

SPEECH OF BLACK KETTLE, 1865

Speech

Author(s): Black Kettle

Date: 1865

Source: Black Kettle. Speech of Black Kettle, 1865. 1865. Reproduced in History Resource Center. Detroit: Gale.

There are few more tragic figures in the history of the Indian Wars than Black Kettle, or Motavato (c. 1800-1868), the greatest Cheyenne peace chief. He rose to prominence in 1860 and signed the Treaty of Fort Wise, which established boundaries for his people, in 1861. He traveled to Washington, DC, and met with President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), who gave him a peace medal and an American flag. Yet, despite these events, he was attacked twice and demonized by Whites who had to justify their brutal actions against his people. At the same time, he was accused by the more militant of his people of selling them out and bringing disaster to them. He was slain by George Custer's Seventh Cavalry during a massacre on the Washita River in what is now Oklahoma, and for years thereafter his bones were exhibited to the public, first in the window of the local newspaper office and later in a museum.

The Cheyenne are a Plains Indian tribe of the Algonquian language family. When they first came in contact with Whites, they lived in Minnesota, but they were gradually driven west into the Dakotas and Montana. In 1832, Charles Bent persuaded a part of the tribe to separate and move south to Colorado in the vicinity of the Arkansas River, where he had established a trading post. This band became the Southern Cheyenne (Black Kettle's people).

The speech reprinted here was delivered by Black Kettle on October 12, 1865, almost a year after the Sand Creek Massacre, at treaty negotiations with the United States. After all he has been through, Black Kettle is clearly tired. He states, "I once thought that I was the only man that persevered to be the friend of the white man, but since they have come and cleaned out (robbed) our lodges, horses, and everything else, it is hard for me to believe white men any more." Even so, he declares, "I live in hopes." A little more than three years later he would be dead.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

We Want The Privilege Of Crossing The Arkansas To Kill Buffalo, by Black Kettle, 1865

The Great Father above hears us, and the Great Father at Washington will hear what we say. Is it true that you came here from Washington, and is it

true what you say here today? The Big Chief he give his words to me to come and meet you here, and I take hold and retain what he says. I believe all to be true, and think it is all true. Their young white men, when I meet them on the plains, I give them my horse and my moccasins, and I am glad today to think that the Great Father has sent good men to take pity on us.

Your young soldiers I don't think they listen to you. You bring presents, and when I come to get them I am afraid they will strike me before I get away. When I come in to receive presents I take them up crying. Although wrongs have been done me, I live in hopes. I have not got two hearts. These young men, when I call them into the lodge and talk with them, they listen to me and mind what I say. Now we are again together to make peace. My shame is as big as the earth, although I will do what my friends advise me to do. I once thought that I was the only man that persevered to be the friend of the white man, but since they have come and cleaned out (robbed) our lodges, horses, and everything else, it is hard for me to believe white men any more.

Here we are, altogether, Arapahoes and Cheyennes, but few of us, we are one people. As soon as you arrived you started runners after us and the Arapahoes, with words that I took hold of immediately on hearing them. From what I can see around me, I feel confident that our Great Father has taken pity on me, and I feel that it is the truth all that has been told me today. All my friends—the Indians that are holding back—they are afraid to come in; are afraid they will be betrayed as I have been. I am not afraid of white men, but come and take you by the hand, and am glad to have an opportunity of so doing. These lands that you propose to give us I know nothing about. There is but a handful here now of the Cheyenne nation, and I would rather defer making any permanent treaty until the others come. We are living friendly now.

There are a great many white men. Possibly you may be looking for some one with a strong heart. Possibly you may be intending to do something for me better than I know of.

Inasmuch as my Great Father has sent you here to take us by the hand, why is it that we are prevented from crossing the Arkansas? If we give you our hands in peace, we give them also to those of the plains. We want the privilege of crossing the Arkansas to kill buffalo. I have but few men here, but what I say to them they listen, and they will abide by their promise whatever it may be. All these young soldiers are taking us by the hand, and I hope it will come back good times as formerly. It is very hard to have one-half of our nation absent at this time; we wish to get through at once. My friends, I want you to understand that I have sent up north for my people, and I want the road open for them to get here. I hope that which you have said will be just as you have told me, and I am glad to hear such good counsel from you. When my friends get down from the north I think it will be the best time to talk about the lands. There are so few here it would not look right to make a treaty for the whole nation, and so many absent. I

hope you will use your influence with the troops to open a road for my men to get here. You may mark out the lands you propose giving us, but I know nothing about them; it is a new country to me.

I have been in great hopes that I may see my children that were taken prisoners last fall, and when I get here I do not see them. I feel disappointed. My young men here, and friends, when we meet in council and come to the conclusion, it is the truth, we do not vary from it.

This lady's husband (Mrs. Wilmarth, formerly Fitzpatrick), Major Fitzpatrick, when he was our agent and brought us presents he did not take them into forts and houses, but would drive his wagons into our villages and empty them there. Every one would help themselves and feel glad. He has gone ahead of us, and he told us that when he was gone we would have trouble, and it has proved true. We are sorry. But since the death of Major Fitzpatrick we have had many agents. I don't know as we have been wronged, but it looks so. The amount of goods has diminished; it don't look right. Has known Colonel Leavenworth for some time; he has treated me well; whether it will continue or not I do not know. He has got a strong heart, and has done us a great deal of good. Now that times are so uncertain in this country I would like to have my old friend Colonel Bent with me.

This young man, Charles Wrath, does not get tired. He is always ready to go and meet them and give them whatever news he has to send to them. There may be wrongs done, but we want to show who does these wrongs before you censure us. I feel that the Great Father has taken pity on us, and that ever since we have met Colonel Leavenworth's words have been true, and nothing done since that time but what is true.

I heard that some chiefs were sent here to see us. We have brought our women and children, and now we want to see if you are going to have pity on us.

This is all by Black Kettle.