

**All Was Confusion:
The Civil War in New Mexico Territory**

Michael D. Block
History 263
12/10/01

Copyright 2001 Michael Block

While the United States spanned from sea to sea by 1861, one rarely hears of Civil War fighting west of Missouri and Kansas. Great works on the Civil War such as James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* and Bruce Catton's *Centennial History of the Civil War* give the impression that the Far West did not matter after the Compromise of 1850 made California a state and settled the New Mexico border. While the Far West certainly played a less vital role in the War than the fighting in the East, Sibley's invasion of New Mexico must not be ignored completely.

In February 1862, a brigade of Texans under the command of General Henry H. Sibley (U. S. Army veteran and "inventor" of the Sibley tent) crossed from Texas, through Mexico, into New Mexico Territory. As far as the Federal government was concerned, this was an invasion by hostile forces, but Sibley and the Confederacy that sent him did not see it that way. Though the troops were not from New Mexico themselves, to the Confederacy they were Confederate troops entering a territory of the Confederate States of America. The urban population, largely settlers from the South, had formed a convention¹ a year earlier to join the Confederacy, so they actually saw the Federal garrisons of regular cavalry and infantry as intruders. Many of the U. S. Army officers in the Territory, Southerners themselves, had even defected to the Confederacy. Despite the Southern sympathy in the Territory, it was not clear what Sibley planned to do there, as when his orders were issued, "it [was] not deemed necessary to confine [him] to matters of detail which may from time to time arise. In this respect [he] will be guided by circumstances and [his] own good judgment."² Other Confederate sources suggest his primary motive was "to capture millions of dollars worth of military stores for the use of the Confederate Army,"³ though this was probably

1. John T. Pickett Papers, Box 108A. Quoted in Martin Hardwick Hall, *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960) 16.

2. United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 4 (Washington: GPO, 1882) 93.

3. John T. Poe, from a work cited as "*Reminiscences of the Boys in Gray 1861 - 1865*, Compiled by Miss Mamie Yeary (1986 Morningside)" quoted in Beverly Becker, "Letters from the Front and Other Writings," *The*

not his only goal. New Mexico would have provided much needed territory in which to expand slavery, especially with its considerable proslavery population. As early as December 1861, the Confederate Congress had already divided New Mexico Territory in two, “with a constitution providing for the full, adequate, and perpetual maintenance and protection of slavery therein . . .”⁴ and listed “the Territories of Arizona and New Mexico”⁵ with Maryland and Delaware as expected allies. The *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph* supported this second motivation, writing that “. . . [the Federals] confine slave territory within a boundary that will shut us out of 3/4 of the underdeveloped territory of the continent adapted to slavery. . . . We must have and keep . . . [New Mexico] at all hazards. . . .”⁶ Sibley may also have hoped to bolster his forces in New Mexico and proceed to California and seize the rich gold fields as well as establish a port on the Pacific Ocean free of the Union blockade. This may seem like a far-fetched idea considering that the Confederacy was at war and could not devote resources to building a transcontinental railroad to reach a Pacific port, but one must remember that the Confederacy made plans for their future, and never counted on losing their “war for independence.” There was also a popular notion that New Mexico had mineral riches greater than the Comstock Lode to finance the Confederacy for years to come. Only time would reveal this as another mistaken notion.

Whatever Sibley’s real motives for invading New Mexico, the Federal government had no way of knowing *his* reasons, and had to guess for themselves. After the wave of defections, the Union forces in the Territory massed at Forts Union and Craig to reorganize for the expected attack. They, and other Union interests, saw Sibley’s invasion as an attempt to link up with

Palace of the Governors Museum of New Mexico website, <<http://www.nmcn.org/features/civilwar/essays/3.html>> (12 November 2001). Verified by the *Charleston Mercury*: “The expedition sent out by the Government had the capture of these [arms] mainly in view.” *Mercury* (Charleston), 26 August 1861, Accessible Archives website, <<http://srch.accessible.com/accessible/text/civilwar/00000021/00002121.htm>> (9 November 2001).

4. “Tuesday, December 24, 1861,” *Journals of the Confederate Congress*, p. 613, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:4:./temp/~ammem_QK8T::> (12 November 2001).

5. “Friday, May 3, 1861,” *Journals of the Confederate Congress*, p. 178,

Confederate sympathizers in New Mexico and California. One must recall that while California as a whole remained in the Union and raised some troops (notably, the California Column that marched across the entire Southwest too slowly to attack Sibley), the southern half of the State was filled with potential rebels. Federal commanders there reported that “[a]n outbreak may be looked for at any moment. The rebels are well organized.”⁷ Other sympathizers were observed “organizing . . . with the avowed purpose of proceeding to Texas to aid the rebels.”⁸ The phrase “treason stalked abroad”⁹ summarizes public sentiment in California, which was partially isolated from the Union by Sibley’s disruption of the overland mails. While Sibley never stated a plan to invade California, he never made plans beyond “securing” New Mexico, as his troops would soon need supplies from the New Mexicans before proceeding further.

Until February 21, 1862, Sibley’s brigade met no resistance, and seemed poised to take the entire Territory without a fight. On that day, though, Sibley crossed the Rio Grande¹⁰ to position his men for a drive on Colonel E. R. S. Canby (commander of the newly formed Department of New Mexico) in nearby Fort Craig. Initially, “in a sharp and spirited skirmish,”¹¹ Colonel Benjamin S. Roberts (a U. S. cavalry regular) was able to drive Sibley’s advance from the river. Riding on this initial success, perhaps, the “boys in blue” seemed surprisingly able to drive back the numerically superior Texans, until Canby took charge. During the bloodiest fighting of the grim day, the largest of the Union howitzer batteries (McRae’s) was captured and a Union victory turned into a rout. The Texans had been armed largely with shotguns, so Canby and other officers

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:./temp/~ammem_QK8T::> (12 November 2001).

6. *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, 12 May 1862, quoted in Hall, *Sibley’s Campaign*, 4.

7. *OR Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 50 pt. 2 (Washington: GPO, 1897) 558.

8. *OR Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 50 pt. 1 (Washington: GPO, 1897) 30.

9. A curiously unattributed quotation. *OR Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 9 (Washington: GPO, 1883) 594.

10. Actually, Sibley himself was “confined . . . to the ambulance for several days previous” (*OR Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 9: 507), leaving Colonel Thomas Green in command.

11. *OR Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 9: 489.

blamed the defeat on the largely Hispanic New Mexico Volunteers. Canby should only have blamed himself, for none of the Volunteer officers reported any misconduct.

Reports of the vicious battle were slow to reach “the States,” as there was no telegraph line into New Mexico, and other communication methods were largely disrupted by the War. Initially, both the Union and Confederacy claimed victory, citing the still intact Fort Craig on the one hand, and the Union retreat on the other. News of the Confederate victory did not reach Charleston until March 29, when the *Mercury* reported “. . . the valor of the Texans has prevailed upon the far plains of New Mexico; that the regulars of the United States army have been beaten in open fight; and that Fort Craig itself is beleaguered.”¹² This was not an entirely accurate report, for instead of continuing to Fort Craig, Sibley’s brigade moved unopposed into Santa Fe. Confusion was greater in the Northern press, where it took an additional week for them to discover that it was a Confederate victory after all.¹³ While the battle certainly did not go unheeded in the East, nobody there seems to have appreciated the ferocity of the fighting. Perhaps it was the relatively small sizes of the two armies engaged that allowed the press to dismiss the fighting as insignificant. “New Mexico” seems to have been synonymous with “very far away” as far as most Easterners were concerned. Considering the remoteness of the battle, the Confederacy lavished attention on their victory at Valverde. The Confederate Congress planned to honor Sibley and his troops with “[a] joint resolution of thanks . . . for gallant conduct,”¹⁴ and Judah P. Benjamin included a glowing account of the victory in a letter to James M. Mason, the Confederate envoy to England,

12. *Mercury* (Charleston), 29 March 1862, Accessible Archives website, <<http://srch.accessible.com/accessible/text/civilwar/00000040/00004014.htm>> (9 November 2001).

13. “The Battle at Fort Craig,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 29 March 1862: 195, HarpWeek website, <<http://image.harpweek.com/1862f/032962/0195d.jpg>> (9 November 2001).

14. “Friday April 11, 1862,” *Journal of the Confederate Congress*, p. 150, American Memory website, <[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(cc00248](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field(DOCID+@lit(cc00248)> (12 November 2001).

in London.¹⁵ The press chimed in too, as the Charleston *Mercury* reported “[t]he good news from Val Verde cheers us in spite of the dark sky and the falling hail.”¹⁶ The Northern press, on the other hand, seemed eager to move past this embarrassing defeat, and was clearly upset that Canby was “still shut up at Fort Craig, and Fort Union.”¹⁷ As the existence of a frivolous joke¹⁸ in *Vanity Fair* illustrates, New Mexico was in the Northern consciousness, if not the spotlight. Nevertheless, the federal government offered no official response, and Lincoln remained seemingly unaware of the situation in New Mexico until after a hearing of Congress’ Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. At that hearing, Col. Roberts suggested that the adjutant general of the army intentionally buried all information about the war in New Mexico: “there has been great culpability on the part of some officers in the War Department . . . in not sustaining General Canby in his great efforts to save New Mexico.”¹⁹

While Easterners mulled over when “the Texas Boys thrashed out the Yankees on the 21st day of February 1862,”²⁰ the desperate fighting continued in New Mexico. On March 1, the First Colorado Volunteers received news of the battle at Valverde and “ma[d]e all possible speed to meet” the Texans.²¹ Perhaps, had they proceeded as the California Column, Sibley could have used his momentum from Valverde to crush Canby at Fort Craig. On March 25, the Coloradans

15. United States Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, ser. 2, vol. 3: 378, Making of America website,

<<http://library5.library.cornell.edu/gifcache/moa/ofre/ofre2003/00398.TIF6.gif>> (18 November 2001).

16. “Richmond News and Gossip,” *Mercury* (Charleston), 2 April 1862, Accessible Archives website, <<http://srch.accessible.com/accessible/text/civilwar/00000040/00004047.htm>> (9 November 2001).

17. “The Situation,” *Herald* (New York), 4 April 1862, Accessible Archives website, <<http://srch.accessible.com/accessible/text/civilwar/00000040/00004075.htm>> (9 November 2001).

18. “A Complete Kit for our soldiers in New Mexico. Kit Carson.” *Vanity Fair*, 22 March 1862: 146, Making of America website, <<http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moajrnl/gifcvtdir/mm000116/1525vani/v0005/i0000/01480146.tif4.gif>> (22 November 2001).

19. “Invasion of New Mexico,” *Report of the Joint Committee On the Conduct of the War*, pt. 3 (Washington: GPO, 1863) 372.

20. John Shropshire, quoted in Beverly Becker, “Letters from the Front and Other Writings,” The Palace of the Governors Museum of New Mexico website, <<http://www.nmcn.org/features/civilwar/essays/3.html>> (12 November 2001).

under Major John M. Chivington captured some of Sibley's pickets near Pigeon's Ranch, and larger contingents clashed the next day at nearby Apache Canyon. During chaotic fighting, the "Pikes Peakers" routed the Texans, who, "terrified at the impetuosity of the attack, broke and fled in every direction."²²

Two days later, Chivington and Colonel John P. Slough divided their force, planning a reconnaissance of the area and surprise attack on Sibley's supplies. Instead, Slough ran right into the main Texan force established in a canyon at Glorieta Pass, under Colonel William R. Scurry and Major Charles Pyron. Slough distracted the rebels, while Chivington slipped behind and destroyed eighty rebel supply wagons, "heavily loaded with ammunition, clothing, subsistence, and forage."²³ In the aftermath, the Confederates cried foul, claiming that Chivington's force shot "the Rev. L. H. Jones . . . with a white flag in his hand" as well as all the prisoners.²⁴ Unlike at Valverde, victory was ultimately indisputable. Although Slough had been driven from the field, Scurry wrote, "The loss of my supplies so crippled me that . . . I was unable to follow up the victory. My men for two days went unfed and blanketless . . . I was compelled to come [to Santa Fe] for something to eat."²⁵ Chivington's lucky maneuver (he, instead of Slough, might have run into the main force) crippled Sibley's invasion. Success had hinged on surprise, and on the Coloradoans reaching Sibley before Sibley moved against Fort Craig.

News of the fighting at Apache Canyon and Glorieta Pass was slow to reach "the States" because of more communications disruptions. As late as mid-April, *Harper's Weekly* could only

21. Benjamin Franklin Ferris, "Benjamin Franklin Ferris - Civil War," ed. Eugene Hutchinson Mallory, c. 1910, <<http://www.lasermail.com/lasermail/bff4.htm>> (20 November 2001).

22. Ovando J. Hollister, *Colorado Volunteers in New Mexico 1862* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1962) 103.

23. *OR Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 9: 539.

24. *ibid*, 544.

25. *ibid*, 542.

report Canby's force was bottled up in its forts after defeat at Valverde.²⁶ Later that month, an erroneous report of the fall of Fort Craig circulated.²⁷ When real news of the battles finally reached "the States" in October, it came muddled with the news that Sibley had been driven back into Texas. What had been a desperate fight and a lucky gamble now seemed inevitable to the press. *The Scientific American* expressed the standard Eastern view of Sibley's "inevitable" defeat when it ran a story quoting the New Orleans *Delta*: "'We know that Sibley's brigade, after a temporary success at Valverde . . . passed Fort Craig and captured Santa Fe. Endeavoring to go on to Fort Union they were defeated and compelled to retreat. They evacuated Santa Fe . . . and took the back road to El Paso.'"²⁸

This view of an inevitable Union victory in New Mexico, preserving California's gold and Nevada's silver for the Union, born of delayed reports of the battle of Glorieta Pass, survives to the present day. With Sibley's defeat, there was no reason for Easterners to think about the West at all, so they focused on the Eastern campaigns that fill modern books about the Civil War. One can only wonder what textbooks might look like today had Sibley marched on Fort Craig instead of Santa Fe, had Sibley's men intercepted Chivington's attack, or had Richmond sent more supplies. While the Confederate forces in New Mexico were in desperate need of supplies, the Union forces were in a similar predicament. As Col. Roberts expressed in his testimony before Congress, "We were reduced to short rations as early as January last, and continued on short rations . . . as late as April of this year. . . No supplies of any kind, or subsistence, was received from the States, and the

26. "In New Mexico," *Harper's Weekly*, 19 April 1862: 243, HarpWeek website, <<http://image.harpweek.com/1862f/041962/0243d.jpg>> (9 November 2001).

27. "Reported Fall of Fort Craig," *Harper's Weekly*, 26 April 1862: 259, HarpWeek website, <<http://image.harpweek.com/1862f/042662/0259d.jpg>> (20 November 2001).

28. "Important Events in Texas," *The Scientific American*, new series, vol. 7, no. 14 (4 October 1862): 210, Making of America website, <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/gifcache/moa/scia/scia1007/00214.TIF6.gif>> (22 November 2001).

country produced nothing.”²⁹ The Federals would have eventually starved, while Sibley controlled the routes into the Territory, so the destruction of rebel supplies was crucial. While the California Column eventually arrived to reinforce the Union forces in New Mexico, they were very late. With his initial prospects, Sibley could have rallied local rebels until his loss at Glorieta Pass. With these additional troops, he could have destroyed Canby’s regulars *and* the Colorado Volunteers, as well as any New Mexicans willing to fight him. Thus inspired, the California secessionists might have risen, further complicating the Union situation. The Union would have been forced to divert from the East to put down this Western rebellion, surely prolonging the war in the East. Some at the time imagined the Confederacy could eventually trade New Mexico and other old Mexican lands for aid from “the French emperor” of Mexico. Far fetched as it may seem, “the language of circumstances all around confirm[ed] this interpretation” for “[t]he alliance of ambition with despair is . . . always formidable and successful.”³⁰

In 1889, an Englishman wrote that “. . . it is evident that the so-called New Mexican campaign was a much more important matter. . . than it has been supposed to be.”³¹ He argued that without territory in which to expand, the Confederacy was doomed to failure. A governor of New Mexico also wrote (in 1893) that the New Mexico volunteers had helped to prevent Sibley from “cutting off the Pacific slope from the remainder of the country. The value of that service to the Union cause can scarcely be over-estimated.”³² Only a handful of historians have taken any

29. *Conduct of the War*, pt. 3: 366.

30. “United We Stand,” *Evening Post* (New York), 10 November ?, quoted in *The Living Age* 78, no. 1003 (22 August 1863): 384, Making of America website, <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/gifcache/moa/livn/livn0078/00394.TIF6.gif>> (22 November 2001).

31. Viscount Wolseley, K. P., “An English View of the Civil War,” *North American Review* 149, no. 395 (October 1889): 451, Making of America website, <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/gifcache/moa/nora/nora0149/00455.TIF6.gif>> (22 November 2001).

32. L. Bradford Prince, “Claims to Statehood,” *North American Review* 156, no. 436 (March 1893): 353, Making of America website, <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/gifcache/moa/nora/nora0156/00359.TIF6.gif>> (22 November 2001).

interest in the Civil War in New Mexico since then. “All was confusion,”³³ Ovando J. Hollister wrote of the fighting at Apache Canyon, but the same holds true for modern perceptions of the Civil War. It is remarkable that a communications delay nearly 140 years ago continues to shape perceptions of the Civil War. One can only wonder how many other important events in the Civil War continue to be overlooked because of similar historical circumstances.

33. Hollister, *Colorado Volunteers*, 99.