

Views of Sand Creek

Read each of the following selections and summarize the writer's attitude toward killing the Indians.

On November 29, 1864, Colonel Chivington sent the following report to his superior officers:

Gentlemen:

In the last ten days my command has marched three hundred miles—one hundred of which the snow was two feet deep. After a march of forty miles last night I at daylight this morning attacked a Cheyenne village of one hundred and thirty lodges, from nine to a thousand warriors strong. We killed Chiefs Black Kettle, White Antelope, and Little Robe, and between four and five hundred other Indians; captured between four and five hundred ponies and mules. Our loss is nine killed and thirty-eight wounded. All did nobly. I think I will catch some more of them about eighty miles [away] on the Smoky Hill. We found a white man's scalp not more than three days old in a lodge.

—J. M. Chivington,
Colonel Commanding District of Colorado
and First Indian Expedition

Another officer gave the following account of the day's battle:

. . . The Command of Colonel Chivington was composed of about one thousand men; the village of the Indians consisted of from one hundred to one hundred and thirty lodges and, as far as I am able to judge, of from five hundred to six hundred dead, the majority of which were women and children; in going over the battleground the next day I did not see a body of man, woman, or child but was scalped and in many instances their bodies were mutilated in the most horrible manner. . . .

. . . The Indian warriors, about one hundred in number, fought desperately; there were about five hundred all told. I estimated the loss of the Indians to be from one hundred and twenty-five to one hundred and seventy-five killed; no wounded fell into our hands and all the dead were scalped. . . . Our force was so large that there was no necessity of firing on the Indians. They did not return the fire until after our troops had fired several rounds. We had the assurance from Major Anthony that Black Kettle and his friends should be saved, and only those Indians who had committed . . . [violence against whites] should be harmed. . . .

Colonel J. M. Chivington:

Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians. I have come to kill Indians and believe it is right and honorable to use any means under God's heaven to kill Indians.

George Bent, son of a white trader and a Cheyenne mother, gave this eyewitness account:

When I looked toward the chief's lodge, I saw that Black Kettle had a large American flag up on a long lodgepole as a signal to the troop that the camp was friendly. Part of the warriors were running out toward the pony herds, and the rest of the people were rushing about the camp in great fear. All the time Black Kettle kept calling out not to be frightened, that the camp was under protection and there was no danger. Then suddenly the troops opened fire on this mass of men, women, and children, and all began to scatter and run. . . .

The soldiers concentrated their fire on the people in the pits, and we fought back as well as we could with guns and bows, but we had only a few guns. The troops did not rush in and fight hand in hand, but once or twice after they had killed many of the men in a certain pit, they rushed in and finished up the work, killing the wounded and the women and children that had not been hurt. The fight here was kept up until nearly sundown, when at last the commanding officer called off his men and all started back down the creek toward the camp that they had driven us from. As they went back, the soldiers scalped the dead lying in the bed of the stream and cut up the bodies in a manner that no Indian could equal. Little Bear told me recently that after the fight he saw the soldiers scalping the dead and saw an old woman who had been scalped by the soldiers walk about, but unable to see where to go. Her whole scalp had been taken and the skin of her forehead fell down over her eyes.

At the beginning of the attack, Black Kettle, with his wife and White Antelope, took their position before Black Kettle's lodge and remained there after all others had left the camp. At last Black Kettle, seeing that it was useless to stay longer, started to run, calling out to White Antelope to follow him, but White Antelope refused and stood there ready to die, with arms folded, singing his death song, "Nothing lives long, except the earth and the mountains," until he was shot down by the soldiers.

Twenty years later, the *Rocky Mountain News* editorialized:

Colonel Chivington's speech was received with an applause from every pioneer which indicated that they, to a man, heartily approved the course of the colonel twenty years ago, in the famous affair in which many of them took part, and the man who applied the scalpel to the ulcer which bid fair to destroy the life of the new colony, in those critical times was beyond a doubt the hero of the hour. This is the simple truth. Colorado stands by Sand Creek, and Colonel Chivington soon afterwards brought his family to the Queen City of the Plains where his remaining days may be passed in peace.

What an eventful history! And how, through it all, his sturdy manhood has been manifest in every action. Through all the denunciation of that Indian fight, he has never wavered or trembled. Others have dodged and apologized and crawled, but Chivington never. He has not laid the blame upon superior officers, as he might do. He has not complained of misinformation from inferior officers, as he might do. He has not said that the soldiers committed excesses there which were in no manner directed by him, as he might do. He has simply stood up under a rain of abuse, heavier than the shower of missiles that fell on Coeur de Lion before the castle of Front de Boeuf, and answered back: "I stand by Sand Creek." And was it wrong? To the abstract question, whether or not it is right to kill women and children, there can be but one answer. But as a matter of retaliation, and a matter of policy, whether these people were justified in killing women and children at Sand Creek is a question to which the answer does not come so glibly.