



THE OTHER CIVIL WAR

Lincoln and the Indians

David A. Nichols

HISTORIANS ARE TEMPTED to burden the past with the conflicts of their own time. The neglected corollary to this is the tendency to read back the absence of conflicts that were real in an earlier time. The ultimate conquest of the American Indian seems painfully apparent to us today, but the outcome was not so predictable to those who lived in nineteenth-century America. So it was with Abraham Lincoln and the Indians. The major concern of Lincoln's presidency was the great War for the Union, but Lincoln could not indulge in the scholar's luxury of segregating Indian affairs from that larger conflict. While never his first concern, Indian relations were a nagging problem for Lincoln, periodically breaking into his consciousness and demanding men and supplies as well as time and energy. On certain occasions the timing of Indian crises gave them an impact on events and decisions far beyond their immediate focus. Moreover, in his response to these crises, Lincoln was instrumental in determining the fate of native Americans in the years following his death.

Lincoln's relationship with the Indians preceded his presidency by many years. His grandfather was killed by Indians in 1784, orphaning Thomas Lincoln at the tender age of six and contributing (so Lincoln claimed) to hardship in young Abraham's household. Lincoln volunteered for the Black Hawk War, fought largely in Wisconsin and Illinois in 1832, but he saw no real combat action. Years later, Lincoln joked about his achievement as a "military hero" when he "bent a musket pretty badly on one occasion" and "had a good many bloody struggles with the musketoes [*sic*]." The Black Hawk War symbolizes Lincoln's relationship to the Indians through the years. Then, as later, he responded to the initiative of others while remaining far from the scene of action. In a preview of his presidential years, Lincoln developed an approach to Indians that was dominated by political considerations.¹

It has become a truism that Lincoln was an ambitious politician. In the era of Andrew Jackson, such politicians knew the political use of Indian fighting. Lincoln quickly

¹ Lincoln to Solomon Lincoln (a distant relative), March 6, 1848, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 1:455-56 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953); Lincoln, "Speech in U.S. House of Representatives on the Presidential Question," in Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:509-10 (quotes).

Mr. Nichols is assistant professor of history and humanities at Huron College, Huron, South Dakota. He currently is completing his doctoral dissertation on Lincoln's relationship with the Indians. This is an expanded version of a paper the author gave at the Northern Great Plains History Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in October, 1972.

attempted to capitalize on his military record in the Black Hawk War by running unsuccessfully for the Illinois state legislature the moment he completed his three months of service.² Long after, as a presidential candidate, Lincoln caused his campaign biographies to high light his election as a Black Hawk War captain as "a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since."³ The Indians had further political use for the new president in 1861. Lincoln discovered at once that the Indian Bureau was a fine source of patronage jobs for loyal supporters, and he spent considerable time parceling out those positions. On March 20, 1861, for example, Lincoln wrote Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith: "Please make out and send blank appointments for all Indian places, to serve in Wisconsin, in favor of the persons unitedly recommended by the Wisconsin Congressional delegation. And in like manner, all in Minnesota, in favor of the persons unitedly recommended by the Minnesota Republican delegation in congress. Of course, these relate to Executive appointments."⁴

But Lincoln's concerns with Indian affairs were more substantial than distributing jobs to followers, although the political theme continued to be present. During the Civil War years he faced very real problems like protecting settlers in the West and guarding the new telegraph and railroad projects from Indian attack. Even less routine were the major Indian insurrections in the Southwest, Colorado, and Minnesota — actually continuations of a violent conflict that had been going on for a long time before the Civil War.

His first year in office confronted Lincoln with vigorous Confederate efforts to form alliances with the southern Indians. The Confederacy even granted congressional representation to the Cherokee Nation in return for an alliance consummated in October, 1861. By December of that year, Lincoln was forced to admit to Congress that "the relations of the government with the Indian tribes have been greatly disturbed by the insurrection."⁵

Eventually, the radical senator from Kansas, James H. ("Bloody Jim") Lane, prevailed upon Lincoln to employ Indian troops against the Confederacy. Already engaged in illegal recruiting of Blacks and Indians, Lane badgered the president into authorizing the organization of 4,000 refugee Indians in January, 1862.⁶ The following June, an expedition using friendly Indians was launched into Indian country south of Kansas with the stipulation: "These Indians can be used only against Indians or in defense of their own territory and homes."⁷ John Ross, for many years head of the Cherokee Nation, was captured in July, 1862, and eventually spent much time in Washington pleading personally with Lincoln for the welfare of his people, including 7,000 refugees in Kansas.⁸

THE SIOUX WAR of 1862 in Minnesota, however, provides the best example of the demands of Indian affairs on

Lincoln. No other situation so clearly demonstrates the artificiality of segregating Indian relations from other concerns. The Minnesota situation, at the same time, is a microcosm of the tragedy of Indian-white relations in America.

The summer of 1862 was a time of crisis for military forces of the North. Major General George B. McClellan's Peninsular campaign had failed to capture Richmond, the Confederate capital, and events leading to the Union disaster at the Second Battle of Bull Run on August 29 and 30, 1862, were well under way. Lincoln not only had troubles with his generals but his relations with the radical Republicans were increasingly a problem. Into this caldron of difficulties was thrust an Indian crisis. In July, Lincoln sent his private secretary, John G. Nicolay, to Minnesota to meet William P. Dole, United States commissioner of Indian affairs, and to travel to the Red River Valley to negotiate a land-cession treaty with the Pembina and Red Lake bands of Chippewa Indians. The men had gone past St. Cloud when they heard that bloody warfare had erupted in Sioux territory to the south and Chippewa treaty-making had to be abandoned.⁹

On August 21, 1862, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton read an upsetting telegram from Governor Alex-

² Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:5.

³ Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, enclosing autobiography, December 20, 1859, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:511-12 (quote). A similar formulation is found in "Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps," in Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:64.

⁴ Lincoln to Smith, March 20, 1861, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:296-97.

⁵ "Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1861, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:46 (quote); John Ross, "Message of the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation," in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 502 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), hereafter cited as *Official Records*.

⁶ Lane to Major General David Hunter, January 3, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 8, p. 482.

⁷ Major General Henry W. Halleck to Brigadier General James W. Denver, April 5, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 8, p. 664-65 (quote).

⁸ On October 10, 1862, Lincoln wrote Major General Samuel R. Curtis in St. Louis (Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:456) about "some Cherokee Indian Regiments" and noted: "John Ross, principal Chief of the Cherokees, is now here, an exile; and he wishes to know, and so do I, whether the force above mentioned, could not occupy the Cherokee country, consistently with the public service." The figure of 7,000 is from "Report of the Secretary of the Interior" (Caleb B. Smith), in 37 Congress, 3 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 7 (serial 1157). The most thorough study on this whole situation is still Annie Heloise Abel's *The Slaveholding Indians*, 3 vols. (Cleveland, 1915-1925).

⁹ Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:397; Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *Lincoln's Secretary Goes West: Two Reports by John G.*

ander Ramsey of Minnesota: "The Sioux Indians on our western border have risen, and are murdering men, women, and children." On August 17, four malcontents from a Sioux encampment on the Minnesota River to the south killed five settlers in Acton Township, western Meeker County. The main body of the Lower Sioux, fearing reprisals from this incident, attacked the Lower Sioux Agency early on August 18, thereby launching what has been called a "preventive war." Minnesota's secretary of state, James H. Baker, was even more explicit in his description of the resulting situation:

"A most frightful insurrection of Indians has broken out along our whole frontier. Men, women, and children are indiscriminately murdered; evidently the result of a deep-laid plan, the attacks being simultaneous along our whole border."¹⁰

The effect in the War Department was electric. In an administration haunted by military defeat and frustrated by manpower shortages, such news was anything but welcome. Especially ominous was the possibility of "a deep-laid plan." The Lincoln administration at this time seriously considered the possibility of a Confederate conspiracy in the Northwest, although the president was more cautious on this than his subordinates. Months later, Interior Secretary Smith proclaimed to Congress: "I am satisfied the chief cause is to be found in the insurrection of the southern states," and he proceeded to present evidence of "southern emissaries" engaged in conspiratorial activities among the Sioux. Lincoln himself told Congress: "Information was received that a simultaneous attack was to be made upon the white settlements by all the tribes between the Mississippi river and the Rocky mountains."¹¹

Nicolay on Frontier Indian Troubles 1862, p. 9-11 (La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1965). On August 29, another secretary, John Hay, wrote Nicolay from the executive mansion in Washington and asked: "Where is your scalp?" See Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay*, 44 (New York, 1939).

¹⁰Ramsey to Stanton and Baker to Stanton, both August 21, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 590-91; Robert Huhn Jones, *The Civil War in the Northwest: Nebraska, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas*, 23-24 ("preventive war" quote) (Norman, Oklahoma, 1960).

¹¹Smith's report in 37 Congress, 3 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 8 (quote) (serial 1157), Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:525-26.

¹²Brigadier General James Craig to Stanton, August 23, 1862, and Craig to Halleck, August 25, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 592, 596.

¹³Ramsey to Stanton, August 25, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 596.

¹⁴Ramsey to Lincoln, August 26, 1862, and Lincoln to Ramsey, August 27, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 597, 599.

The Minnesota Indian war may seem insignificant today from our perspective of the entire Civil War, but the Union leadership could not know with certainty how extensive it was. The idea of a conspiracy appears ludicrous to most scholars now, but Lincoln's people had seen how far the Confederacy would go to gain the aid of the southern Indians — and John Ross was available as a witness to that. For all they knew, a new front had been opened in the War for the Union.

At minimum, the situation in Minnesota demanded men and supplies needed elsewhere. The Third Minnesota Volunteer Regiment, which had been surrendered by its commander at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the previous July 13 and paroled, was quickly ordered to return to Minnesota for action. Companies from other, newly formed Minnesota regiments also faced the Sioux before going south. It was hoped that the conflict could be brought to a quick end, but the news reaching Stanton confirmed his worst fears. A general sent word on August 23 from Fort Laramie, Wyoming: "Indians, from Minnesota to Pike's Peak, and from Salt Lake to near Fort Kearny, committing many depredations." Two days later the same source reported: "I am satisfied rebel agents have been at work among the Indians."¹²

That very afternoon, Governor Ramsey wired the secretary of war that the Minnesota conflict was worsening. "The panic among the people has depopulated whole counties," he asserted.¹³ Then Ramsey made a request guaranteed to generate panic in the War Department — an extension of the draft deadline. This message was appropriately endorsed by Indian Commissioner Dole, who was on the scene. The Union army, already beset with difficulties in troop recruitment, could not afford to lose the Minnesota contingent. Stanton refused the request.

The next day, Ramsey went over Stanton's head to Lincoln. "Half the population of the State are fugitives," he told the chief executive, and the governor passionately appealed for a one-month extension on recruitment. Lincoln's reply was almost savage in tone: "Attend to the Indians. If the draft cannot proceed of course it will not proceed. Necessity knows no law. The Government cannot extend the time."¹⁴

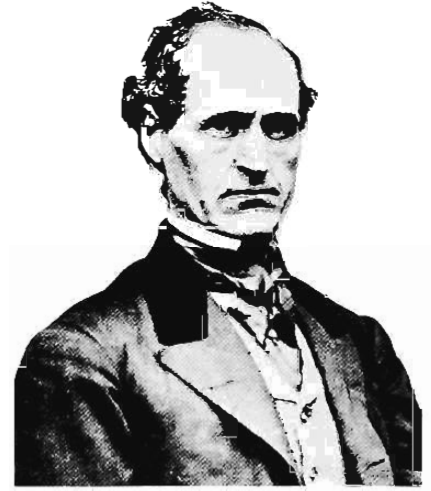
Lincoln eventually regretted the "blank check" he gave the Minnesotans in the name of "necessity." But his agitation was understandable. That same day, Lincoln got more bad news in a joint telegram from Nicolay, Dole, and Senator Morton S. Wilkinson of Minnesota: "We are in the midst of a most terrible and exciting Indian war. Thus far the massacre of innocent white settlers has been fearful. A wild panic prevails in nearly one-half of the State. All are rushing to the frontier to defend settlers." Nicolay reported to Stanton that fighting was in process along a 200-mile front, and he estimated that "several hundred whites" had been slaughtered. Nicolay also re-



JOHN POPE



ALEXANDER RAMSEY



MORTON S. WILKINSON

layed Ramsey's sizable requests for weapons and supplies: "Six field pieces complete, with horse equipments and fixed ammunition; six 12-pounder mountain howitzers; arms, accouterments, and horse equipments for 1,200 cavalry; 5,000 or 6,000 guns, with 500,000 cartridges to suit; medical stores for three regiments and blankets for 3,000 men."¹⁵ Thus, Lincoln had strong evidence from his personal secretary that the Minnesota situation was indeed serious.

By August 26, 1862, Ramsey was requesting the creation of a new military department in the Northwest.¹⁶ Three days later, Union forces under Major General John Pope were defeated at Second Bull Run. It was a low point for the Lincoln administration. Lincoln's military plans were in shambles, and now he had an Indian war in the Northwest. What gave the Minnesota situation particular importance, beyond its obvious drain on troops and supplies, was that *civilians* were dying in that staunchly Republican state. Now, needing northern support more than ever, Lincoln could ill afford to ignore the bloodshed in Minnesota.

ALL THIS may have had an impact on a momentous decision — to use Negro troops. As late as August 4, 1862, Lincoln had publicly declared his opposition to this course of action. His change of mind is normally attributed, with good reason, to the lag in recruitment and the setbacks in the South. But the timing of the Minnesota crisis requires its consideration as an additional factor. Lincoln and the War Department could not know how big the Indian war might become, and their intelligence reports were anything but encouraging. Obtaining sufficient troop strength was a major worry before the Indian uprising, and the new conflict may have been the final straw. August 25 was the day Ramsey asked for an

extension of the Minnesota draft, the day that Stanton was again informed of rebel activity farther West, and the very day that Stanton gave orders to Brigadier General Rufus Saxton to organize the first officially sanctioned Black troops in South Carolina. This was four days before Second Bull Run and only two weeks after Major General David Hunter had given up on governmental approval for use of Black soldiers. While the importance of the troop maneuvers in the South cannot be minimized, the most dramatic new military action between August 4 and 25, 1862, was Indian warfare in Minnesota. Lincoln's invocation of "military necessity" in the Emancipation Proclamation may have had a measure of Indian content in its development.¹⁷

Ramsey's request on August 26 for a new military department was denied by General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck. But Halleck was overruled by Lincoln. The Second Bull Run battle on August 29, a Union disaster, demonstrated the abysmal state of co-operation among Lincoln's generals. The radicals were agitating against McClellan, and Lincoln had on his hands a very disgrun-

¹⁵ Wilkinson, Dole, and Nicolay to Lincoln, August 27, 1862, and Nicolay to Stanton, August 27, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 599-600.

¹⁶ Ramsey to Halleck, August 26, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 597.

¹⁷ *New York Tribune*, August 5, 1862, reprinted in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:356-57, Stanton to Saxton, August 25, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 14, p. 377; Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro*, 153-55 (New York, 1962); Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army 1861-1865*, p. 50-55, 80-81 (New York, 1956). Mr. Cornish ascribes the change in orders to Stanton's estimation of Saxton as the better man for the job. He argues that Lincoln allowed this due to "military events" but makes no mention of the Minnesota war.

bled, defeated general in John Pope. Furthermore, the news from the Northwest offered little comfort. Governor William Jayne of Dakota Territory (Lincoln's friend from days in Springfield, Illinois) reiterated the familiar theme: "a general alarm pervades all our settlements." Jayne also raised the specter of "a few thousand people at the mercy of 50,000 Indians should they see proper to fall upon us."¹⁸

September 5 was a day of decision. Halleck informed McClellan: "The President has directed that General Pope be relieved and report to the War Department." A Military Department of the Northwest was being created, and Pope would command it. Pope felt misused over what he perceived to be banishment to a far-off place (St. Paul), and he made his feelings known in a series of letters to Halleck.¹⁹ But there may have been more to the wording of Stanton's orders than Pope realized: "The Indian hostilities require the attention of some military officer of high rank, in whose ability and vigor the Government has confidence, and you have therefore been selected for this important command." Stanton continued: "You cannot too highly estimate the importance of the duty now intrusted to you," and ended by expressing his confidence that Pope could "meet the emergency."²⁰ Clearly, Lincoln had a double purpose. He was separating quarrelsome generals while meeting a new military emergency. The latter was not contrived, as Pope quickly discovered on arriving in Minnesota.

Meanwhile, the War Department got more disheartening news from Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood of Missouri: "I have reliable information that Yankton In-

dians on our western border . . . have joined with the hostile Indians in Minnesota, and threaten our whole northwestern frontier." On September 16, word came of attacks in Nebraska, "indicating that a combined effort on the part of the unfriendly Indians is meditated against the entire frontier region."²¹ By that date, the government was sufficiently worried to contemplate the rather desperate measure of employing Confederate prisoners of war against the Indians. Lincoln personally urged Stanton to act on this matter with "all possible despatch." By this time, too, Pope had taken over his new command. For part of his troops, he was promised as many as 10,000 Confederate prisoners paroled to the North.²²

ONCE IN MINNESOTA, Pope acted vigorously and without mercy for the Indians. He ordered the destruction of Indian farms and food supplies as well as the killing of Indian warriors. (A military campaign led by Colonel Henry H. Sibley was well under way in Minnesota when Pope arrived, and in effect he ordered its continuation.) Pope planned no mere holding action. He wrote Sibley:

"It is my purpose utterly to exterminate the Sioux if I have the power to do so and even if it requires a campaign lasting the whole of next year. . . . They are to be treated as maniacs or wild beasts, and by no means as people with whom treaties or compromises can be made."²³

Meanwhile, Pope's communications to the War Department were frantic. "I am doing all I can, but have little to do it with," he complained to Stanton. "There are neither troops nor arms." For this war of "formidable proportions," Pope demanded supplies that, in Stanton's view, constituted "an immense expenditure of money and material needed elsewhere." Halleck, trying to restrain Pope, told him: "Your requisitions . . . are beyond all our expectations. . . . Moreover, they cannot be filled without taking supplies from other troops in the field."²⁴

Pope grew more hysterical. "You do not seem to be aware of the extent of the Indian outbreaks," he wrote Halleck. The new commander in the Northwest envisioned 50,000 homeless people and expressed fears that "the whole of Minnesota west of the Mississippi and the Territories of Dakota and Nebraska will be entirely depopulated." Never one to understate, Pope continued:

"You have no idea of the wide, universal, and uncontrollable panic everywhere in this country. Over 500 people have been murdered in Minnesota alone and 300 women and children now in captivity. The most horrible massacres have been committed; children nailed alive to trees and houses, women violated and then disemboweled — everything that horrible ingenuity could devise. It will require a large force and

¹⁸ Halleck to Ramsey, August 29, 1862, and Jayne to Brigadier General James C. Blunt, September 3, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 605, 613.

¹⁹ Halleck to McClellan, September 5, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 12, part 3, p. 811. In the same volume (p. 816-27) are the rather bitter letters that Pope and Halleck exchanged on this whole matter.

²⁰ Stanton to Pope, September 6, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 617.

²¹ Kirkwood to Stanton, September 8, 1862, and Indian Agent B. F. Lushbaugh to Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles E. Mix, September 13, 1862, enclosed in Caleb B. Smith to Stanton, September 16, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 620, 644-45 ("unfriendly Indians" quote).

²² Lincoln to Stanton, September 20, 1862, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:432; Pope to Halleck, September 23, 1862, and Halleck to Stanton, September 25, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 663-64, 669. Halleck mentioned the figure of 9,000 paroled prisoners to Stanton; Lincoln spoke of 20,000 to Stanton on September 20, but the statement is somewhat ambiguous as to whether all were to be sent to the Indian front.

²³ Pope to Sibley, September 17 and September 28, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 648-49, 686 (quote).

²⁴ Pope to Stanton, September 22, Stanton to Halleck, September 22, and Halleck to Pope, September 23, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 658-59, 663.

much time to prevent everybody leaving the country, such is the condition of things.”

The tone may have been exaggerated, but for the most part the situation behind the words was real. This had some effect on a beleaguered War Department. Although he was unable to provide everything desired, Halleck wearily told Pope: “All that is possible will be done.”²⁵

In reality the Sioux had little chance against Pope’s and Sibley’s forces, and the reports of a frontier-wide conspiracy were false. By October 9, 1862, Pope could inform his superiors: “The Sioux war may be considered at an end.”²⁶ Indian men, women, and children were voluntarily surrendering, many to avoid slaughter under Pope’s brutal policy and others because they had had little stomach for the fighting from the beginning. The estimate of white deaths ranged from about 500 to around 800 or even 1,000, but it is characteristic of the time that few bothered to calculate Indian casualties. (If they had, the Indian tendency to bury their dead on the spot, or to carry casualties with them, would have made a count difficult.)²⁷ Indeed, by virtue of the military trials being initiated in the field, Minnesotans were to contemplate, and demand, the vengeful execution of 300 more Sioux men. Consequently, Lincoln would enjoy little respite from the news that the Minnesota war was substantially over. The projected executions confronted him much more personally than the demands for troops and supplies. The man who had ordered, “Attend to the Indians,” would now have to attend to them himself in a matter thick with moral and political ramifications.

On October 14, Stanton read Pope’s report to the cabinet. Lincoln immediately faced cabinet dissension over the proposed executions. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles noted in his diary: “I was disgusted with the whole thing; the tone and opinions of the dispatch are discreditable.” Welles may have reflected second thoughts in the cabinet when he added: “What may have been the provocation we are not told.” He pointed to one factor that must not have escaped Lincoln’s attention: “The Winnebagoes have good land which white men want and mean to have.”²⁸

But pressure from the other side was stronger. Governor Ramsey quickly hit Lincoln with the argument that would become standard for the pro-execution forces - - a prediction of mob rule:

²⁵Pope to Halleck, September 23. Halleck to Pope, September 25, 1862. *Official Records*, series I, vol. 13, p. 663-64, 669.

²⁶Pope to Halleck, October 9, 1862. *Official Records*, series I, vol. 13, p. 722.

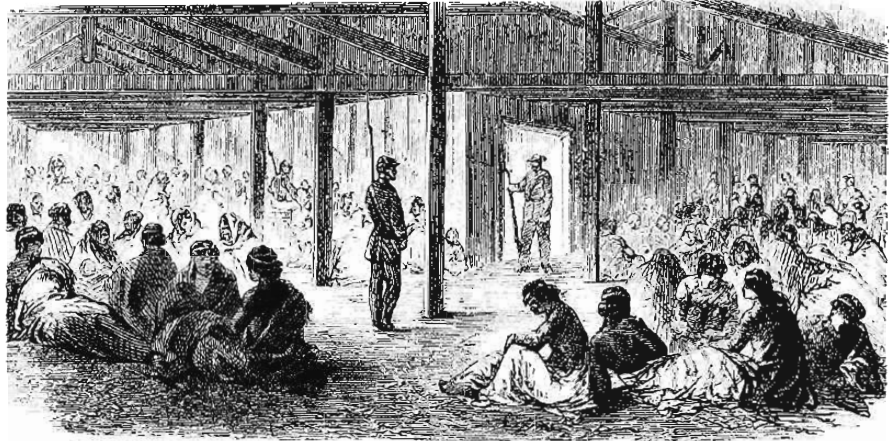
²⁷There has been much dispute about the white death figure, and estimates range widely. Ramsey, for instance, wrote Lincoln on September 6, that “more than 500 whites have been murdered,” while Interior Secretary Smith estimated the figure to be “not less than 800.” See *Official Records*, series I, vol. 13, p. 617, and 37 Congress, 3 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 7 (serial 1157).

²⁸*The Diary of Gideon Welles: Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson*, 1:171 (Boston and New York, 1911). The Winnebago Indians, living on a reservation south of Mankato, did not join the Sioux in the war.



LOOKING THE PART of a gun-in-hand frontiersman, John G. Nicolay, Lincoln’s secretary, was pictured with Indian Commissioner William P. Dolc (left) on August 24, 1862, at a camp in Sherburne County, Minnesota. This photograph is reproduced through courtesy of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, Fort Wayne, Indiana, which owns the original.

SOLDIERS GUARDED condemned Sioux prisoners who awaited their fate in a crowded jail at Mankato after surrendering. This drawing appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, June, 1863.



"I hope the execution of every Sioux Indian condemned by the military court will be at once ordered. It would be wrong upon principle and policy to refuse this. Private revenge would on all this border take the place of official judgment on these Indians."²⁹

In early November, Pope sent Lincoln a list of 303 Indian men sentenced to death by a five-man military commission that met first at Camp Release (where 269 captives of the Indians were freed on September 26) and later at the Lower Agency, scene of the first full-scale attack. On November 10, Lincoln wired Pope for "the full and complete record of their convictions," requesting distinctions to be made as to the seriousness of the alleged crimes. Pope complied with a characteristic commentary: "I desire to represent to you that the only distinction between the culprits is as to which of them murdered most people or violated most young girls." He then echoed the governor's dire warning:

"The people of this State are exasperated to the last degree, and if the guilty are not all executed I think it nearly impossible to prevent the indiscriminate massacre of all the Indians -- old men, women, and children."³⁰

Lincoln could not have been comfortable as he read Pope's descriptions of daily funerals for white settlers.

Even more disturbing was the revelation that the general's troops fully sympathized with the citizenry. Pope himself had clearly shown his own sympathies. He even offered Lincoln a relatively painless way out of the situation: "I would suggest that if the gov't be unwilling at so great distance to order the execution of the condemned Indians the criminals be turned to the State Gov't to be dealt with."³¹

For more than a month, Lincoln and his aides labored over the trial transcripts. They discovered an appalling lack of evidence against most of the accused who had merely been warriors in battle. Lincoln's fears had been justified. The Minnesotans were seeking blood vengeance, not justice.

Meanwhile, Lincoln was being pressured by groups both for and against the executions. Episcopal Bishop Henry B. Whipple of Minnesota became the leader of those pleading for mercy. Whipple visited Lincoln following the outbreak in Minnesota, and the eloquent churchman found the president sympathetic to his point of view. Lincoln is said to have told a friend that Bishop Whipple "came here the other day and talked with me about the rascality of this Indian business until I felt it down to my boots." Lincoln reportedly then pledged: "If we get through this war, and I live, *this Indian system shall be reformed.*"³²

The bishop did not relax his pressure on Lincoln concerning the proposed executions. On November 12, he sent a letter to Senator Henry M. Rice of Minnesota, requesting it be delivered to the president. Whipple told Rice:

"We cannot hang men by the hundreds. Upon our own premises we have no right to do so. We claim that they are an independent nation & as such they are prisoners of war. The leaders must be punished but we cannot afford by any wanton cruelty to purchase a long Indian war -- nor by injustice in other matters purchase the anger of God."

Rice had a "long interview" with Lincoln on November

²⁹Ramsey to Lincoln, November 10, 1862. *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 787. Ramsey's general relationship with Lincoln on this matter is discussed briefly in William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors*, 274-77 (New York, 1948). Hesseltine's context is the decline of state power.

³⁰Lincoln to Pope, November 10, 1862, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:493. Pope to Lincoln, November 11, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 13, p. 788.

³¹Pope to Lincoln, November 12, 1862, *Lincoln Papers*, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

³²Henry B. Whipple, *Lights and Shadows of a Long Episcopate*, 136-37 (New York, 1899).

26, 1862. Presumably, the Indian prisoners, along with more general concerns of Indian policy, were the focus of that conversation. Rice reported to Whipple that the Minnesota congressmen were causing trouble, and that he had discussed this with Lincoln.³³

Those opposed to Whipple's position were also pressuring the president, and they co-ordinated their efforts very well. On November 24, General Pope informed Lincoln that vigilante groups were being formed in Minnesota "with the purpose of massacring these Indians." He warned of "serious trouble." Four days later, Governor Ramsey wired Lincoln: "Nothing but the speedy execution of the tried and convicted Sioux Indians will save us here from scenes of outrage." He then echoed Pope's earlier proposal, offering to take the burden off Lincoln: "If you prefer it turn them over to me and I will order their execution." That very same day, Senator Wilkinson and Congressman Cyrus Aldrich met with Lincoln to make similar arguments, but they received no satisfaction.³⁴

On December 1, Lincoln made the necessary bow in his annual message, telling Congress: "The State of Minnesota has suffered great injury from this Indian war." But he said nothing of the executions. The next day, Lincoln revealed that he was possibly considering the Pope-Ramsey proposal for shifting responsibility. He sought a legal opinion as to "whether if I should conclude to execute only a part of them, I must myself designate which, or could I leave the designation to some officer on the ground?"³⁵ The answer was negative. The president alone would have to face the fire.

THAT AVENUE CLOSED, Lincoln moved reluctantly toward a decision as political pressure mounted. Navy Secretary Welles described the situation on December 4: "The Members of Congress from Minnesota are urging the President vehemently to give his assent to the execution of three hundred Indian captives, but they will not succeed." Lincoln had made up his mind, and Welles' opinion may have mirrored the president's growing exasperation over the whole matter:

"When the intelligent Representatives of a State can deliberately besiege the Government to take the lives of these ignorant barbarians by wholesale, after they surrendered themselves prisoners, it would seem the sentiments of the Representatives were but slightly removed from the barbarians they would execute. The Minnesotians are greatly exasperated and threaten the Administration if it shows clemency."³⁶

On December 5 that threat became real in Congress. The new session had hardly begun when Senator Morton S. Wilkinson rose in the Senate to introduce a resolution demanding that the president account to the body con-

cerning the Minnesota war and the projected executions. Then Wilkinson launched a speech punctuated with atrocity stories from the recent conflict. He voiced his concern that persons against the executions "have so wrought upon the President as to shake his purposes and render him doubtful as to what he ought to do."

The Minnesota senator spared no rhetorical device as he described poor farmers slain in their fields by Indians: "They then went, from the murdered bodies of the men, into the houses where the women and children were; they murdered the little children, and they took the mothers and daughters into captivity." As one who had been on the scene, Wilkinson could cloak his allegations in seeming authenticity. "I wish to state a few facts," he said, and proceeded to describe to the Senate the details of the rape of a thirteen-year-old girl. The senator excoriated the military trials, contending that Colonel Sibley "ought to have killed every one of the Indians as he came to them."

Wilkinson capped his argument with the same threat thrown at Lincoln by Ramsey and Pope — that of mob action:

"The result will be this: either the Indians must be punished according to law, or they will be murdered without law. The people of Minnesota will never consent that they shall be turned loose in their midst. They have always been a law-abiding, law-loving, law-respecting people. I want the people of my State to be so still; but, sir, I tremble at the result; I dread the consequences in that State of turning these murderers, these violators of our women, loose among our people. The matter is in the hands of the President of the United States, and it is for him to say whether our people shall be protected under the forms of law, or whether they must without law protect themselves."

Wilkinson made plain his own sentiment: "I could not stop it if I wished to do so." The resolution calling the president to account then passed the Senate. Thus, in the midst of war, Lincoln faced the irony of defiance and vigilantism in a key northern state, aided and abetted by

³³ Whipple to Rice, November 12, 1862, and Rice to Whipple, November 27, 1862, Henry B. Whipple Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁴ Pope to Lincoln, November 24, 1862, in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:290 (St. Paul, 1892); Ramsey to Lincoln, November 28, 1862, Lincoln Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. The meeting of Lincoln, Aldrich, and Wilkinson is noted in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:493, from the *New York Tribune* of November 29, 1862. This is evidence of the publicity the matter was receiving.

³⁵ "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, and Lincoln to Joseph Holt, judge advocate general, December 1, 1862, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:526, 537-38.

³⁶ Welles, *Diary*, December 4, 1862, 1:186.



BISHOP HENRY B. WHIPPLE IN 1866

congressional representatives and elements in his own army.³⁷

On December 6, 1862, Lincoln accepted the challenge. He forwarded to Sibley a list of thirty-nine Indian men to be executed, a drastic reduction from the original

³⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 37 Congress, 3 session, 13.

³⁸ Lincoln to Sibley, December 6, 1862, and Lincoln to the Senate, December 11, 1862, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:542-43, 551.

³⁹ Wilkinson to Ramsey, December 9, 1862, in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:291.

⁴⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 37 Congress, 3 session, 100.

⁴¹ Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning* (vol. 20 of Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library), 1:596-97 (Springfield, 1925). T. Harry Williams discusses this situation in *Lincoln and the Radicals*, 208-209 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1941) but says nothing of Wilkinson's particular grievance against Lincoln.

⁴² *Congressional Globe*, 37 Congress, 3 session, 130; Sibley to Lincoln, December 27, 1862, *Official Records*, series 1, vol. 22, part 1, p. 880.

figure of 303. Responding on December 11 to the Senate resolution, Lincoln told senators that only two Indian men could be proven to have violated women. He further explained that he had attempted to distinguish those who had participated in "massacres" from those participating in "battles" and had thereby reduced the number of executions.³⁸

Lincoln's action would have a political price. The whole situation had arisen amid great agitation by the radicals against William H. Seward and a campaign to remove the secretary of state from office. Seward was a major topic of conversation when the Republicans held important caucuses on December 16 and 17. But one of the agitators had something else on his mind. Morton S. Wilkinson had never been merely interested in having the Indians executed. He was playing a bigger game. The senator wrote Governor Ramsey on December 9: "If the people will be patient we will be able, I think, to dispose of those condemned, and will also succeed in removing the Sioux and Winnebago Indians from the state."³⁹ The catch was that the Winnebagoes had not been involved in the warfare, although they lived on the fringe of territory where battles took place. Their importance was having that "good land that white men want," mentioned earlier by Gideon Welles.

On December 16, Wilkinson again gained the floor of the Senate for the purpose of introducing a bill to compensate Minnesotans for losses in the Indian war. He also presented bills for the removal of Indians, including the Winnebagoes, from the state.⁴⁰ Upon adjournment, Wilkinson walked to the caucus room to speak on the subject of Seward. It requires no special insight to discern that the senator from Minnesota had more on his mind than the secretary of state as he harangued the Republicans about a "cause . . . lost" and "the country ruined."⁴¹ Lincoln had bucked Wilkinson on the execution of the Indians. Wilkinson found a way to retaliate against the president on the Seward issue while still achieving his (the senator's) aims of Indian removal.

On December 18, the House of Representatives requested information from Lincoln on the Minnesota war. Before Lincoln could answer, Sibley reported that thirty-eight Indians (one was reprieved) were executed without incident in a mass hanging December 26 in the public square of Mankato.⁴²

Lincoln's decision had been ad hoc rather than the result of coherent policy. Still, he had served the cause of justice by withstanding great political pressure to reduce considerably the number of Indians he would permit to be hanged. However, he did sanction one of the largest mass executions in American history. The Indians, too, would have to pay another price, as usual. Lincoln would have little choice but to acquiesce in punitive Indian campaigns in the area the next two years and in the forcible removal of the Indians from Min-

nesota — thus facilitating a sizable land-grab. The removal to a wretched reservation in what is now South Dakota left the Indians in great misery and near starvation.⁴³ Lincoln had won a skirmish but lost the struggle for control of Indian policy to Congress. Confronted with the demands of the War for the Union, he may have been able to do little else.

HOWEVER, the Minnesota bloodshed did lead Lincoln and his subordinates to attempt a major reform of Indian policy. As part of his discussion of that war in December, 1862, Lincoln asked Congress to remodel the entire program. "Many wise and good men have impressed me with the belief that this can be profitably done," he said.⁴⁴ The secretary of the interior explained the two essential premises of the program:

"The duty of the government to protect the Indians and prevent their suffering for the want of the necessities of life should be fully recognized. They should be taught to earn their subsistence by labor, and be instructed in the cultivation of the soil."⁴⁵

The following year, Indian Commissioner Dole further explained the concept "of allotting land to Indians, to be held by them in severalty." The Lincoln administration proposed nothing less than a concerted attempt to make subsistence farmers of American Indians. This would, in the commissioner's words, encourage "the ideas of self-reliance and individual effort, and, as an encouragement of those ideas, the acquisition and ownership of property in severalty."⁴⁶

How did this proposal come about? Prominent among those "wise and good men" whom Lincoln mentioned was Henry B. Whipple of Faribault. The bishop's campaign to convert Lincoln into an Indian policy reformer began as early as March 6, 1862, when Whipple addressed a long letter to the president. Whipple told Lincoln the Indian system was riddled with corruption and degraded the Indian people. In its place, the bishop proposed a reformed system based on honest appointments and an all-out attempt to assimilate Indians into "civilized" life through education and the encouragement of individualized farming. The president politely passed these proposals on to Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith, but Whipple had no intention of leaving Lincoln alone. He wrote Lincoln directly again on the same subject.⁴⁷

IT IS PROBABLE that it took the Minnesota Indian war to convince Lincoln of the urgency of reforming the Indian system. In the light of that bloody conflict, Whipple's previous communications made sense. But the bishop left nothing to chance. He traveled to Washington to explain the problem to Lincoln personally. It was then that Lincoln reportedly pledged: "This

Indian system shall be reformed."⁴⁸ However, Lincoln apparently hoped to wait until "this war" (probably meaning the main War for the Union) was over. The projected execution of 300 Indian men changed all that. The deadline for decision on the executions and the time for Lincoln to lay before Congress his annual concerns dovetailed precisely. In his November 26 interview with Lincoln, Senator Henry M. Rice learned of Lincoln's decision to "call the attention of the Congress to the subject." This was in direct response to Rice's reading aloud of another reform proposal written by Whipple. Rice told the bishop: "He is disposed to do all he can."

However, Rice also transmitted to Whipple news that was symptomatic of the barriers to Indian policy reform. "I fear opposition from Minnesotians," he said, referring especially to the state's congressmen. Rice had visited Commissioner Dole to plead for support of the purchase of farm implements for the Indians. Dole responded that "his hands were tied, that Senator

⁴³*Congressional Globe*, 38 Congress, 1 session, part 3, p. 2846.

⁴⁴"Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:526.

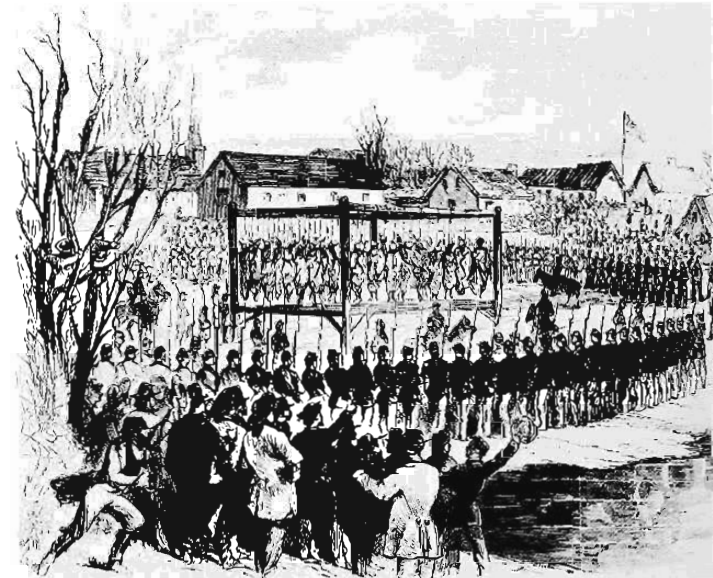
⁴⁵37 Congress, 3 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 11 (serial 1157).

⁴⁶38 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 130 (serial 1182).

⁴⁷Whipple to Lincoln, March 6, 1862, Lincoln to Whipple, March 27, 1862, and Whipple to Lincoln, April 10 and April 16, 1862, all in the Whipple Papers.

⁴⁸Whipple, *Lights and Shadows*, 137.

THIS SKETCH of the hanging of thirty-eight Sioux Indians at Mankato on December 26, 1862, is from Harper's Weekly, January 17, 1863.





PRESIDENT LINCOLN reads the *Emancipation Proclamation* to his cabinet on July 22, 1862, in this painting by Francis B. Carpenter. From left to right are Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war; Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury; Lincoln; Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy; William H. Seward (seated, front), secretary of state; Caleb B. Smith, secretary of the interior; Montgomery Blair, postmaster general; and Edward Bates, attorney general.

Wilkinson had amended a Bill so as to preclude him from advertising for anything *not estimated by the Superintendent.*" Rice had personally urged Lincoln to go against this corrupt legislation. The senator shared with Whipple his discouragement: "I will do my best. Alas! The poor Indian is kept in a savage state by a giant government and his condition renders him, not an object of pity, but of plunder."⁴⁹

Lincoln had no well-defined program, but he had made a pledge — and he kept it. Whipple wrote in gratitude for Lincoln's recommendations for reform of the system, calling the old system "a stupendous piece of wickedness and as we fear God ought to be changed."⁵⁰

The bishop had done a big thing: He had converted the president of the United States into an advocate of

Indian reform. Unfortunately, that was only a necessary first step. Other steps involved politicians like Ramsey, Wilkinson, and Aldrich, and a myriad of people who, in one way or another, profited from the old Indian system.

Congress never passed Lincoln's reform proposal. By December 27, 1862, Senator Rice reluctantly informed Whipple: "I fear little or nothing will be done with your Indian project."⁵¹ The Lincoln administration continued to be the tool of a brutal process of piecemeal removal and concentration of Indian tribes — a process responding primarily to the vested interests of localities expressed through members of Congress.

Whipple and Lincoln failed in the short run. However, judged on their own terms, they made a proposal of genuine reform and were ahead of their time. The severalty idea was written into law in the Dawes Individual Allotment Act of 1887. This act provided for dissolution of the Indian tribes as legal entities and division of the tribal lands among individual members (160 acres to the head of each Indian family and eighty acres to each

⁴⁹Rice to Whipple, November 27, 1862, Whipple Papers.

⁵⁰Whipple to Lincoln, December 4, 1862, Whipple Papers.

⁵¹Rice to Whipple, December 27, 1862, Whipple Papers.

adult single person). Citizenship was granted to those receiving the land. The Dawes Act came about under the impetus of a reform movement in which an older Bishop Whipple still played a role, though much less actively than in 1862.⁵² This movement has normally been characterized by historians as an eastern-based crusade propagated by people living far from the scene of the "Indian problem." Students of the movement have also agreed with the historian who labeled it as "completely new" in the 1880s.⁵³ Both contentions are inaccurate. "Westerners" like Whipple were in the vanguard of the severalty movement, and the essence of the Dawes reform was proposed by Lincoln in 1862. Hindsight reveals that the Dawes Act was a disaster, both in its implementation and its lack of respect for cultural patterns thousands of years in development. But that does not detract from what Lincoln and the reformers attempted to do. They sought fundamental change for essentially humane ends, measured in the context of that era. Their failure demonstrates how difficult any kind of reform would have been.

In judging Lincoln's role, it would be unfair to picture him as merely a weak-willed politician succumbing to pressure from reformers like Whipple. The severalty proposal was consistent with Lincoln's experience and his conviction that farming constituted the cornerstone of civilization. In 1863, following a year of failure, Lincoln again pressed on Congress "the urgent need for immediate legislative action" and spoke of the Indians in terms paternalistic and protective:

"Sound policy and our imperative duty to these wards of the government demand our anxious and constant attention to their material well-being, to their progress in the arts of civilization, and, above all, to that moral training which, under the blessing of Divine Providence, will confer upon them the elevated and sanctifying influences, the hopes and consolation of the Christian faith."⁵⁴

But this civilizing-the-savages argument, for all its honed words, did not sway Congress.

This emphasis on subsistence farming was appropriate for the president who had organized the nation's first Department of Agriculture.⁵⁵ His attitude was amply demonstrated when he spoke with Indians about their role in America's future. In March, 1863, a diverse group of chiefs visited Lincoln to request his advice on their situation. Lincoln made a highly paternalistic little speech and even had a professor show the visitors a globe to explain how "We pale-faced people think that this world is a great, round ball."

Then Lincoln discussed his concept of Indian-white differences:

"The pale-faced people are numerous and prosperous because they cultivate the earth, produce bread, and

depend upon the products of the earth rather than wild game for a subsistence.

"This is the chief reason of the difference; but there is another. Although we are now engaged in a great war between one another, we are not, as a race, so much disposed to fight and kill one another as our red brethren."⁵⁶

Unfortunately, there is no record of what went through the minds of the chiefs at this incredible recitation by the president of the United States. Lincoln clearly accepted the stereotype of the hunter-Indian. Perhaps he was unaware of the Indian farms destroyed by his own troops in Minnesota. The statement on killing, "as a race," revealed even more that the president still retained the prejudices of the frontiersman from Illinois.

But Lincoln's plea must be seen from his perspective. He told the chiefs: "I can see no way in which your race is to become as numerous and prosperous as the white race except by living as they do, by the cultivation of the earth."⁵⁷ Lincoln was trying to prepare the Indians for his reform policy. He also communicated an ultimatum. It was not that Lincoln wanted the Indians exterminated. His considerable reduction of the number he allowed to be executed in Minnesota showed him to be more humane than that. It was simply that he could "see no way" that anything else could happen if the Indians continued their resistance. In his own way, Lincoln was pleading for their welfare.

This was typical Lincoln fatalism, so similar to that expressed to a Negro delegation that visited him the previous year — and whom he advised to consider colonization.⁵⁸ Lincoln had spent much of his life developing skill as an analyst of public opinion. This perceptive politician could summon no vision of the future because he felt he knew the hearts of his fellow Americans. After all, had he not seen conclusive evidence of white hatred of Indians in the Minnesota affair? To Lincoln, assimilation was the Indians' only hope. Indeed, given the events of the years following 1865, Lincoln's gloomy words were prophetic.

Lincoln's Indian policy was important, but even more significant was his program for the West. Lincoln

⁵² United States, *Statutes at Large*, 24:388-91.

⁵³ Carl N. Degler, *The Age of the Economic Revolution*, 7 (Glenview, Illinois, 1967).

⁵⁴ "Annual Message to Congress, December 8, 1863, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 7:48.

⁵⁵ The act creating a Department of Agriculture became law on May 15, 1862, three months before the Minnesota war. See United States, *Statutes at Large*, 12:387-88.

⁵⁶ *Washington Daily Chronicle*, March 28, 1863, reprinted in Basler, *Collected Works*, 6:151-52.

⁵⁷ Basler, *Collected Works*, 6:152.

⁵⁸ *New York Tribune*, August 14, 1862, reprinted in Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:370-75.

shared in the great national consensus on western development, and he never departed from it. Here there was no lack of vision. "The great enterprise of connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific States by railways and telegraph lines has been entered upon with a vigor that gives assurance of success," he proudly told Congress in 1864.⁵⁹ Lincoln was plainly enthusiastic about the gains in gold and silver mining, and he urged Congress to lower restrictions on immigration to encourage cheap labor for these enterprises. When he spoke of this development in the West, Lincoln's tone never lacked fervor: "This noble effort demands the aid, and ought to receive the attention and support of the government."⁶⁰

But Lincoln's vision for the West carried with it the

implicit doom of the Indians. He and those who followed him would never quite resolve the contradiction inherent in his desire to make the West "secure for the advancing settler, and to provide for the welfare of the Indian."⁶¹ The eventual expression of his program for the West would be a series of bloody wars after his death. The policies of Pope (as he felt in 1862 rather than later) and of Wilkinson triumphed. In fairness, one should say that there is perhaps little that Lincoln could have done about that. In any event, Lincoln's call to "bind up the nation's wounds" would not be applied to native Americans.⁶² They would continue to be deprived of land, life, and even their just role in the histories of Lincoln's presidency.

⁵⁹"Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1864, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:146.

⁶⁰"Annual Message to Congress," December 8, 1863, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 7:40.

⁶¹"Annual Message to Congress," December 6, 1864, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:147.

⁶²"Second Inaugural Address," March 4, 1865, in Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:333.

THE PHOTOGRAPH of John Pope on page 6 is from Francis Miller's *Photographic History of the Civil War*, vol. 10; that of Morton S. Wilkinson on page 6 is through courtesy of the National Archives; the painting of Lincoln and his cabinet on page 13 is through courtesy of the Library of Congress; other pictures not credited in the captions are in the Minnesota Historical Society's collections.



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