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## Letter from George Sibley to Henry Clay, February 13, 1841

George Champlin Sibley  
*Lindenwood College*

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Letter to The Hon: Henry Clay

From George C. Sibley of Missouri

(On Indian Affairs)

13<sup>th</sup> Feby. 1841

Linden Wood, near St. Charles, Missouri,

February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1841

To the Hon. Henry Clay

In the Senate of the United States

Sir,

We are told from high authority that “there a time every purpose under the Heavens – a time to keep silence and a time to speak” And I am persuaded that the time is now at hand, when we may reasonably expect that “Our Indian Relations” will be better cared for than they have been for some years past; and I trust that I, even I, may now without any impropriety, “Speak” on this Subject. I use the preacher to address to you what I have to say in the Supposition that you do still, as heretofore, regard those relations with a Sincere interest, And knowing that you have on several occasions, in the Senate and elsewhere held and expressed opinions adverse to those that have prevailed in practice for the last ten or twelve years; and having good reasons for believing that our recently chosen Chief Magistrate entertains views in this Relation Similar to yours; I am greatly encouraged to hope and expect, that among the many objects to be revised and corrected, this one that So nearly concerns the Rights of Humanity, and the National \_\_\_, as well as the peace and safety of our own border Settlements, will not be overlooked; but will be duly appreciated.

Although I have been very frequently urged during the last seven or eight years, to set before you my views on this Subjects (Views resulting from the experience and close observation of twenty years active duty to the Indian Service in virtue of various commissions conferred on me by Presidents Jefferson, Madison and Monroe) I have hitherto declined any interference, from the conviction that it would be worse than useless, during the prevalence of a policy that I was constrained to believe consisted more in a petty System of Patronage for Rewarding certain Lateral parties some Services, than in any just regard for those interesting and important relations.

It became my duty last Summer (as a Candidate for Congress) to take an active part in our Election: which brought me frequently to revert to this subject in my public addresses and private conversations along our Western and Southwestern frontiers, where the people are naturally very much concerned about the management if their Indian neighbors – Devoted as the most of those letters several (and proud) to be, to the \_\_\_ National Administration, there was yet very evidently a painful distrust \_\_\_ fall, that the brooding storm they instinctively dreaded, was not at all likely to be averted should the present defective system be continued. And when I confidently assured them that the whole

Administration was about to be discontinued, many of those who fall pledged to Support it, frankly acknowledged that in the event of such a change, they would probably be relieved from much painful apprehension, inasmuch as the Indian affairs would then fall into the hands of one who was not only practically and well acquainted with them, but who knew how to feel for and sympathize with those who were Subjected to the troubles incident to a proximity to discontented Indians. -- I need not say that I took it upon myself to assure as many as I conversed with on the Subject, that their hopes would not be disappointed; and I pledged myself to them, that whether elected to Congress or not (an event by the way, that seemed to me very improbable) I shall certainly \_\_ myself in favor of what I deemed a wholesome and necessary change in our Indian Relations, and it is partly to redeem that pledge that I now address you.

I believe I am well enough acquainted with the views of The President elect on this subject, to know, that whilst he will take suitable measures to secure the peace and safety of the frontier settlements against any hostile intensions of their Indian neighbors, he will at the same time take care that the Indians shall also be protected in their just rights; which last is most necessary in order to effect the first.

Such I know has ever been the professed theory of our government under every administration. But there is abundant evidence, unhappily, that either the Theory is wrong, or the means used to carry it into effect have been sadly defective- The theory itself cannot be wrong – though there is doubtless and inherent difficulty attending its proper development even under the most favorable auspices – for there is that in our AngloSaxon blood, which constantly militates against an honest conviction of what we owe in justice and humanity to the Indians. Ever since our forefathers obtained a Sure footing upon this Continent, a War of exclusion and extermination has been waged against it ab. Original possessors. That war has been in Some degree Checked and modified indeed. By the conflicting, and alternately ascendant influences of Justice and Cupidity; else the work of expulsion or destruction would most probably have been fully accomplished long since.-. In the might of our great powers, we have taken sovereign possession of this Whole Land; and in fitful caprice, have from time to tome enacted whatever served good and profitable unto ourselves, concerning the lands and its rightful owners (as we admit the Indians to have been) upon whom by way of palliating the wrong we have bestowed to appellative “savage” as in contradiction to own self administered title of Civil. -- -- Under all the different Administrations of our National Government, the proper management of our Indian Relations, has been an object of more or less concern: and at times has engrossed much attention, from a Sincere desire, no doubt, to do Justice, and as far as possible to remove the reproach that has been cast upon our national character in reference to our dealings with the Natives.- Having degraded those people in our own estimation, if not in theirs, they have of late years, been Repulsed on every Side, as if their proximity was a contamination, and at the Same time coveting their lands lying within certain Districts, or States, that we have marked our for our own convenience, and from which we have covenants among ourselves, that the Savages shall be removed immediately, it has Suited our policy and convenience, in honor and good faith complying with those covenants, to demand of the Indians to enter into certain voluntary Treaty engagements, under which according to our forms we may legally, Rightfully, and Righteously, Oust to him from his native land and locate him somewhere in the interminable “Far West”. beyond our settlements, where ever they may be.- And in pursuance of this policy we have already caused several of those Tribes to be carefully transferred to their newly chosen abode, whilst some others are now being reduced, at come cost, to the like Submission.

But the Rambling prosperity that distinguishes our race is, as usual, leading thousands to Seek for “better land and Range” upon the outskirts of Civilization, which brings them in close contacts, and frequently in collision with the Indians, who having again and again receded westward in the vain hope of “getting out of Reach” has at length, as might reasonably be expected under all the circumstances, contracted a Sentiment of dislike, not to say hatred, for their restless and enterprising pursuers. This sentiment which, however he may dissemble for his own security, I know the Indian cherishes and which I have no shadow of doubt is rankling in a greater or less degree in every bosom of every tribe, is the bitter source of the evil that I have long apprehended is to fall upon our Missouri frontiers. Unless it be averted by the wisdom of the national Councils, to whom alone it belongs, and ought to belong, to manage these Relations. Wherever the discomfited, desperate, Remnant of the Seminoles, shall be added to the discontented Tribes that have been exiled to our borders, and to those native tribes who have been disturbed to make room for the unwelcome strangers and who are equally dissatisfied; then will the brand have been thrown into the wild of a truly frightful mass of destructive combustibles; and in the natural course of such a State of thing, must inevitably produce an incalculable amount of human crime and suffering, not to mention the pecuniary expense of suppressing so great an \_\_\_. It is needless for me to enter more fully into this part of \_\_\_ at this time, the faint outlines that I have here drawn will Serve sufficiently. I am persuaded to show your attention to it accordingly to its importance.

From some of these remarks you will probably conclude that my feelings are pretty warmly entitled in behalf of the Indians. Indeed Sir it could not well be otherwise. When in 1805 in my youth Mr. Jefferson sent me out to reside among the Missouri Indians, I entered heart and soul into his well known benevolent views towards the aborigines, and endeavored for nearly twenty years without interruption to carry them as far as possible, within my sphere of action, into effect. And I have now no doubt, as to the happy result, if those views had been preserved in ‘till the present time. I mean the general policy that governed Mr. Jefferson’s administration of the Indian affairs. – So long and so intimate an intercourse, could scarcely fail to initiate one so adamantly devoted to the Subject as I was, into the true innate character of those children of the wilderness. And I am sure that I enjoyed their confidence in a high degree during the whole period of my official intercourse, so that I can have no reason to doubt the correctness of my judgement, where I say that whilst there is much to disgust and deplore in the Indian Character, there many of the noblest traits of humanity strongly established; and tho there are some eminent men who doubt its practicability, I am still well satisfied that with the use of roper means the blessings of civilization and Christianity may be fully imparted to those people.

If I feel much concerned for the welfare of the Indian: I am sure I am much more so for that of my own Race, and not a little, believe me, for the honor of my country as connected with our dealing with the original proprietors of this goodly land. And I rejoice most sincerely in the prospect now presented of Such changes in this department, as will tend to ward off and possibly prevent entirely the dangers that threaten , not only the safety of our frontier settlements, including much bloodshed, but the extermination of many Indian Tribes.

Impressed as I am with these views of the present condition of our “Indian Relations” and in the belief that my experiences entitles me to a knowledge to such aids the Subject and that our President elect in entitled to such aids as I can afford in the promises (even to my personal services if he should require them) I will now proceed to States, with as much brevity as I can, Some of the leading features of the policy that I should deem it proper to pursuer in the Indian Department, and especially in Reference to our Western and South-Western frontiers.

If we consider for a moment the vast moral power possessed by our National Government over the Indians, which is conferred by that Article of the Constitution that empowers Congress to “Regulate Commerce with the Indian Tribes” and call to mind the practical effect of that power when it was used in pursuance of the intention of the grant; and then compare the present aspect of our Indian Relations with what it was before the exercise of that power was materially relaxed, if not entirely discontinued, where it was most needed. I am very much mistaken Sir if one of the principal causes of the present miserable condition of those Relations will not be made very apparent. – It was the exercise of the power (principally through the agency of Trading Houses) that enabled Mr. Jefferson to conduct the Indian affairs with such signal success; and I am free to express the opinion, which I have long held, that the repeal of the Trading House (or factory) System in 1822, took from the hands of the Government its best and most efficient instrument of influence and power over the Indian Tribes. – I am not now prepared however to recommend a revival of that System, though I am perfectly convinced that some system ought to be adopted that will give to the government The entire control of the Indian trade, under the immediate supervision and watchful inspection of their own responsible agents. Control their trade and you infallibly control the Indians. I cannot conceive of any thing so irresistibly powerful in governing the Indians as Trade properly regulated. Armies and military array are not half so terrible to the Indian, as an intended friend of Trade; these he may evade or combat at pleasure, and when while they for a time distress him almost beyond human bearing, they serve to gratify one of the strongest propensities of his nature. And there is nothing conciliatory in physical force. But it is impossible for the Indian to resist the power of Trade or to evade its operations. This truly powerful agent, whose influence penetrates the Palace of the mighty Despot, as well as the Cabin of our poor Indians, and pervades the whole human family, will afford to our government the certain means of introducing Civilization and Christianity, if properly employed. That the benevolent policy adopted by our government, to civilize the Indians, is also wise and practicable, we have abundant proofs, If some of those deluded beings in whose favor that policy has been successfully applied, have raised their barbaric hands against their benefactor, it is no evidence against its wisdom, but rather a strong reason for persevering in it. If the Creeks and Seminoles, children as they are, have, in times past, yielded to the Seductive Arts and Strong Temptations of British agents and “British Gold” have not more than half the civilized and enlightened nations of the world done the same? Planted as we have been by providence in the midst of these children of nature, raised up to vigorous manhood and great national power; and enjoying as we do every blessing of this life in a high degree; it would seem that we are specially entrusted with the welfare of these poor ignorant creatures; and there is no way to discharge this obligation of duty but by the due exercise of the power of regulating their Trade. If this influence of Trade, is the best and surest \_\_\_ power it is no less potent as a Conciliatory agent. If exercised with justice, liberty, uniformity and dignity in a word with a sincere desire to conciliate & gain the confidence of the Indian, it cannot fail to have that effect, Men, Women, and Children of all ages and conditions, are brought (under such a system as I have in view) personally and frequently before the Agents of the Government: the little favors and kindnesses that each individual from time to time would receive, must make deep and lasting impressions, and even these apparently trifling transactions would go towards Serving the objects we aim at.

If the Government does not take into its hands the entire Regulations and Control of Trade and Intercourse with the Indian Tribe, upon some uniform System, the consequence must follow that they will go unregulated. The Indians themselves have no possible means of confining the Traders or their own people within any reasonable bounds and all experience shows that the Traders poses neither the

ability or the disposition to do it. Unless therefore the Government chooses to abandon the Indians to the rapacity and mischievous influence of an unregulated traffic, and on our frontier settlements to the inevitable consequences of the rapacity, added to the dangers already suggested as likely to follow the arrival of the Seminoles on our borders, it will I trust, assume that commanding and determined influence over the Indian Relations, that will best comport with its dignity and obligations, and most effectually \_\_ the cause of humanity, and vindicate the National honor. It is manifest that whatever plan may be adopted to effect these desirable purposes, the most essential feature must be to assume the complete and entire control of all Trade and intercourse with the Natives, for without this you may rest assured that no plan or system can succeed. It is emphatically true that these people must be led. They cannot be forced. True you may overpower their bodies with military force but you cannot gain their confidence, or by such means lead them into the pale of Civilization, much less can they be thus brought under the influence of Christian institutions; and there is no such thing as civilizations without that influence as applicable to this case. I know very well that a proposition to place the entire control of the Indian Trade and intercourse in all its minute details, as I would suggest it, in the hands of the President and his subordinate agents, would meet with opposition from a certain quarter, on the ground that Trade ought to be free, and if left free will regulate itself properly and that it is unbecoming, undignified, and mean for this great Government to interfere in the minutiae of the traffic between our Citizens and the Indians for a coon skin. Such persons I know, would imagine that the honor and dignity of the Government might be better served by abstaining from all such trifling details, and suffering the :commerce with the Indian Tribes” to regulate itself; and in cases of serious collision employ the Army to punish the Indian, and set matters on a friendly footing again. I have often had occasion to combat such notions, and very seldom failed to remove them from the mind of any candid person. But I need not detain you Sir, with any further remarks on this point.

Another important feature that should be incorporated into any System designed to promote the proposed objects, is this. The Settlement of the Indians on their own lands individually. In October 1820 whilst in the Service on the Missouri, I wrote to the Indian Department in Answer to Certain Inquires addressed to me from the Intendant, in relation to the progress of Indian Civilization. My old letter Book is now before me, which enables me to quote thereon Certain passages that lean upon the subject now in hand. One motive for using this old letter is to myself right in relation to Indian Civilization; for I find in the 25<sup>th</sup> volume of Niles’ Register page 20 an extract of this very letter, purporting, upon what authority I know not, that my letter was addressed to D. More and intended to illustrate the proposition that it is impracticable to civilize the Indians; Mr. Metcalfe of Kentucky in his Speech in 1822 on this subject in which he labors to prove the uselessness and folly of attempting the civilization of the Indians, also quotes the same passage from my letter above referred to in support of his position. This partial quotation presents me in a false attitude, for although well aware of the difficulties attending the process of civilization, and its necessary very slow progress, I never entertained a serious doubt of its ultimate accomplishment if properly persevered in. I was not aware of the unfair use of my letter ‘till within the last or six years. If I had known it at the time it would have been promptly corrected, but I was then at my post on the Missouri. To Proceed – “From these facts you will not be surprised to learn that the arts of Civilization have made but little progress as yet among the Indian nations in this quarter; knowing as you do, the natural propensity of the Indian to live without toil upon the bounties of wild Nature, rather than submit to what he considers the degradation of labor in order to procure Sustenance. So long as the facilities I have enumerated exist, so long will the propensity to rely chiefly on them exist. This is nature. And assumes the reins when nature gives them up, and we

cling to nature as long as we can. So long as her exuberant bosom affords us sustenance, there we fondly repose free and untrammled. On the failure of that reason we are obliged to resort to art for support. The whole history of man shows, that art never gets the ascendancy of nature, without a desperate struggle, in which the object of contention is most \_\_\_ mangled and often destroyed; which compromise if I understand the subject, is the very thing we call Civilization in reference to the Indian Nations; what we are all aiming at and what is I feel as solicitous to promote as any one. But the process is slow and we must exercise a due degree of patience.

[I have often noticed Indians observing with much apparent interest the effects of our agricultural and mechanical skill. Our fine Gardens, abundant crops, and numerous comforts and conveniences. A very sensible Osage, The Big Soldier, who had twice been to Washington and Some of our own largest cities once said to me when I was urging the subject of civilization on him 'I see and admire your manner of living. Your good warm houses, your extensive fields of corn &. Your Gardens, orchards, cows, oxen, work horses wagons and a thousand machines that I know not the use of. I see that you are able to clothe yourselves even from the weeds and grass. In Short you do almost what you chuse. You White people possess the power of subduing almost every animal to your use. But you are surrounded by slave, everything about you is in chains, and you are slaves yourselves. I fear if I should exchange my pursuits for your, I should become a slave. Talk to my sins, perhaps they may be persuaded to adopt your fashions, or at least to recommend to them their Sons But for myself I was born free and have been raised free and wish to die free'.- It was in vain to combat the good man's opinions with argument.. He was perfectly content he said with his condition. The forests and prairies supply all the calls of nature profusely and there is no lack of white people to purchase from us the Surplus products of our industry"-]

This is the language that is held by the Indians generally in the region. Like all people in a state of ignorance they are bigoted, and obstinately adhere to their old customs and habits. 'tis in vain to attempt to train the aged oak to our purposes. The tender sapling however will yield to our culture, and bend to our will. The Missionary establishment now forming neat the Osages I have no doubt will tend much to promote the civilization of those Tribes, so far at least as Regards the rising generation. Few if any of those now above the age of fifty will ever wholly abandon their present wild pursuits freely. It is a singular fact however that altho' the Indians who have attained to the Age of 25 years and upwards generally refuse instructions, yet they seem by no means averse to having their Children taught the arts of Civilization.

I will conclude for the present with the following proposition, which you may make use of as you think fit. It is this.- for the Government, by compact with the Indians to cause to be surveyed certain districts if the Indian lands suitable for the purpose, in the same manner that the U.S. lands are surveyed, tho' I would recommend that the lines and corners should be more distinctly marked- wherever an Indian winced a sincere disposition to settle himself permanently, and to pursue civilized habits, a portion of this land from 160 to 640 acres, as might be proper, should be allotted to him, patented to him by the Government, and secured to him and his family forever. He should not have the Right to sell or alienate it in any measure except by the express permissions of the President, nor should it be held liable for his debts. – I believe that by locating each Indian family disposed to adopt our mode of living, on a Tract of land of their own, distinctly marked, and permanently secured to them, the Government would greatly advance the Scheme of Civilization. You would thes give them at once, a distinct and permanent property and interest in the soil. Instead of a vague transient undivided property

in a vast extent of Country, which the Act of a few of the Chiefs and head men of his Tribe may at any time [possible missing page] the destruction and extinction of the Native Tribes can be arrested and effectively prevented.

My views as to the locations of the Indians, as set forth in the later part of my old letter just quoted, were adopted by Mr. Monroe, and recommended in various forms to Congress; But I am not informed to what extent the plan has been hitherto carried into practice, thought I am quite Sure it has not been applied as extensively as it should have been.

But after all sin, the Success of any System if operations in this interesting branch of the publick service, must obviously depend mainly on the fitness, fidelity, and activity of the Subordinate Agents employed by the President therein.

As it relates to the service this quarter, I have been long convinced that it labors under great disadvantages. Whilst the Superintendcy was under the care of my excellent & esteemed friend Genl. Wm. Clark, it possessed even to the very last, some beneficial influence among the Indians of the interior, tho' it was by many considered to be a useless appendage to the Department for the last ten years of the General's incumbency. By some, its location at St. Louis (tho' once the most proper point) was thought objectionable, whilst not a few were of opinion that the sedentary character of the agency, not the agent, prevented its accomplishing what was reasonably to be expected from such an establishment.. However, there objections may have been applicable to Gen. Clark's time, there can be no doubt I am sure, as to the present character of the office at St. Louis, a mere clerkship of the Indian bureau. In any other respect it is utterly useless, and might just as well be located any where else, as at St. Louis, so far as any salutary influence thereupon, ever reach the Indians, or ever can reach the them, other than might as well if not better proceed directly from the Bureau at Washington. A disbursing agent may probably be necessary at St. Louis, but if so it should not be connected with the Indian Agency proper, which requires very different qualification, and more of locomotion.

I do not wish to be understated as casting any causance on the present superintendent at St. Louis. As the office is now constituted, that Gentleman is probably well enough qualified for it; and I have no reason to doubt in the least his fidelity in the performance of all the duties required at his hands; But I must repeat my own opinion at least, that as an appendage to the Indian Department in this quarter, except as a mere clerkship, the agency's of no more use at St. Louis that it would be a Nahawk on Passamaquoddy; and it is high time that it was abolished, or if continued, located at a more suitable place. But I confess I am unable to see how it can be of any service any where are now constituted.

And yet, we cannot by any means dispense with a General Agency to superintend the details of the Service in this Region. An active agency it must be tho' to answer the emergency, and should only be confided to a man of experience, intelligence and established good character. One disposed to devote himself actively, steadily, and zealously to the service: frequently visiting the Indians. The interior sub agencies. The Trading depots and our frontier settlements.

Such an agency, \_\_\_ filled and properly sustained, is, in my view an essential auxiliary here, to enable the President (Harrison) to carry into effect with energy and success, such measures as may be devised upon his recommendation in reference to the safety of our frontier settlements and the promotion of the best interest of the Indian Tribes. It would not be necessary, or hardly expedient to fit the office of such General agent at any particular point; indeed an office would scarcely be



necessary at all. The necessary correspondence could be very easily arranged without it. This however is a matter of but little importance either way.

If I have made myself understood the following Suggestions are herein set forth, and respectfully first. The obligation to protect our frontier settlements, now as I believe in imminent danger.

Second. The obligation to protect the Indian Tribes in their just rights, and to use proper means to civilize them.

Third. The obligation to “regulate commerce with the Indian Tribes” and the justice and propriety of doing it, as to control entirely all Trade and intercourse with them, in the minutest details, as the sure and only sure means of properly controlling their actions etc.

Fourth. The expanding of locating, the Indians, as fast as it can be done, on small tracts of Land of their own etc. as a necessary step towards their civilization.

Fifth. The expediency of reorganizing the Indian Department. So far at least as relates to this region, dispensing with the sedentary clerkship at ST. Louis, and in lieu thereof, establishing a General Supervisory Agency of a much more active and energetic character.

Had I a seat in Congress, I should present this whole subject for consideration in all its details in proper form for legislative actions. It is now presented to you in the present form, with the sole view of contributing, my mite to promote the objects proposed; and to tender such aids as I am qualified to give on this occasion, to the new Administration. And should the President think for to call upon me, even for \_\_ service, I shall be ready to answer the call, wither in the Department at large, or here in this region. I add this last tender (of personal service) with some hesitancy; lest it be thought for a moment that I “Seek Office” which is by no means the case. I am certainly free however to a tender of myself to the Administration of my own choice, in a Department that I served in nearly twenty years actively; nay according to my way of thinking on the subject, I should not fully perform my duty on the occasion if I were to omit such tender.

With very great respect

I have the honor to be Sir

Yr: frd: & Svt:

G. C. Sibley