

Mr. G. C. Sibley

Letter to The Hon^r. Henry Clay
from George C. Sibley, of Missouri.

(On Indian Affairs.)

13th Feby. 1821.

Lindens Wood, near St. Charles, Missouri.
February 13th 1844.

To the Hon. Henry Clay,
In the Senate of the United States.

Sir.

We are told from high authority that "there is a time for 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 freedom 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 raised and corrected, this one that so nearly concerns the rights of humanity, and the national honour, as well as the peace and safety of our 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 let before you my views on this subject (views resulting from the experience and

and close observation of twenty years active devotion to the Indian Service, in virtue of various Commissions conferred on me by Presidents Jefferson, Madison and Monroe) I have hitherto declined any intercession, 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 party System of patronage, affording some additional resources very convenient for rewarding certain federal party Indian 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 Elections; 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 of Indian Affairs: and my own feelings were more than once highly excited by what I heard and witnessed, touching the perilous situation of those Settlements, arising from the bad temper and bad management of their Indian neighbours - Doctored as the most of those Settlers seemed (and proved) to be, to the existing National Administration, there was yet very evidently, a painful distrust extensively felt, 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 felt pledged to support it, frankly acknowledged that in the event of such a change, they would probably be relieved from

much

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 sympathise 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 (as evinced by the way, that learned to me very improbable) I should certainly interest myself in favour of what I deemed a wholesome and necessary change in our Indians 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 intrusions of their Indian neighbours; 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 an inherent difficulty attending its proper development, even under the most favourable auspices - for there is that in our Anglo-Saxon blood, which constantly militates against an honest conviction of what we

were over in Justice and Humanity to the Indians - Even since our forefathers obtained a sure footing upon this Continent, a War of exclusion and extermination has been waged against its aboriginal 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 time enacted whatever seemed good and profitable, unto ourselves, concerning the Lands and their rightful owners (as we admit the Indians to have been) upon whom, by way of palliating the wrong, we have bestowed the appellative "Savage" as in contra-distinction to our own self-assumed title of Civil. - - Under all the different Administrations of our National Government, the proper management of our Indians 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 Expelled 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 out for our own convenience, and from which we have covenanted among ourselves, that the Savages

Savages shall be removed immediately, it has suited our policy and convenience, in honour and good faith complying with those covenants, to remove of the Indians to enter into certain voluntary Treaty engagements, under which according to our forms, we may legally-rightfully and righteously, oust 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 some cost, to the like Submission.

But the rambling propensity 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 contact, 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 Indians 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 - Whenever the discomfited, desperate, rambler of the Seminoles, shall be added to the discontented Tribes,

Tribes that have been added to our borders, and to those natives
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 midst of a truly frightful mass of
destructive combustibles; and in the natural course of such
a state of things, must inevitably produce an incalculable
amount of human crimes and suffering, not to mention the
pecuniary expenses of suppressing so great an outbreak.

It is needless for me to enter more fully into this ^{part of the} subject
at this time; the fair outlines that I have here drawn will
serve sufficiently, I am persuaded to draw your attention
to it according to its importance. —

From some of these remarks you will prob-
ably conclude that my feelings are pretty warmly enlisted
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 toward the
Aborigines, and endeavored for nearly twenty years with-
out 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
persevered 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 inter-
course, could scarcely fail to initiate one so ardently
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

degree during the whole period of my official intercourse;
so that I can have no reason to doubt the correctness of my
judgment, when I say, that whilst there is much to disgust
and to displease in the Indian character, there are many
of the noblest traits of humanity strongly exhibited; and
tho' there are some eminent men who doubt its practicability,
I am still well satisfied, that with the use of proper means
the blessings of Civilization and Christianity may be fully
imported to those people.

If I feel much concerned for the
welfare of the Indians: I am sure I am much more so
for that of my own race, and not a little, believe me, for
the honour of my Country, as connected with our dealings
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, involving much
bloodshed, but the extirpation 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 experience entitles me to a knowledge of the Subject,
and that our President elect is entitled to such aids as I can
afford, in the premises, (even to my personal services if he
should require them) I will now proceed to state, with
as much brevity as I can, some of the leading features
of the policy that I should deem it proper to pursue in
the Indian Department, and especially in reference
to our Western and South-western frontiers.

If

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 aspect 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 conditions of those relations will not be made very apparent. - It was the exercise of this 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 anything so irresistibly powerful in governing the Indians as trade properly regulated - Armies and Military array are not half so terrible to the Indians, as an interdict from trade; these he may

may evade or combat at pleasure, and even while they for a time distress him almost beyond human bearing, they serve to qualify one of the strongest propensities of his nature - and there is nothing conciliatory in physical force - But it is impossible for the Indians 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 favour that policy has been successfully applied, have raised their paracidal 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 those 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

back and Smart coercive power, it is no less potent as a Councilary agent. If exercised with justice, liberality, uniformity and dignity, in a word, with a sincere desire to conciliate & gain the confidence of the Indians, 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 favours 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 far toward, securing the objects we aim at.

If the Government does not take into its hands the entire regulation and control of Trade and Intercourse with the Indian Tribes, 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 shews that the Traders possess 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 our frontier settlements to the inevitable consequences of that 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 back Comport with its dignity and obligations, and most effectually subserve the cause of humanity, and vindicate the national honour.

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 back 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 can not thus 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 Civilization 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, 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, peeping and prying into such small matters, and occasionally perhaps interfering in a trade between a white man and an Indian for a Cow Skin. — Such persons I know, would imagine that the honour 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 Service on the Missouri, I wrote to the Indian Department in answer to certain Queries 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 therefrom certain passages that bear upon the Subject now in hand - One motive for using this old letter on the present occasion, is to set myself right in relation to Indian Civilization; for I find in the 25th 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 Dr. Morse, and intended to illustrate the proposition that it is impracticable to civilize the Indians. W. Metcalfe of Kentucky in his Speech in 1822 on this Subject, in which he labours 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 necessarily very slow progress, I never entertained a serious doubt of its ultimate accomplishment if properly pursued in - I was not aware of the unfair use of my letter till within the last five or six years - If I had known

known it at the time it would have been promptly cor-
rected; 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
"Labour in order to procure Sustenance. So long as the fa-
"cilities I have enumerated exist. So long will the pro-
"pensity to rely chiefly on them exist. This is nature - art
"assumes the rains where nature gives them up, and we
"cling to Nature as long as we can. So long as her abundant
"bosom affords us sustenance, there we fondly expose, free
"and untrammeled. On the failure of that resource,
"we are obliged to resort to art for support. The whole
"history of man shows, that we never get the ascendancy
"of Nature without a desperate struggle, in which the
"object of contention is most pitiously mangled, and of-
"ten destroyed, and a compromise is always obliged to be
"effected; 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
"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 usage, the Big Soldiers,
who

"who had twice been to Washington and some of our largest Cities,
"once said to me when I was urging the Subject of Civilization
"on him - 'I see and admire your manners of living - your good
"warm houses, your extensive fields of Corn &c. your Gardens, Or-
"chards. Cows. Oxen. Work Horses. Waggon and a thousand Ma-
"chines that I know not the use of - I see that you are able
"to clothe yourselves even from the wood and grass. In short
"you do almost what you choose. You White people possess the
"power of Subduing almost every animal to your use. But
"you are surrounded by Slaves - every thing about you is in
"Chains, and you are Slaves yourselves - I fear if I should
"exchange my pursuits for yours, I should become a Slave.
"Talk to my Sons, perhaps they may be persuaded to adopt your
"fashions, or at least to recommend them to their Sons. but
"for myself, I was born free, 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 pro-
"fusely 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 this 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
"Oaks to our purposes - the tender sapling however, will
"yield to our Culture, and bend to our will - The Mis-
"sionary establishment now forming near the Osages.
"I have no doubt will tend much to promote the Civiliza-
"tion of those Tribes. So far at least as regards the rising
generations

"generation. Now, if any of those now above the age of Fifteen,
"will ever wholly abandon their present wild pursuits probably -
"It is a singular fact however, that altho' the Indians who
"have attained to the age of 25 years and upward, generally
"receive instruction, yet they learn by no means averse
"to having their Children taught the arts of Civilization -

"I will conclude for the present with the following propo-
"sitions, which you may make use of as you think fit -
"So is this - For the Government, by compact with the Indians,
"to cause to be Surveyed certain Districts of the Indian Land,
"suitable for the purpose, in the ~~same~~, ^{manner} that the U.S. Lands
"are Surveyed, ths I would recommend that the lines and
"corners should be more distinctly marked - Whenever
"an Indian evinced a sincere disposition to settle him-
"self 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 manner
"except by the express permission of the President, nor
"should it be liable for his debts - I believe that
"by locating such Indians family disposed to adopt our mode
"of living, on a tract of Land of their own, distinctly
"marked, and permanently secured to them, the Gover-
"ment would greatly advance the Scheme of Civilization.
"You would thus 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

the destruction and extinction of the native Tribes can be arrested and effectually prevented -

My views as to the location of the Indians, as set forth in the latter 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; though I am quite sure it has not been applied as extensively as it should have been.

But after all Sir, the success of any system of 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 in this quarter, I have been long convinced that it labours under great disadvantages - whilst the Superintendancy was under the care of my excellent & esteemed friend Genl. W^m. 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 these 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 Clarkship 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

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any salutary influence therupon, ever reaches the Indians, or ever can reach 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 qualifications, and more of locomotion.

I do not wish to be understood as casting any censure on the present Superintendent at St. Louis. - As the Office is now constituted, that Gentlemen 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 Clarkship, the agency is of no more use at St. Louis, than it would be at Naknek or 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 anywhere as 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, fitly filled, and properly sustained, is, in my view, an essential auxiliary here, to enable the President (Harrison) to carry into effect with energy

and

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 interests of the Indian Tribes - It would not be necessary, or hardly expedient, to fix 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 presented for your consideration.

First. The obligation of the Government 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 so 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 &c -

Fourth. The expediency of locating the Indians, as far as it can be done, on small tracts of Land of their own &c as a necessary step towards their Civilization.

Fifth. The expediency of re-organizing the Indian Department, so far at least as relates to this region; dispensing with the sedentary Clarkship at St. Louis, and in lieu thereof, establishing a General Supervisory Agency of a much more active and energetic character -

Had

Had I a seat in Congress, I should present this whole subject for consideration in all its details, in proper form for legislative action - 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 aid as I am qualified to give on this occasion, to the new Administration. And should the President think fit to call upon me, even for personal service, I shall be ready to answer the call, either 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 make 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 honour to be Sir

Yrs frd: G. C. Libby

G. C. Libby