SULLY'S EXPEDITION of 1864 (the year before events described in this article) set up wagon corrals near Fort Berthold in Dakota Territory.
Political Pressures and Army Policies on the Northern Plains, 1862-1865

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LONG LINES of dusty, weary, disgruntled men, their wagons creaking under heavy loads, moved west during the spring and early summer of 1865. They were part of the bustle and confusion that marked military activity in the trans-Mississippi West during preparations for one of the largest campaigns yet undertaken against the Plains Indians.

The men moved under orders of Major General John Pope, commander of the Division of the Missouri with headquarters at St. Louis. He had served in the West since September, 1862, when he was transferred from Virginia to St. Paul to head the new Department of the Northwest during the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota. Pope was in charge during the last stages of that conflict and in 1863 and 1864 sent punitive expeditions against the Sioux in Dakota Territory. Pope operated in the context of the Civil War then and was always subject to the withdrawal of troops for service in the South. Although his field commanders repeatedly defeated the Indians in battle, he failed to crush them or to settle the Sioux problem.

By 1865, however, the situation changed. The Civil War had ended, and there were ample troops available for duty on the frontier. Now Pope would have all the men he needed, and he believed that he could solve Indian difficulties on the Northern Plains.

Pope planned to send several expeditions against the Indians in the vicinity of the Black Hills and of the Powder River of present-day Montana and Wyoming. Wisdom and experience guided his thinking, and his strategy of a large-scale, co-ordinated campaign was sound. But the Powder River campaign would fail. Among the reasons for the disaster of 1865 were the indifferent quality of the officers in the field, their lack of co-operation, and the contrary attitude of the volunteer troops who constituted these expeditions — but politics also contributed to defeat. Political pressure from Minnesota prompted Pope to send his ablest officer and most experienced troops on an unpro-

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ductive march to the northeast away from the hostile concentration west of the Missouri River.

The political pressure causing Pope to modify his plans in 1865 was not a new phenomenon in the Northwest. It had, in fact, plagued his operations against the Sioux from the very beginning. Politics and warfare have never been widely separated, and this was especially true during the Civil War years. General Pope was well aware of this. He had played politics himself, had sought influential friends, and, while commanding the newly created Army of Virginia during the summer of 1862, had hobnobbed with the Radical Republicans. Even after his defeat in the Second Battle of Bull Run in August and his exile to the Department of the Northwest, he had sought to influence the selection of army commanders through powerful friends. After he lost his command in Virginia, he bitterly attacked George McClellan and other Democratic generals in a series of letters to a friend and former superior, Henry W. Halleck. In Minnesota, however, Pope discovered a different situation. There, prominent opponents handicapped his efforts.

Minnesotans willingly expounded their views from the time the Sioux Uprising began in August, 1862. They first demanded assistance and got it in the form of a military expedition led by Colonel (later Brigadier General) Henry H. Sibley, who had been the state’s first governor. His force raised the siege of Fort Ridgely, defeated the Sioux under Little Crow at the Battle of Wood Lake on September 23, shortly thereafter freed 269 white and half-breed prisoners, and took charge of Indians who surrendered. The people and their political and military leaders, including Governor Alexander Ramsey, Sibley, and Pope himself, demanded not only the execution of some three hundred prisoners convicted by a military commission but also the removal of all Indians from the state. The people were unhappy when President Abraham Lincoln reduced the condemned list to thirty-nine, one more than the total eventually hung.

Minnesotans approved of General Pope’s decision to help settle the Sioux problem with a spring campaign into Dakota Territory. Representative of newspaper bitterness against the Indians was an editorial entitled “THE SIOUX WAR: WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH IT?” in which the St. Paul Press announced, “now, in God’s name, let the columns of vengeance move on!” There should be no peace “until the whole accursed brood are crushed — crushed as no band of these North American Sepoys have ever been punished by military force.” Practically no voices at the time, except that of Episcopal Bishop Henry B. Whipple, spoke up to indicate that inept government policies and white encroachments on Indian lands, among other things, had given the Sioux provocation for the outbreak.

Despite the pressing needs of the Civil War, the War Department authorized campaigns against the Sioux in 1863 and 1864, but Pope discovered that his strategy of offensive movements against the Indians was subject to mounting criticism. Political considerations and political rivalries were very much involved as Henry M. Rice, Democratic senator from Minnesota, began to attack his old enemy Sibley and General Pope. Rice, a member of the Senate’s influential committee on military affairs, sought to discredit his rival. He apparently attempted to have Sibley removed in the autumn of 1862 and evidently delayed the promotion of the old fur trader and Indian fighter to the rank of brigadier general. These efforts failed, so Rice then sought to replace Pope as commander of the Department of the Northwest. As a Democrat his chances for re-election were slim, and the command of the military department would keep him in the public eye and place Sibley under his control.

When Pope learned of these developments, he warned his old friend, General in Chief Henry W. Halleck, that “unscrupulous speculators and traders” would use every means to have one of their number appointed to command the department. The appointment of Rice, he said, would result in many years of border wars and “ruinous Indian treaties and frauds.” The senator was a “reckless and ruined speculator and
old Indian trader" whose appointment would be based
"upon a knowledge of Indians and Indian character,
acquired during many years of unlimited concubinage
with Indian women."  

Rice failed to destroy Sibley or to remove Pope, but
he and Republican Senator Morton S. Wilkinson of
Minnesota continued to interfere with military opera­
tions in the Department of the Northwest. They pre­
dicted the failure of the 1863 campaign and claimed
that the troops should be retained in Minnesota to
protect the settlements rather than sent on a fruitless
march into Dakota Territory. They failed in their ef­
forts to block the Sibley expedition, but they did man­
age to secure authorization for a battalion of cavalry
under Major Edwin Hatch of St. Paul, a friend of
Rice. They apparently envisioned a military unit which
would be independent of the regular military authori­
ties in the department, but Pope wisely demanded that
Hatch be placed under his command. The War De­
partment agreed, and Sibley effectively removed this
potential source of difficulty by sending Hatch to Pem­
bina near the Canadian boundary to establish a post in
midwinter. Sibley wrote of the Hatch appointment:
"The whole thing I regard as a miserable scheme got
up by Rice & others who hate Gen. Pope, and do not
love me, & who wish to annoy & humiliate us both. I
have contempt for the whole humbug, inventors &
all."  

The two Minnesota senators continued to meddle in
departmental affairs by working behind the scenes in
Washington. Pope had planned a pincer movement
with troops under Sibley advancing westward from
Minnesota, while Brigadier General Alfred Sully, an
experienced Indian fighter who had just arrived in the
West, advanced up the Missouri. Once again efforts
were made to discredit Sibley, but Pope defended his
subordinate and lashed out at the critics. "I think my
opportunities for knowing the condition of affairs in
this department are as good, if not better, than those
of any one not connected with the military service," he wrote. It was clear that "There are not troops
enough in our whole armies to satisfy the people of

* Pope to Halleck, November 20, 1862, Official Records,
vol. 12, part 3, 826. It should be pointed out that Rice's
side in this and other controversial matters is impossible
to present because of a lack of his papers and other mate­
rial.

** Pope to Colonel John C. Kelton, assistant adjutant
general, July 13, 1863, Official Records, vol. 22, part 2,
371; Folwell, Minnesota, 2:289-294; Diary of Henry H.
Sibley, July 9, 1863, Sibley Papers, in the Minnesota His­
torical Society.
Minnesota," for they wanted a regiment or at least a company "in the front door of every settler's house in the country." Pope also attacked the Interior Department, claiming that the Indian agents were co-operating with the critics for their own profit. He was not alone in this belief. Colonel Stephen Miller, who would soon be elected governor of the state, wrote to Pope of the "trading, corrupt Indian politicians of Minnesota" who were as "selfish and heartless as Satan." 8

Although Sibley and Sully failed to crush the hostile Indians, they did manage to defeat the latter in every engagement in Dakota Territory. Pope's detractors were not silenced by these victories, as he had hoped, so he struck at them in self-defense. There would be attempts to keep all the troops in Minnesota, he predicted. In fact, such a demand had already been voiced by the very men who had claimed that Sibley's force was too large. Pope was well aware of the typical demands for large and permanent protective garrisons in frontier regions. With an eye to their pocket-books as well as their security, westerners repeatedly called for new posts and more troops. Pope, however, realized that increased forces would be required to defend the frontier if the Indians were not attacked, and he warned Halleck that it would be difficult to remove troops from the frontier once they had been sent there. "People who never felt apprehensions before," he wrote, "immediately find troops absolutely necessary for their protection." 9

During 1863 the predictions of the critics proved inaccurate. Despite this and the fact that Rice lost his bid for re-election to the Senate, the criticisms of Pope and his subordinates continued. In February, 1864, when the need for troops in the South was acute, several members of Congress insisted that Pope had more troops than were required in the Northwest. They thereby implied that he was unconcerned about the outcome of the Civil War. At the same time, frontier settlements clamored for more protection. The exasperated general complained to the War Department: "Whilst I am urged on all sides to furnish protection to emigrants across the plains, by giving them escorts and establishing military posts, a set of people ignorant of all the facts and perfectly unacquainted with the necessities of the department are besieging the authorities at Washington to deprive me of the very means necessary to do precisely what they seek with constant persistence." The Sioux war was related to events in the South, and when more troops were needed to fight Rebels, operations against the Indians had to be restricted. In August, for example, General Ulysses S. Grant was attempting to provide more troops for the advance upon Atlanta. He called for every man that could be spared and ordered that inspectors and surgeons be sent to the western hospitals "to clear them out and send the convalescents to the front." 10

ATTACKING his unknown critics, Pope accused "persons connected with our unfortunate Indian system, agents, Indian traders, whisky sellers, contractors, &c." of being concerned only with their own profits. "When the Indian war is really ended by driving the Indians entirely beyond reach of the settlements of Minnesota the business of such people is brought to an end," he explained. "They therefore do not desire to get rid of the Indians, nor do they favor any measures which will bring their connection with the Indians to an end." He complained as well that those men who were seeking to reduce the military strength in the Department of the Northwest were political opponents of the government who were seeking the means to attack the administration. The continuation of Indian hostilities and the murder of travelers crossing the plains would enable them to make such attacks. 11

Pope defended himself as best he could and was supported by Halleck who explained to General Grant that Pope had not retained an unnecessarily large force in his department. In fact, he was "the most ready of all the department commanders to give assistance to others when asked," Halleck insisted. 12 Pope was dismayed, therefore, when his department was subjected to three inspections within the space of a few months. These indicated that credence was given to the statements of the critics.

The inspections during the summer of 1864 cleared Pope of the charges and indicated that many of the critics of military affairs in the Northwest were interested in the profits which would result from keeping large garrisons in the country. Grant also concluded that Pope was a conscientious and efficient adminis-
trator. "With Pope in command we secure at least two advantages we have not heretofore had," Grant wrote, "namely, subordination and intelligence of administration." Pope had not solved the Sioux problem although the troops under his command had defeated the Indians in battle in 1863 and 1864, but he had brought order and direction to the confused situation in the region. In November, 1864, Grant called Pope to Virginia to offer him a more important command, and the decision was quickly made to combine the departments of Kansas, Missouri, and the Northwest into the Division of the Missouri. This would give Pope control of the entire plains area north of Indian Territory and allow him to direct and coordinate all operations against hostile Indians in that region.

The decision to create the division was fortunate, for Indian difficulties had expanded by the time that Pope assumed command early in 1865. The Sand Creek massacre, a surprise attack upon a Cheyenne village in eastern Colorado in November, had brought bitter reprisals by that tribe and its allies. These Indians attacked all along the Platte route, causing great destruction and cutting off Denver for a time before they moved north to the vicinity of the Black Hills. The hostile Sioux and Cheyenne west of the Missouri River were the primary consideration when Pope made his plans for the summer campaign, although he also took some action to protect travel along the Santa Fe Trail and to terminate the raids by the Kiowa and Comanche tribes.

When Pope called his subordinates to St. Louis for a strategy conference in March, 1865, the army appeared ready to deal effectively with the hostiles on the Northern Plains. The Civil War was drawing to a

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**TROOP MOVEMENTS of 1865 included three-pronged campaign to Powder River. Sully stayed in Dakota.**

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**13** Lieutenant Colonel William L. Duff conducted one inspection for Grant and reported that some individuals described the Indian war as a "humbug," but he also indicated that some of the critics wanted to keep troops in the region permanently. Duff to Brigadier General John A. Rawlins, chief of staff, July 2, 1864, *Official Records*, vol. 41, part 2, 29 ("humbug" quote), 30; Grant to Halleck, November 30, 1864, vol. 41, part 4, 716.

**14** For a description of the massacre and its aftermath as well as the events along the Santa Fe Trail, see Donald Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes*, 193-244 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1963).
close, and it was evident that troops would be available for duty on the frontier. With this in mind, Pope planned to send several columns into the Powder River country west of the Black Hills. In general command would be Brigadier General Patrick E. Connor, an ambitious Californian who was a favorite of the westerners. He had led Union forces in Utah and had been involved in constant difficulties with the Mormons.

General Sully would march westward from Fort Pierre on the Missouri River with twelve hundred cavalrymen and a detachment of artillery to drive the Indians into a trap and to establish a post on the Powder River. Sully had campaigned against the Sioux west of the Missouri River in 1864 and defeated them at Killdeer Mountain, but he had failed to deliver a crushing blow. Now, however, Pope would have enough troops for a major effort. He was determined to settle the Sioux problem while troops were available and before the humanitarians, who were already beginning to show interest in Indian affairs, began to interfere with his operations. But Pope would find that success was elusive. He himself would contribute to the failure of the 1865 campaign by diverting Sully’s force to the Devils Lake region of northeastern Dakota Territory.

He would do this by bowing to political pressures from Minnesota.

THE POWDER RIVER campaign, as it took form, included three columns under the direction of Connor. Colonel Nelson Cole of the Second Missouri Light Artillery was to lead approximately fourteen hundred men from Omaha, Nebraska, to the Black Hills and thence to the Powder River. The center column under Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Walker of the Sixteenth Kansas Cavalry, about six hundred men, was to proceed from Fort Laramie to the Black Hills and then march northwestward to Powder River. Connor, meanwhile, was to move west and north from Fort Laramie to the Powder River rendezvous point.

Pope’s strategy for the 1865 campaign was sound, but the army was plagued by innumerable problems from the beginning. Troops marched west to fight Indians only to be mustered out before they were sent into action; mounts, arms, and supplies did not arrive; and on several occasions soldiers mutinied, demanded their discharge, and had to be suppressed with “grape and canister.” Walker’s Sixteenth Kansas Cavalry, for example, had taken several months to march from Fort...
Leavenworth to Fort Laramie and then mutinied soon after it arrived. The men had disappeared from sight. Nobody knew where they were, causing Major General Grenville M. Dodge to comment after two months that there had been time enough for the regiment "to walk to Fort Kearny and return twice.

Connor also suffered major supply problems, but more serious was the lack of co-operation — and ability — of the officers in charge of the field operations. These difficulties spelled failure for the Powder River campaign. With few exceptions it was the Indians rather than the soldiers who launched the attacks and harassed their enemies, while the soldiers did little more than defend themselves, and that rather poorly. The troops managed to build Fort Connor on the Powder River but otherwise did not accomplish their objectives. Cole’s force in particular barely escaped disaster before the government suddenly called off the campaign.

Although the lack of planning, the shortcomings of the field commanders, and the unco-operative attitude of the troops pointed to a lack of achievement, the summer campaign might have been more successful had not the ablest commander and most experienced soldiers been sent away from the scene of conflict. Bowing to political pressure, Pope withdrew Sully's forces from the campaign. (During the 1863 campaign in Dakota Territory, Pope had berated Sully for not reaching the rendezvous point on the Upper Missouri and thereby permitting the Sioux to escape after their skirmishes with Sibley’s forces. The delays were caused by low water and supply problems, and when Pope realized this and also learned that Sully defeated the Sioux at Whitestone Hill, his anger cooled. Sully demonstrated more energy and confidence than Sibley.

SOON AFTER plans were made for the Powder River campaign, a chorus of voices was heard from Minnesota that eventually swelled to a fortissimo. From the military commanders and government officials to the press and local communities, Minnesotans called for increased military aid and protection from what proved to be imagined bodies of hostile Indians. Sibley began to raise the alarm in March, 1865. He had always been something of an alarmist and in this respect had irritated Pope before, but as a politician he was responsive to the pressures and fears of the citizens of his state. In March he reported that there was serious danger of an outbreak by the Chippewa tribe and suggested that Canadian half-breeds and traders and possibly Rebel agents were behind the discontent. At first Major General Samuel R. Curtis, who assumed command of the Department of the Northwest on February 13, 1865, tended to discount Sibley’s fears. Minnesotans had made similar claims for years. The Chippewas reportedly were discontented at this time because members of the tribe were being abducted and then sold into the Union army as substitutes for men who had been drafted. The Chippewa reportedly were discontented at this time because members of the tribe were being abducted and then sold into the Union army as substitutes for men who had been drafted. The Chippewas reportedly were discontented at this time because members of the tribe were being abducted and then sold into the Union army as substitutes for men who had been drafted. The Chippewas reportedly were discontented at this time because members of the tribe were being abducted and then sold into the Union army as substitutes for men who had been drafted.

Sibley, however, continued to spread the alarm throughout the spring and summer, bombarding Curtis and then Pope with his cries of danger. Having raised the specter of a Chippewa war, he next turned his attention to the Sioux and painted a dark picture of the prospects of the Minnesota frontier when hordes of Indians descended upon the unsuspecting and unprotected settlements. Large camps of Sioux were reported at Devils Lake and Turtle Mountain in the northeastern portion of Dakota Territory, and Sibley feared that there were several parties of hostiles near the settlements waiting for the opportune moment to strike. There was, he said, great alarm on the border, but it is doubtful that it matched his own fears. To protect the frontier Sibley planned to establish a line of posts and to “destroy utterly” all raiding parties.

Minnesotans approved of Sibley’s plans, for they remembered the dark days of August and September, 1862, when the seemingly peaceful Santee Sioux suddenly attacked the unsuspecting frontier settlements. Estimates of the number of whites killed ran from 450 to as high as eight hundred or more, and the loss of life and property undoubtedly had a long-lasting psychological impact upon the state. Memories of those events remained vivid and explain in part the extreme reac-

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19 Sibley to Major Chapman S. Charlot, assistant adjutant general, Department of the Northwest, April 4, 1865, Sibley to the editors of the Press and Pioneer (St. Paul), May 5, 1865, Official Records, vol. 48, part 2, 30, 327, 328 (quote).
tion to rumors of Indian activity near the borders of the state.

The Minnesota settlements now had adequate protection, but gradually the alarms of Sibley and others began to influence Curtis. He soon voiced similar demands in his communications to Pope. In May he wrote that he must have a line of posts from the Niobrara River in Nebraska Territory to Spirit Lake on the Minnesota-Iowa border. He also began to question the wisdom of sending Sully westward, urging instead that the Minnesota and Iowa frontiers first must receive effective protection.

Early in May Sibley's fears appeared to be justified, for he excitedly informed Pope that "formidable raids" had been made near Mankato in southern Minnesota. Curtis believed that the raiders were from "the great hive of hostile Sioux" near Devils Lake, and he expected continued attacks along the frontier. There was much excitement among the settlements, the militia was hurriedly organized, and plans were formulated for using bloodhounds to hunt down skulking Indians. The resulting criticisms in the Minnesota press strengthened Sibley's determination to bring additional troops to the state, and Curtis begged that Sully be sent to Devils Lake immediately. "At the risk of being considered somewhat of an alarmist," he wrote, "I am frank to express my conviction that the Indian difficulties in this part of the country will continue to increase in their proportions unless the most vigorous measures are taken to suppress them."

Despite the steady stream of alarms from Sibley and then Curtis, Pope was unmoved. He had listened to Sibley's fears before and placed little faith in them. His strategy had always been that the best defense is a good offense, and events of the past two years had proved him right. Pope informed Curtis that a campaign to Devils Lake would not be considered. It was unwise and could not be effective with the sanctuary of Canada so near at hand. There was, he said, a stampede in Minnesota every spring, and the stories from the frontier were greatly exaggerated. Sully would march to the Powder River as planned.

Soon after the entreaties of Sibley and Curtis had been rejected, Pope began to vacillate. On May 22 he asked Grant to seek permission to pursue hostiles into Canada, for he wished to send a cavalry force to Devils Lake. He was considering such a move only if authorized to cross the border in hot pursuit, he explained, but at the same time he sent Major General Alfred Pleasonton to Minnesota to examine the situation. He sarcastically told Pleasonton that only sixteen Indians had passed through the line of posts and scouts and made a raid near Mankato without having been discovered. As Sibley had eighteen companies of cavalry, scouts "took the ground that if so he was in a proper frame of mind to go to the happy hunting grounds, and he went." 21

Throughout May various warnings continued to flow in as Sibley seized on any and all reports of danger. He feared that the Chippewa, Assiniboin, and other tribes were plotting war despite the fact that they were ancient enemies of the Sioux. He wrote Curtis that he needed more troops. He had barely enough to protect the settlements, he said, and an attack upon the hostiles was imperative. He begged that Sully be sent to Devils Lake immediately. "At the risk of being considered somewhat of an alarmist," he wrote, "I am frank to express my conviction that the Indian difficulties in this part of the country will continue to increase in their proportions unless the most vigorous measures are taken to suppress them." 22


Sibley to Pope, May 8, 1865, Curtis to Bell, May 11, 1865, Sibley to Charlot, May 26, 1865, Official Records, vol. 48, part 2, 359, 412-413 ("great hive" quote), 616 (Mankato episode quotes); Folwell, Minnesota, 2:349.


four companies of infantry, and one company of artillery, this appeared to be gross negligence. "The whole affair," he wrote, "shows such utter want of vigilance and such inefficiency . . . that I am wholly at a loss to understand it." 24

DESPITE HIS IRRITATION Pope had begun to meet the demands from Minnesota, and on May 23 he surrendered completely. Orders went out that Sully would suspend the move to the Black Hills and march instead from Fort Rice to Devils Lake. It was now Sully's turn to be upset, and he protested at once; the change of orders was unwise and unnecessary, he thought. The main concentration of hostiles was west of the Missouri River, and it was evident that all of the subtribes of the Teton Sioux had taken up arms against the government. Sully wrote to Pope that the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and portions of the Brulé and Blackfoot Sioux were gathered at Bear Butte, north of the Black Hills, waiting to fight, and they were confident of victory. The Cheyenne were loudly boasting of their successes along the Platte road and promised similar victories on the Missouri River. 25

In spite of indications that the Sioux bands which normally made their home along the Missouri River favored peace, the remainder—especially the wild Hunkpapa—were determined to fight. Colonel Charles A. R. Dimon, the youthful commandant at Fort Rice in Dakota Territory, reported that the hostiles had moved north of the Platte River in February and scattered in small encampments from the Missouri to the Tongue River, but with the arrival of spring they were gathering to "take the war out of the bag." Already they were making their presence known along the Missouri River. In March and April increasing Indian activity was evident along the river and so was the presence of the western Sioux and Cheyenne. Logging parties and horse and cattle herds were attacked near Fort Rice, and on April 26 some three hundred Indians surrounded the guarded horse herd within a mile of the post before they were beaten off. Other raids followed, and on May 26 and June 2 Indians struck within several hundred yards of the fort itself. 26

It was apparent to Sully that the real danger lay to the west and that little could be accomplished in the Devils Lake region. If there were any hostiles there, they would simply move across the Canadian boundary when the troops approached. More important, such a movement would leave the Indians in control of the Missouri Valley, giving the appearance that the troops were afraid of the western tribes. The hostiles had thrown out the challenge. Sully feared that the friendly Indians would join their brethren if the challenge were not met.

Sully was not the only one to protest the change of orders. Congressman Asahel W. Hubbard of Iowa, who was interested in opening new roads to the Montana gold fields, urged Pope to carry out the original plan. The safety of the emigrant routes and especially the Sawyers Road depended upon it. Congress had appropriated funds for the survey of a wagon road from the mouth of the Niobrara River to the Bozeman Trail, which ran northwestward to Virginia City, Montana, through the Powder River country, and James A. Sawyers of Sioux City, Iowa, was in charge of the expedition. Pope had made up his mind, however, and was not about to change it again. Orders went out that

**THE INTERIOR OF FORT RICE (1864), the post from which Sully made a futile march to Devils Lake**
Connor would now have to cover the Black Hills region and establish the post on the Powder River.27

Pope had made his decision, but the issue remained the subject of controversy, and he continued to exhibit doubts that he had acted wisely. His letters demonstrate that he had no faith in the reports from Minnesota and that he expected few if any results from the Devils Lake expedition. On June 2 he forwarded one of Sibley's alarming reports to Grant with the comment: "It seems difficult to know what reply to make to such communications. They exhibit a panic which I hardly know how to deal with, except by asking you to send me an officer to command in Minnesota who is not subject to such uneasiness." With 2,490 soldiers in Minnesota, Pope could not understand how anyone could fear Indian attacks, especially when seven hundred men had provided adequate protection during the previous summer. "Such a force as this in Minnesota is unheard of in all previous time," he wrote in irritation. "I cannot believe that it is not abundantly sufficient if properly posted and handled." Of the approximately 2,500 troops in Minnesota some nineteen hundred were cavalry. The expedition toward Devils Lake was taking shape, and Pope assumed that Minnesotans would be satisfied, but such was not the case. Governor Stephen Miller requested that an additional force of a "regiment or two from Minnesota" be sent to Devils Lake as well.28

Once Sully was ordered to Devils Lake, dispatches from the Department of the Northwest began to indicate that the move was unnecessary. On June 3 Curtis informed Pope that there was little danger from the Chippewa, yet at the same time he requested additional cavalry for his department. Curtis supported the demands for an additional movement to Devils Lake from Minnesota, while admitting that the Sioux were very remote from the frontier. Only small bands had come down into Minnesota, but they created "great trepidation," and Curtis wished to prevent a "great stampede" by the settlers.29

Sully continued to protest against the new orders and begged Pope to reconsider. He was discontented with Curtis, his superior, and made no attempt to hide this from Pope. He repeatedly warned that nothing would be accomplished. That Sully was correct can be seen from the reports from Fort Abercrombie. Lieutenant Colonel C. Powell Adams, commander of that post, indicated that the Sioux had moved west of Turtle Mountain on the Canadian line, and the few who remained were without mounts and arms and were starving. He believed that a quick strike by two to three hundred men would destroy them.30

POPE'S DECISION for a thrust to the northeast was made in the face of all the facts. Sully warned Pope that the hostile Teton Sioux and the Cheyenne were active along the Missouri and encouraging all the

27 Hubbard to Pope, May 26, 1865, Pope to Hubbard, June 3, 1865, Official Records, vol. 48, part 2, 618, 764. Pope wrote Hubbard that "Sully's change of movement will not at all interfere with operations against hostile Indians in the Black Hills and west of them, nor with the establishment of the post on Powder River."


bands to continue the war. They boasted that they had destroyed the whites along the Platte route and promised they would drive them from the Missouri as well. Throughout June and July he begged for permission to march against them, but his requests were denied. Sully reluctantly prepared for the Devils Lake expedition, and on July 23 the thoroughly disheartened general led a column of about one thousand men from his camp opposite Fort Rice. By July 29 they had reached Devils Lake and began to scour the region southward to the James River. Finding nothing, Sully moved northward to the Mouse, or Souris, River near the Canadian line and then returned to the Missouri River at Fort Berthold.31

Additional troops were also sent into the same region from Minnesota. Colonel Robert H. Carnahan of the Third Illinois Cavalry searched the region with his regiment and a detachment of artillery, but he, like Sully, found no Indians, and he was unable to find Sully either. These military expeditions wasted the time of troops that were needed west of the Missouri River. Pope had expected few results, and he was not disappointed. He had acquiesced to political demands and committed a large force to a futile search for a nonexistent body of hostiles. It was a foolish move from a military point of view, although he did not realize this until the disastrous results of the Powder River campaign were known. In insisting upon the Devils Lake expedition, Pope ignored the reports from the Upper Missouri and demonstrated excessive sens-

32 Olin to Carnahan, June 28, 1865, Sully’s reports of July 20, July 20, August 8, 1865, Official Records, vol. 48, part 2, 1022–1024, 1109, 1136, 1172–1174; Robert M. Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848–1865, 332–340 (New York, 1967). The Frontier Scout (Fort Rice), August 17, 1865, includes a report of the expedition by “Medicus” that is critical of Pope: “If he [Sully] is sent here to fight Indians let him have the privilege of going where the Red-Skins are, and not tie him down with orders from Head Quarters, a thousand miles away, telling him to fight the Indian, but to be sure and not go where they are! Much which might be accomplished this year, will not be, simply on account of such hand-tying orders.”  

THE PHOTOGRAPH on page 50 is from Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders, 107 (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1964); all others are from the society’s picture collection.