *Lincoln's Secretary Goes West: Two Reports by John G. Nicolay on Frontier Indian Troubles 1862*, 45 (La Crosse, Wis., 1965). For statements on the severity of the uprising, see Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:269 (Mankato, 1908); William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:viii, 212 (St. Paul, revised edition, 1961); C. M. Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising*, vii (New York, 1959); Robert Huhn Jones, *The Civil War in the Northwest*, 24 (Norman, Okla., 1960); and Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, 1 (St. Paul, revised edition, 1976).

²Willoughby M. Babcock, "Minnesota's Indian War," in *Minnesota History*, 38:93 (September, 1962); Carley, *Sioux Uprising*, 6 (quotes). For an extended analysis of the underlying causes, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:212-241.

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at last occurred on August 17, 1862, with the killing of five settlers at Acton and early on August 18 with the attack led by Little Crow on the Lower Sioux Agency.

Why did the Sioux become anxious for war? Did they truly believe they could emerge victorious? And if so, what led them to that conclusion? Admittedly, these are difficult questions to answer, if for no other reason than that the Sioux left few written records. But as with other "inarticulate" nonwhite groups in American history, evidence bearing on their views and actions does exist in the form of letters, reports, and reminiscences of whites who in some way had direct contact with them. In the case of the Sioux, for example, this would include settlers in the area, reservation employees and their families, missionaries, government agents, captives of the Indians, soldiers, newspaper reporters, and the like. And there are a few long-after Indian accounts. If used with caution, the testimony from these various quarters could prove to be highly significant. Some of it, in fact, suggests an avenue of thought which has not been adequately considered by historians — namely, that the Civil War then raging between the North and the South played a decisive role in convincing the Sioux that the time was ripe for their own war against the Union. Indeed, as one perceptive observer of the uprising later put it: "The outbreak will not be fully accounted for until we have linked it with the Southern rebellion."³

FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, the Sioux were well aware of the armed conflict taking place below the Mason-Dixon line. As news of the war reached the reservations, either through the newspapers (which many of the mixed-bloods and some of the Indians could read), or by word of mouth, it "would be taken up and passed on to be circulated among the lodges." According to Jannette E. De Camp Sweet, whose first husband had charge of the lumber mill at the Lower Agency, the Sioux came almost daily to her house "with their bags of corn to be ground, and would linger about the doors and windows asking questions and receiving answers about everything usually discussed . . . but they seemed more especially interested in the conflict between our disrupted states." For that matter, Little Crow himself "watched the war between the North and the South with the deepest solicitude. His runners were always early at the office waiting arrival of the mail, and, after gathering the news concerning the war, hastened to their chief."⁴

During the summer of 1862 the war in the eastern theater was going badly for the Union. News of General George B. McClellan's abortive Peninsular Campaign apparently did not escape the attention of the Sioux. "We understood that the South was getting the best of the fight," Big Eagle later recalled in his famous account of the uprising, "and it was said that the North would be whipped." Stephen R. Riggs, a Presbyterian missionary,

confirmed this point. Writing several years after the outbreak, he noted that when "a battle occurred between our forces and the rebels, in which the latter had the advantage in any respect, our Indians were sure to learn the fact, and, oftentimes, with exaggerations."⁵

Consequently, many Sioux feared that the government would become bankrupt and unable to grant future annuities to them. The fact that their payments were already past due in 1862 seemed to add a degree of validity to their fears. Other members of the tribe, however, anticipated even more disastrous consequences, as revealed by questions they posed to the missionaries: "Whether it was true that the South had burned all our large cities, New York, Boston, Philadelphia? Whether the Great Father had been killed or taken prisoner, our armies destroyed, and the enemy coming to make slaves of all of us?"⁶

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the Sioux began to whisper "that now would be a good time to go to war with the whites and get back the lands." For those who still harbored doubt concerning the wisdom of such action, much of it was probably dispelled when Congress on July 17 authorized a draft of 300,000 nine-month militia men, with quotas assigned to the states. Determined to fill Minnesota's quota, state authorities encouraged all able-bodied men to enlist, including those residing on the reservations. As a result, the Indian agent for the Sioux, Thomas J. Galbraith, recruited a company of soldiers called the Renville Rangers, many of whom were mixed-bloods. In the eyes of the Indians, it now seemed clear that the Union was "in the last throes of dissolution."⁷

³Stephen R. Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kañ; or, the Gospel Among the Dakotas*, 329 (Boston, 1869).

⁴Adrian J. Ebell, "The Indian Massacres and War of 1862," in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 27:7 (first quote) (June, 1863); Jannette E. Sweet, "Mrs. J. E. De Camp Sweet's Narrative of Her Captivity in the Sioux Outbreak of 1862," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:355 (1894); Asa W. Daniels, "Reminiscences of Little Crow," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12:524-525 (1908). See also report of Agent Thomas J. Galbraith, in Indian Office, *Reports*, 1863, 286-287, and Blegen, ed., *Lincoln's Secretary Goes West*, 51.

⁵"Chief Big Eagle's Story," in Kenneth Carley, ed., "As Red Men Viewed It: Three Indian Accounts of the Uprising," in *Minnesota History*, 38: 131 (September, 1962); Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kañ*, 330. Mrs. Sweet remembered that the Sioux "often described, most accurately," battles in which the Union suffered reverses. See her "Narrative of Her Captivity," in *Collections*, 6:355-356.

⁶Moses N. Adams, "The Sioux Outbreak in the Year 1862, With Notes of Missionary Work Among the Sioux," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:433 (1901); Ebell, "The Indian Massacres," 7 (quote). See also Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kañ*, 330-331. Kenneth Carley notes that the "most important immediate cause of the Sioux uprising" was the government's delay in shipping the Indians' annuity goods and cash (\$71,000) during the summer of 1862. See *Sioux Uprising*, 5.

⁷"Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:131 (first

Even Little Crow's confidence in the government was shaken, despite the fact that he had visited Washington and other eastern cities and had some understanding of the power of the whites. Their "early defeats, losses in battle, and the enlisting of men at the Agency," in the opinion of Dr. Asa W. Daniels, the physician at the Lower Sioux Agency, "encouraged hopes of success in an uprising. . . ." Whatever may have prompted the enigmatic chief to lead his men into battle will probably remain a matter of some conjecture, but one thing is certain: By mid-August 1862, more and more Sioux were beginning to believe that the authority of the Union could be challenged.⁸

Of even greater import, however, was the growing conviction among a number of warriors that such a challenge would be met with very little, if any, opposition. After all, not only had the able-bodied men on the reservations been enlisted for service in the Union army, but throughout the state "nearly all the white men capable of bearing arms had gone south. . . ." The Sioux were well aware of these conditions. During the past year, when they hunted in various parts of Minnesota, they saw

nothing but old men, women, and children and "all that were fit to be soldiers had gone to the wars."⁹

MUCH OF THE STATE was indeed left virtually undefended. Charles S. Bryant, a St. Paul attorney who became familiar with the uprising through his work in settling the claims for property damages committed by the Indians, maintained that the entire organized force for the defense of the Minnesota frontier at times did not exceed 200 men, leading the Sioux to believe that the whites were weak and that the government's attention was directed solely toward the struggle in the South.¹⁰ Other informed contemporaries, including government officials, newspaper reporters, and victims of the outbreak, arrived at similar conclusions.¹¹ Outspoken Jane Grey Swisshelm of the *St. Cloud Democrat*, acting as a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, was particularly outraged, blaming the Lincoln administration for the uprising, since it refused to use slaves in the armed services and thus drained the "North Star State of her hardy frontier defenders. . . ." Before long the president would reverse his policy and employ Blacks in the army, but for the moment Minnesota was left exposed, and the Sioux decided that "now was the time to strike. . . . They could make their way down to Saint Paul, and repossess themselves of the good land of their fathers, for which they had been so poorly remunerated."¹²

Obviously, the Sioux had enough provocation to arrive at such a decision on their own. But this did not deter some from thinking that the Indians had external help — that they were instigated by outsiders, probably Confederate agents. Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, for example, believed that this was the case. A week after the outbreak, Greeley insisted that:

"The Sioux have doubtless been stimulated if not bribed to plunder and slaughter their White neighbors by White and Red villains sent among them for this purpose by the Secessionists. They will have effected a temporary diversion in favor of the Confederacy, and that is all *their* concern."¹³

High-ranking government officials, moreover, held the same opinion as Greeley. The United States consul general in Canada, Joshua Giddings, reported that Confederate agents were very active in northwestern Minnesota, operating through Canadian Indians and fur traders. Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith, "after a careful examination of all the data which the Indian Bureau had been able to obtain," also believed that "southern emissaries" were responsible for inciting the Sioux. And finally, Lincoln himself, in his annual message on December 1, 1862, told Congress he had information "that a simultaneous attack was to be made upon the white settlements by all the tribes between the Mississippi river and the Rocky mountains."¹⁴

quote); Jannette E. Sweet, "Narrative of Her Captivity," in *Collections*, 6:356 (last quote). See also Charles E. Flandrau, *The History of Minnesota and Tales of the Frontier*, 137 (St. Paul, 1900), and Stephen R. Riggs, *Mary and I: Forty Years With the Sioux*, 176 (Boston, 1880; Minneapolis, reprint edition, 1969).

⁸Daniels, "Reminiscences of Little Crow," in *Collections*, 12:524–525.

⁹Adams, "Sioux Outbreak," in *Collections*, 9:433 (first quote); Isaac V. D. Heard, *History of the Sioux War and Massacres of 1862 and 1863*, 45 (last quote) (New York, 1863).

¹⁰Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, *A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians in Minnesota*, 54–55 (Cincinnati, 1864).

¹¹See, for example, Blegen, ed., *Lincoln's Secretary Goes West*, 51; *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, September 10, 1862; Flandrau, *History of Minnesota*, 137; Ebell, "The Indian Massacres," 7; and Mrs. N. D. White, "Captivity Among the Sioux, August 18 to September 26, 1862," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:420 (1901).

¹²*New York Tribune*, September 2, 1862, p. 2; Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kañ*, 331 (last quote). See also "Big Eagle's Story," in *Minnesota History*, 38:131–132.

¹³*New York Tribune*, August 25, 1862, p. 4.

¹⁴"Report of the Secretary of the Interior," in 37 Congress, 3 session, *House Executive Documents*, 1862–1863, p. 8–9 (Smith quotes) (serial 1157); Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 5:525–526 (quote). For additional commentary suggesting that Confederates instigated the uprising, see *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, September 16, 1862; *Chicago Tribune*, August 25, 1862; *New York Tribune*, August 28, 29, 1862; *New York Times*, August 24, 1862; Harriet E. Bishop McConkey, *Dakota War Whoop: Or, Indian Massacres and War in Minnesota, of 1862–'3*, 288–290 (Minneapolis, reprint of 1864 edition, 1970); Major General John Pope to Major General Henry W. Halleck, October 2, 1862, in United States War Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 705.

Yet, if there was concrete information of Confederate agents engaged in conspiratorial activities among the Sioux, it never surfaced. For that matter, those who were actually on the scene, either as victims of the outbreak or in battle against the Indians, denied the existence of secessionist emissaries.¹⁵ It is more than likely, therefore, that these unsubstantiated accusations probably reflected the Union's weariness with its own war in the South and its willingness to heap all that was evil on the shoulders of the Confederacy.

ON THE OTHER HAND, there is solid evidence suggesting that the Sioux were incited by white men, many of whom belonged to what was called the "old moccasin Democracy" of the territory and state. With the Republican victory in 1860, these men were ousted from their positions as government employees and traders on the reservations. Eventually they comprised the "Copperhead element" in the area, expressing sympathy for the southern cause and, according to several eyewitnesses, neglecting no opportunity to tell stories which would "poison the minds of the Indians and inflame them against the present agent and the government." To make matters worse, Union defeats on the battlefield tended to lend credence to their tales that the Great Father "was whipped" and that the Indians would receive no further annuities.¹⁶

Attempts by newly appointed government officials to disprove these fabrications met with little success. The Confederate sympathizers, who had known the Indians far longer than their recently installed Republican opponents, were evidently more adept in working "upon the fears and hopes of the dissatisfied and restive Sioux. . . ." As one victim of the outbreak (who had been held captive for several weeks) later wrote: "I was assured by many of the wisest among the Indians that it was what the traders told them more than anything else that caused the uprising." In any case, subsequent events carried a tragically ironic twist. Apparently the pro-southern traders and other former reservation employees had "carried it a little too far." When the Sioux engaged in their war against the whites, they made no distinction between Unionists and Copperheads.¹⁷

Disloyal whites were not the only ones to have their plans backfire. The Sioux themselves would experience a similar fate. They had hoped to gain the support of the Confederacy; in fact, Little Crow was reported to have

made plans to sell the Minnesota Valley to the southern states.¹⁸ The Confederacy, however, failed to respond. The Sioux also anticipated possible aid from the British. Many among them were aware that the Civil War had seriously disrupted Anglo-American relations. Furthermore, the Indians believed that in gratitude for the help they had given Great Britain in the War of 1812, the British would now return the favor. But nothing materialized.¹⁹ Nevertheless, after the Sioux were defeated, Little Crow, who escaped capture, ultimately made his way to Canada with a small band. There he demanded supplies from the British authorities, but received nothing but mere handouts of food. The chief later returned to Minnesota and, in July, 1863, was shot to death near Hutchinson by two settlers who were out hunting.²⁰

Thus, from beginning to end, the Sioux outbreak of 1862 was a tragic and brutal episode in the history of Indian-white relations in America. Like similar conflicts, its underlying causes were complex and deeply rooted in the past. Yet, would it have occurred if the national situation had been different? Perhaps missionary Stephen R. Riggs, who had spent several decades with the Sioux, was right when he declared: "If there had been no Southern war, there would have been no Dakota uprising and no Minnesota massacres!"²¹

¹⁵See, for example, Riggs, *Mary and I*, 176; Charles E. Flandrau, "The Indian War of 1862-1864, and Following Campaigns in Minnesota," in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:729 (St. Paul, 1890). Most historians agree in discounting the possibility of Confederate agents being involved in the uprising. See, for example, Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:212, 234, 235n.

¹⁶*New York Tribune*, August 29, September 5, 1862; Indian Office, *Reports*, 1863, 286-288; Heard, *History of the Sioux War*, 44 ("whipped" quote).

¹⁷Adams, "The Sioux Outbreak," in *Collections*, 9:433 (first quote); Jannette E. Sweet, "Narrative of Her Captivity," in *Collections*, 6:357; Riggs *Mary and I*, 172-173 (last quote).

¹⁸Mrs. White, "Captivity Among the Sioux," in *Collections*, 9:404.

¹⁹Daniel Buck, *Indian Outbreaks*, 74 (Minneapolis, reprint edition, 1965); Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising*, 32-33; Stephen R. Riggs, trans., "Narrative of Paul Mazakootemane," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:85 (1880); Ebell, "The Indian Massacres," 7; Ralph K. Andrist, "Massacre!" in *American Heritage*, April, 1962, p. 111.

²⁰Alvin C. Gluek, Jr., "The Sioux Uprising: A Problem in International Relations," in *Minnesota History*, 34:319 (Winter, 1955); Carley, *Sioux Uprising*, 84.

²¹Riggs, *Tah-koo Wah-kan*, 331.



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