

Speeches of Black Thunder and Big Elk

Black Thunder, 20 July 1815

Speech by the Meskwaki chief Black Thunder to William Clark and the other peace commissioners at Portage des Sioux, Missouri Territory, as reprinted from *The Western Journal* (St. Louis) in *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore, 14 October 1815). Translated from Meskwaki into French by Maurice Blondeau, and from French into English probably by John A. Cameron; transcribed by Robert Wash.

“My Father—Restrain your feelings, and hear calmly what I shall say. I shall tell it to you plainly, I shall not speak with fear and trembling. I feel no fear. I have no cause to fear. I have never injured you, and innocence can feel no fear. I turn to all, red skins and white skins, and challenge an accusation against me.

“My Father—I don't understand well how things are working. I have been just set at liberty. Am I again to be plunged into bondage? I know not how or where to turn my head. Frowns are on all sides. I have never forgot what my great father told me. No man has ever been able to change me. You may perhaps, my father, be ignorant of what I tell you, but it is a truth which I call Heaven and Earth to witness—a fact that can be easily proved—that I have been assailed in every possible way that pride, fear, interest or feeling could touch me—that I have been pushed to the last for to keep up the tomahawk against you: But all in vain. I never could be made to feel that you were my enemy. If this be the conduct of an enemy I shall never be your friend.

“You are acquainted, my father, with my removal above Prairie du Chein. I went and formed a settlement, and called my warriors around me. We counseled and took our determination, from which we never departed. We smoked, and resolved to make common cause with the United States. I sent you the pipe. I took great pains in sending it, that the Indians of the Mississ[i]ppi might not know what was doing. I sent it by the Missouri. It resembled this, my father. You received it. My determination was then taken. I told you we were ready to make war—that your enemies should be our enemies, and waited only for the signal. If doing all this is to manifest hostile disposition, I do not know how to be friendly. The things I tell you, my father, because it is a truth, a melancholy truth, that the good things which

men do are often buried in the ground and forgot, while their evil deeds are stripped naked and proclaimed to the world.

“My father—When I come it was simply to hear what you had to say to me. I little thought I should have to defend myself. If I had been your enemy I would doubtless have taken some caution. I would have come with my excuses all prepared. But having ever held you by the hand, I have no excuses to offer. I consider myself, and wish to be considered in the same condition as before the war. If I had fought against you, my father, I would have told it to you, as those of my nation who have, will be compelled to do whe[n] they come—It will be for them to make their own defence in the best way. I have nothing to say but for myself and tribe.

“My father—As to what has or may be done in council here, I have nothing to say. It is simply to repeat what I said to my great father, the president of the United States.—You heard it, and no doubt remember it. It is simply to say, that my lands can never be surrendered. I was cheated, basely cheated, in the contract. While I live they shall never be surrendered.

“My father—I call heaven and earth to witness, and smoke the pipe in evidence of the truth and sincerity of what I have said. I remember the sentiments my great father expressed towards me. I hope he and you still cherish the same. If you do, I know you will receive the pipe. My only desire is to smoke it with you—to grasp your sacred hand, and claim the protection of the United States for myself and tribe. I hope as the pipe touches your lips, it will operate as a blessing on all my tribe—that the smoke will rise like a cloud, and as it passes away will carry with it all the animosities that have arisen between us.”

Big Elk, July 1815

Remarks by the Omaha principal chief Big Elk to William Clark, apparently in St. Louis a few days after the signing of the treaty with the Omahas on 20 July 1815, as printed in *The Missouri Gazette* (St. Louis, 29 July 1815). Translated from Omaha into French by Louis Dorion, and from French into English most likely by Samuel Solomon.

“*Father,*

“I have always listened to your words, your councils are yet fresh in my memory—I am your child; if my skin was white I should be your oldest son.

“*Father,*

“When we are at our villages, or on our lands in the prairies, if we die, we are *sometimes* buried, and sometimes not. If they bury us, we are put in a Buffaloe robe, perhaps an old robe, and are left a prey for the wolves and crows, and our bones are scattered over the plains. Who would not wish to die among you! that he may be buried with the honors of war, as you buried one of our red skin chiefs,^[1] who died at Portage des Sioux.

“*Father,*

“I speak rather loud, if it is not agreeable to you tell me so and I will speak lower.

“*My Father,*

“I have always given my young men good council, if you doubt it, enquire of warriors present—they will tell you the truth.”

Big Elk, 4 February 1822

Speech by Big Elk to President James Monroe in the White House, as printed in the *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, 16 February 1822). Translated from Omaha into English by William Rodgers.

“My Great Father:

“Look at me—look at me, my father, my hands are unstained with your blood—my people have never struck the whites, and the whites have never struck them. It is not the case with other red skins. Mine is the only nation that has spared the long knives[.] I am a chief, but not the only one in my nation; there are other chiefs who raise their crests by my side. I have always been the friend of the long knives, and before this chief (Major O’F.)^[2] came among us, I suffered much in support of the whites. I was often reproached for being a friend, but when my father came amongst us he strengthened my arms and I soon towered over the rest.

“*My Great Father*—I have heard some of your chiefs, who propose to send some good people amongst us to learn us to live as you do; but I do not wish to tell a lie—I am only one man, and will not presume, at this distance from my people, to speak for them on a subject with which they are entirely unacquainted—I am afraid it is too soon for us to attempt to change habits: We have too much game in our country—we feed too plentifully on the buffaloe to bruise our hands with the instruments of agriculture.

“The Great Spirit made my skin red, and he made us to live as we do now; and I believe that when the Great Spirit placed us on this earth he consulted our happiness. We love our country—

we love our customs and habits. I wish that you would permit us to enjoy them as long as I live. When we become hungry, naked—when the game of our country becomes exhausted, and misery encompasses our families, then, and not till then, do I want those good people among us[.] Then they may lend us a helping hand—*then* show us the wealth of the earth—the advantages and sustenance to be derived from its culture.

“I am fond of peace, my Great Father, but the Sioux have disturbed my repose. They have struck upon me and killed two of my brothers, and since more of my bravest warriors, whose deaths are still unrevenged. Those Sioux live high up the Missouri, and, although they have seen my Father and heard his words, they rove on the land like hungry wolves, and, like serpents creeping through the grass, they disturb the unsuspected stranger passing through the country. I am almost the only red skin opposed to war—but, my Father, what should I do to satisfy the dead, when every wind coming over their bones brings to my ears their cries for revenge? I am constantly disturbed by the recollection of my brothers, and am afraid to neglect their bones, which have been thrown to the winds, and lie uncovered and exposed to the sun—I must not be slow to avenge their death; I am forced to war, my Great Father, and I am in hopes you will assist me; I am in hopes that you will give some arms to my Father^[3] to place in the hands of my braves to enable them to defend their wives and children. Since I have known my father I have obeyed *his commands*, and when I die I will leave my children to him that he may do with them as he pleases.”

¹ Black Buffalo, principal chief of the Teton Sioux.

² The newspaper editor’s identification of Maj. Benjamin O’Fallon, the Indian Agent at Council Bluffs who escorted the delegation to Washington.

³ O’Fallon.