

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN AND THE SIOUX INDIANS

Senator Alexander Ramsey of Minnesota on November 23, 1864 visited President Lincoln and made this note in his diary with respect to the visit: "Called to see the President and Secretary of War in the evening. President in fine spirits, talks of the result of the election, majority in several states. Said his in Minnesota in 1860 was 10,000 and now only 7,000. I jocularly remarked that if he had hung more Indians, we should have given him his old majority." The President then commented, "I could not afford to hang men for votes."

The reference to hanging Indians related to the Sioux uprising in Minnesota in 1862. In his message to Congress that year the President reported the hostilities in these words: "In the month of August last the Sioux Indians in Minnesota attacked the settlements in their vicinity with extreme ferocity; killing, indiscriminately men, women and children. The attack was wholly unexpected and therefore no means of defense had been provided. It is estimated that no less than 800 persons were killed by the Indians and a large amount of property was destroyed. . . . I submit for your especial consideration whether our Indian system should not be remodeled."

A military commission composed of Col. Crooks, Lieut. Col. Marshall, Capt. Grant, Capt. Bailey and Lieut. Olin was appointed to try the members of the Sioux tribe who had been apprehended by the United States Army and some 300 of them were found guilty by the court and sentenced to be hung. The list was sent to Lincoln for his confirmation of the sentences.

Observing that the government was apparently reluctant to order a mass execution of the 300 condemned men the people of Minnesota suggested that the state be given jurisdiction. On November 12 General Pope sent this telegram to Lincoln: "I would suggest that if the government is unwilling at so great distance to order the execution of the condemned Indians the criminals be turned to the state government to deal with."

Still reluctant to hurry executions of 300 Indians, many of whom he considered prisoners of war, Lincoln began to receive communications from Minnesota setting forth the horrors of the massacre. At the same time, however, some letters arrived which emphasized that there were friendly Indians among those condemned and that there has not been sufficient dependable evidence presented to allow the court to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty. The position of the court had been that "the only distinction between the culprits is as to which of them murdered the most people. . . ."

Rev. S. R. Riggs, who had been a missionary among the Indians for twenty-five years and then serving as chaplain for the United States troops in Minnesota, not only expressed his own opinions with respect to the innocence of some of the prisoners but also forwarded a letter he had received from Miss Jane Williamson associated with the Indian agency who gave specific instances of loyalty to the government by some of the Indians accused. Church groups in the east also suggested to the President that the hostilities had resulted from an inadequate system of dealing with Indians.

By the last week in November public sentiment against the imprisoned Indians had become so acute that General Pope advised Lincoln: "Organizations of the inhabitants are being repeatedly made with the purpose of massacring these Indians." Four days later on Nov. 26 the following telegram reached the President from Governor Ramsey: "Nothing but the speedy execution

of the tried and convicted Sioux Indians will save us here from scenes of outrage. If you prefer it turn them over to me and I will order their execution." The governor later issued a printed proclamation asking the people to preserve the peace.

Having had time apparently to see that each individual case of the 300 Indians condemned to death was scrutinized carefully, on December 6 the President issued the following document sent to General H. H. Sibley:

"Ordered that of the Indians and halfbreeds sentenced to be hanged by the Military Commission, composed of Col. Crooks, Lt. Col. Marshall, Capt. Grant, Capt. Bailey and Lieut. Olin, and lately setting in Minnesota, you cause to be executed the following named to wit (thirty-nine names are listed). The other condemned persons you will hold, subject to further orders, taking care that they neither escape nor are subjected to any unlawful violence."

The day before, pressure having been brought on the United States Senate to bring about immediate action, the President was requested "to furnish the Senate with all information in his possession touching the late Indian barbarities in the state of Minnesota and also the evidence in his possession upon which some of the principal actors and head men were tried and condemned to death."

The President gathered documents bearing on the case, those in the Department of the Interior being forwarded to him on December 8. On December 11 he sent the manuscripts to the Senate with this reason for the action he had taken:

"Anxious to not act with so much clemency as to encourage another outbreak, on the one hand, nor with so much severity as to be real cruelty, on the other, I caused a careful examination of the records of trials to be made, in view of the first ordering the execution of such as had been proved guilty by violating females. Contrary to my expectation only two of this class were found. I then directed a further examination, and a classification of all who had proven to have participated in massacres as distinguished from participation in battles. This class numbered forty and included the two convicted for female violations. One of the number is strongly recommended by the commission which tried them for commutation to ten years imprisonment. I have ordered the other thirty-nine to be executed on Friday the 19 instant."

On December 15 General Sibley advised Lincoln that he had received by special messenger his order for the execution of the 39 Indians and continued: "They are imprisoned at Mankato 90 miles distance and the time fixed the 19th is too short for preparation and the concentration of troops necessary to protect the other Indians and preserve the peace." He then requested the postponement of the executions for one week if it seemed necessary.

The thirty-nine men whose death sentenced by the military court were confirmed by the President, paid the penalty for their crimes, but the remainder of the 300 Indians also condemned to death by the court escaped the hangman's noose due primarily to the composure and careful consideration of Abraham Lincoln.