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SAND CREEK MASSACRE

The Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 remains a powerful symbol of the U.S. government's appalling treatment of Native Americans.

In September 1864, Black Kettle, a known peaceful chief of the Cheyennes, sent peace feelers to Fort Lyon in response to the proclamation of Colorado governor John Evans issued the previous June. In essence, Evans had declared that any group of American Indians who detached from known hostile groups would be allowed to set up camp near specified army posts and enjoy military protection.



In the weeks following the proclamation, however, the situation became increasingly tense. Indian raids to the east had virtually isolated Denver, and the June murder of the Hungate family near Denver had fueled public outcry for retaliation. Evans was thus caught in a difficult situation: On the one hand, his offer was on record; on the other, the public was demanding action. So, Evans promulgated a second notice in August, which virtually gave citizens a free hand with any hostile Indians. He had also received authorization to form a volunteer cavalry regiment for home defense. In late September, at a parley held at Camp Weld near Denver, Evans washed his hands of the problem by turning it over to the district military commander, Col. John M. Chivington. The June offer was still open, Evans informed Black Kettle, but it would now be necessary to make peace with the military.

Disturbed but still desiring peace, Black Kettle and the other chiefs agreed to the governor's terms. In early October, a large band of Arapahos surrendered to Maj. Edward Wynkoop at Fort Lyon, near the site of present-day Lamar, Colorado. Since the Indians were in effect considered prisoners, Wynkoop saw it as his responsibility to feed them, an act for which he was promptly replaced by Maj. Scott Anthony. After collecting the Indians' firearms, Anthony ordered the Arapahos to camp on Sand Creek, some 40 miles distant; when Black Kettle arrived in early November, he too was directed to set up camp on Sand Creek. Both contingents believed they had acted in good faith and were now under the protection of the troops.

Meanwhile, in Denver, Chivington had been formulating plans for a strike against the Indians. There was a sense of urgency to Chivington's efforts, as the term of enlistment for the Third Colorado, organized during the summer, would soon run out. The regiment had seen no action and had come to be known as the Bloodless Third.

Although there had been some vague talk of a campaign against hostile villages in eastern Colorado, it seems clear that Chivington aimed from the start to strike the Indian encampments on Sand Creek. Accordingly, on November 28, Chivington arrived at Fort Lyon with the Third Colorado, prepared to launch a surprise attack. Some of the officers at Fort Lyon strenuously objected on the grounds that the Indians were under a pledge of protection, a protest that Chivington angrily overruled. That evening, Chivington's command, composed of the Third Colorado and part of the First Colorado, together with four mountain howitzers—some 700 men in all—left Fort Lyon.

By dawn on November 29, the forces were positioned for a surprise attack on Black Kettle's village. Chivington struck. While two battalions cut off and captured the pony herds, the remaining troops attacked the village proper. Unable to accept what he saw was happening, Black Kettle hoisted an American flag above his tipi and reassured his people that there was no need to panic. White Antelope, meanwhile, ran at the attacking troops, urging them not to fire and crying out that this was a peaceful camp. It was all to no avail, as he was quickly killed.

Elsewhere in the village, panic took hold despite Black Kettle's pleas. The troops tore through and shot or bayoneted any Indian they came across—man, woman, or child. Chivington had ordered that no prisoners be taken, and none were. Perhaps 60 or 70 of the villagers managed to take up a defensive position of sorts and return fire, but it did little to halt the slaughter. When at last it was over, more than 200 Indians—the entire village—lay dead, many of them mutilated.

In the aftermath, cries of indignation echoed from across the country. To his dying day, Chivington defended his actions at Sand Creek, but the verdict of history has condemned the act for what it was: one of the most infamous massacres on record, a grim day in the annals of American history. The legacy of Sand Creek was a bloody war that lasted from 1867 to 1869.

Jerry Keenan

Further Reading

Dunn, William R., *I Stand by Sand Creek: A Defense of Colonel John M. Chivington and the Third Colorado Cavalry*, 1985; Hoig, Stan, *The Sand Creek Massacre*, 1963; Mendoza, Patrick M., *Song of Sorrow: Massacre at Sand Creek*, 1993; Schultz, Duane P., *Month of the Freezing Moon: The Sand Creek Massacre, November 1864*, 1990; Utey, Robert M., *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865*, 1967.

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