

To Henry Knox

(Private)

My dear Sir,

Mount Vernon Novr 19th 1790.

I have received your letter of the 10th instt, and will declare to you without reserve, that my forebodings with respect to the Expedition against the Wabash Indians are of disappointment; and a disgraceful termination under the conduct of B. Genl Harmer.¹

I expected *little* from the moment I heard he was a *drunkard*.² I expected *less* as soon as I heard that on *this account* no confidence was reposed in him by the people of the Western Country—And I gave up *all hope* of Success, as soon as I heard that there were disputes with *him* about command.

The latter information is from report *only*;³ but the report of *bad news* is rarely without foundation. If the issue of this Expedition is honorable to the Concerters of it, & favorable to our *Arms*, it will be *double* pleasing to me; but my mind, from the silence which reigns, and other circumstances, is prepared for the worst; that is—for expence without honor or profit.⁴

If any thing *more* than the statement of *this business* for the information of Congress should occur to you, previous to my arrival, be so good as to digest it, for it is my wish to have every matter which may occur to the heads of Departments as well as to myself, ready, if proper to lay before that body, at the opening of the Session. With sincere friendship, & affecte regard I am—ever Yrs

Go: Washington

P.S. I expect to commence my journey for Philadelphia on Monday—but from the State of the Roads after the incessant and heavy rains which have fallen, my progress must be slow.

G.W.

ALS, NNGL: Knox Papers; LB, DLC:GW.

¹ For the background to Josiah Harmer's expedition, see GW to Arthur St. Clair, 6 Oct. 1789 and note 2, St. Clair to GW, 1 May 1790 and source note, Henry Knox to GW, 25 Oct. 1790 and note 2, and Thomas Jefferson to GW, 29 Aug. 1790, nn.1 and 2.

² On 3 Sept. 1790 Knox wrote privately to Harmer: "There are times, in almost every man's life, requiring the plainness & freedom of sincere friendship. We are too apt, to act under delusions, and to fancy that we may indulge [669] ourselves in particular propensities unobserved.... It has been reported, and under circumstances which appear to have gained pretty extensive credit on the frontiers, that you are too apt to indulge yourself to excess in a convivial Glass—Whether this circumstance be true in any great extent or not, seems to be immaterial as in the present case. It is unhappy that it should have gained any credit whatever and it would be still more unhappy if there were any solid foundation for the report. . . . This report has been communicated in such a way as even to reach the ears of the President of the United States, whose esteem for you is great—It is with his knowledge I write this letter but with no other persons whatever." Knox concluded that if Harmer's expedition failed, "for the want of arrangement or the possession or exercise of any of those great qualities of the mind which a general ought to possess, it will be unfortunate—But if it fails, or is even supposed to fail by any fatal indulgences, your reputation will be forever blasted" (draft in NNGL: Knox Papers; see also Lyman C. Draper's transcription of the receiver's copy in WHi: Draper MSS, Josiah Harmer Papers). Harmer was cleared by a September 1791 court of inquiry of charges of drunkenness (*ASP, Military Affairs*, 1:24, 25, 30, 34, 35; see also n.4 below; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 107, 340, n.59; and Guthman, *March to Massacre*, 194–95).

³ Instead of regular dispatches from Harmer or St. Clair, only disturbing rumors about the expedition arrived from the west. For instance, on 1 Nov. 1790 Benjamin Briggs and other citizens of Virginia's northwestern frontier wrote to Gov. Beverley Randolph in fear of "the consequences of the defeat of our army by the Indians on the late expedition, as the Indians flushed with victory will doubtless fall on our frontiers, as soon as the weather will permit" (*Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, 5:222–23). Eleven days after GW had written to Knox on 19 Nov., the president received a letter from the governor of New York quoting a 5 Nov. 1790 letter from Mohawk Joseph Brant with reports from Detroit about the ambush of the American force (see George Clinton to GW, 26 Nov. 1790 and note 4). Henry Lee wrote GW from Richmond on 28 Nov., also mentioning "a defeat of the Western army."

⁴ In light of the failure of the Kentucky militia's 18 Oct. 1790 reconnaissance under Col. James Trotter, General Harmer sent out the next morning another body of 300 militia and regulars under Lt. Col. John Hardin to search for Indian soldiers and noncombatants in the vicinity of Kekionga (see Jefferson to GW, 29 Aug. 1790, n.2). After a third of the militia had deserted back to camp and another company accidentally had been left behind after a halt, the remaining troops ran into an ambush of 150 soldiers under Little Turtle. All but the regulars under Capt. John Armstrong and nine of the militia precipitately fled at the first volley, and the Indians easily cut the unsupported line to pieces, as Armstrong and Ens. Asa Hartshorne, the sole survivors, had reported upon their return to the army the next morning. The panicked remnants of Hardin's patrol had already reached the safety of the main camp at Chillicothe the previous night and demoralized the rest of the militia with news of the rout (Sword, *Washington's Indian War*, 106–9; Guthman, *March to Massacre*, 190–91).

On 20 Oct. 1790 Harmer denied Hardin permission to return to the battlefield [670] and instead set about his stated mission of destroying the Indian towns. The army moved out at ten o'clock A.M. on 21 Oct. 1790 after having fired Chillicothe and five Miami villages along with all the Indians' crops and winter foodstores. That evening, however, Harmer decided to send a column of 60 regulars and 340 of the best militia troops under Hardin and federal Maj. John Wyllys to surprise any Indians returning to Kekionga and thus to secure his return march from harassment. After Wyllys had divided his command into three separate columns, he was ambushed while fording the Maumee River on the morning of 22 Oct. 1790. The Kentucky cavalry dislodged the attackers and pursued them with members of the third column. Meanwhile, Wyllys and the regulars were overwhelmed by another hidden force. Wyllys fell, and the

survivors blindly followed the charging militia, who eventually returned to the sound of firing. After intense fighting the Indians withdrew from the field, leaving about 40 of their dead. Close to 50 regulars had been killed; militia losses totaled 68 dead or missing and 28 wounded (Sword, *Washington's Indian War*, 110–15; Guthman, *March to Massacre*, 192–94).

The thirty reinforcements that Harmar sent on the morning of 22 Oct. shortly met the retreating militia. In claiming a complete victory, Hardin exaggerated the prowess of his troops. With the militia on the brink of mutiny, Harmar resumed his homeward march the morning of 23 Oct. and never returned to the site of either skirmish, leaving there the remains of his dead unburied and any severely wounded to the mercy of the enemy. The trek back to Fort Washington was burdened by many nonambulatory wounded and was slowed by the loss of mounts and packhorses as well as the continuing insubordination of the militia (Sword, *Washington's Indian War*, 115–16, 119–20; Guthman, *March to Massacre*, 194).

Harmar's dispirited army reached Fort Washington on 3 Nov. 1790, five days after the arrival of a detachment he had sent ahead with the message that five Indian villages had been destroyed and upwards of 200 Indians had been killed. St. Clair immediately forwarded this report of victory to Knox, but news of a severe defeat had reached the western settlements even before the army returned to Fort Washington, as militia deserters returned to the comfort of their homes. Harmar prepared his official report with casualty lists only on 4 Nov. 1790, which the governor forwarded to Knox two days later: 75 of the expedition's 320 regular officers and men had been killed, along with 108 of its 1,133 militia troops; another 3 regulars and 28 militia had been wounded. Rumors and reports of a disaster had reached GW's ears long before these official figures arrived in Philadelphia on 13 Dec. 1790 (Sword, *Washington's Indian War*, 120; *ASP, Indian Affairs*, 1:104, 106; see also Knox to GW, 14 Dec. 1790, DNA: RG 46, First Congress, 1789–91, Records of Legislative Proceedings, President's Messages).

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