

*Letter from
George W. Campbell, Esq.
Late Secretary of the Treasury*

January 2, 1815

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LETTER

FROM

GEORGE W. CAMPBELL, ESQ.

LATE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY,

TO

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE

APPOINTED

TO INQUIRE INTO THE CAUSES AND PARTICULARS

OF

The invasion of the City of Washington, and the neighboring town of
Alexandria, in the month of August last.

JANUARY 2, 1815.

Laid before the House by the chairman of the said committee, and ordered to be printed.

WASHINGTON CITY:

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1815.

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LETTER.

Nashville, (Ten.) Dec. 7, 1814.

SIR—I have had the honor to receive your letter of the 29th October last. You request that I should give the committee of which you are chairman, such facts and views as may be in my power, respecting the proceedings of a cabinet council on the 1st July last, in relation to the defence of military district No. 10; and on the subject of a conversation that took place between the president and myself on the 24th August, respecting the part general Armstrong was to take at Bladensburg; and also, any other facts and views that may be thought pertinent to a fair and impartial inquiry into the causes of the fall of the capital of the United States.

The information requested by the committee shall be given without reserve, so far as my recollection and state of health will enable me. I deem it, however, proper, previously to state, that according to the views I entertain of the relations existing between the executive and the other members of the government usually called on to assist in council, I should not consider myself bound, on such application as the present, to disclose, in all cases, the proceedings which may have taken place at such council, or what may have passed at a conversation held with the president individually, such as that above referred to; as such disclosure might justly be considered as restrained; in the former case, on the ground of official, and in the latter on that of personal confidence; and without taking into consideration the effect of the restraint that would naturally be imposed on such delibe

rations and interchange of sentiments, by establishing the precedent, that they were liable to public disclosure whenever called for, there might be cases in which the public interest would be compromised by such development. I do not, however, consider the present such a case; and I have no motive for withholding the information required on account of any bearing it might be supposed to have on my own conduct on that occasion, or on that of any other member of the government; as I am perfectly satisfied it is the desire of the executive, and presume it is so also of the other members, that every circumstance calculated to throw light on the subject before the committee, and develop the real causes which led to the late events at the seat of government, should be disclosed without reserve. Under these impressions, therefore, I act in giving the information desired.

At the cabinet council referred to, held on the 1st July, by the members of the government convened by request of the president, I was present. Despatches had been received a few days previously thereto, from two of our ministers (Messrs. Gallatin and Bayard) in Europe, the consideration of which, according to my present impressions, was the principal object of the conference. They were accordingly taken up for deliberation; and the changed aspect of affairs in Europe as unfolded by them as well as by information derived from other sources, was brought into view. The subject of our foreign relations generally was taken into consideration, and the effect the late great events on the continent would be likely to produce upon them, was freely spoken of. It was stated as probable, first, I believe, by the president, that England, considering her own relative power and influence greatly increased, would be disposed to

employ a considerable portion of her military and naval forces lately disengaged from the great European contest, in prosecuting the war against this country; that she might be expected to strengthen herself in Canada, and carry on her depredations against our Atlantic coast on a scale more extended than heretofore. Some general remarks were also made on the propriety of adapting our measures to that state of things an increase of the enemy's forces would produce; and there appeared a concurrence of opinion among the members as to the importance of providing the means and making the requisite arrangements for defending not only district No. 10, including the seat of government, but, as far as practicable, every other portion of the union against which an attack might reasonably be expected; but I do not at present recollect any specific proposition made while I was present, in relation to the defence of that district, or any other place in particular. I cannot, however, undertake to state in detail all the proceedings that took place in relation to this subject on that occasion. The state of my health was very imperfect; and some official duty, according to my present recollection, requiring to be attended to at a certain hour, occasioned me to withdraw before the subject of the defence of the seat of government was formally taken up for decision; nor do I now recollect of being present when the question on that subject was decided. The president, either on my return the same day, or shortly after, informed me it had been determined to call forth and organize a force deemed sufficient for the defence of the district, and particularly the seat of government, of which measure I approved; and from the secretary of war I afterwards understood the number to be called on for that purpose was 15,000 men, which appeared to me am-

ply sufficient. Nothing further occurs to me at present, in relation to what passed at that conference while I was present, on the subject of the defence of the seat of government. I recollect that about this time, the president, in conversation, stated his impressions to be, on the fullest consideration he had been able to give the state of affairs in Europe, in connexion with the disposition of Great Britain, as far as it could be ascertained from the late despatches of our ministers, as well as from other sources of information, that we ought to calculate she would direct a considerable portion of her numerous forces liberated from the late great conflicts on the continent, and left entirely at her disposal, against this country, either to produce a favorable effect on the pending negotiation, and if disposed to peace, close the war with some brilliant achievement calculated to give her arms the air of eclat; or if not so disposed, for the purpose of prosecuting the war more vindictively, and possibly with a view to other more ambitious objects; and that whatever might be her ulterior views, we ought to expect that Washington city, being the seat of the national government, and from its local situation more accessible, as well as less capable of defence than most other places, would be among the first objects of her attack, and that we ought, therefore, to make the requisite preparations to meet such event. With this view, I understood general Winder was appointed to the command of the district, and orders given for concentrating in the neighbourhood of the city such force, to consist of regulars and militia, as was deemed sufficient for its defence.

The conversation between the president and myself, on the 24th August, respecting which the committee requests information, having taken place incidentally, and under peculiar circumstan-

ces, it will not be expected that I should recapitulate it at length; and it may be difficult to communicate its substance with precision, or the causes that led to it, without going more into detail than would be acceptable to the committee, or accord with my own inclination.

When it was known, on the evening of the 23d August, that the troops under general Winder had retired across the Eastern Branch, and encamped in the city, it occasioned, as may be readily supposed, considerable agitation in the minds of the citizens. It appeared to have been expected, that in case our force was not considered sufficient to meet and repulse the enemy on his landing, his advance would be opposed, and his progress, at least retarded as far as practicable, by harassing him on his march, erecting defensive works at suitable positions, and throwing such other obstructions in his way, as was best calculated to check his movements; for all which operations the nature of the country through which he must pass was said to be very favorable; when, therefore, it was stated, that he was near the city, without such means having been either at all, or but partially resorted to, it produced some surprise, as well as inquiry into the causes that led to such a result. Falling in conversation with the secretary of war on the subject, I expressed my apprehensions, that suffering the enemy to approach so near, (if his progress could by any possible means have been checked,) as to make the fate of the city depend on a single battle, to be maintained, on our part, principally by raw, inexperienced troops, was hazarding too much. He appeared to concur in this opinion. And when I inquired, whether the late movements of the troops were made pursuant to his advice, or with his approbation, and what plan of operations was determined on to

oppose the further progress of the enemy; and also, whether our army would have the benefit of his suggestions and advice, in directing its future movements? He gave me to understand, that the movements which had taken place, were not in pursuance of any plan or advice given by him; that general Winder having been appointed to the command of the district, including the city, and the means assigned for its defence placed at his disposal, he was considered as having the direction of their application; and it was to be presumed he had formed such plan for defending the city, as he deemed best suited to the emergency and the means he possessed; and that interposing his opinion might be considered indelicate, and perhaps improper, unless he had the approbation of the executive for so doing; in which case any assistance that his suggestions or advice could render, should be afforded.

It appeared to me an occasion so highly important and critical demanded the united efforts of all the military skill and ability within the reach of the government; and that feelings of delicacy, if their cause could be removed, should not be allowed to come in collision with the public interest, and, I believe, I so expressed myself to general Armstrong.

On the following morning, I set out with the secretary of war for general Winder's headquarters, then near the bridge on the Eastern Branch. When we proceeded as far as the president's house, we learned he had gone on before. Some other company joining us, I proceeded in advance, and arrived there before the secretary, where I found, with general Winder, the president, the secretary of the navy, and, I believe, the attorney general of the United States, with some military officers. Some conversation took place in relation

to the route the enemy would be most likely to pursue in approaching the city; when a messenger arrived, bringing the commanding general information, considered by him decisive, that they would advance by Bladensburg, and he immediately proceeded with the troops to that place. At this time, the secretary of war had arrived. All the members of the government, that were present, left the house. Falling in conversation with the president, I took occasion to state to him the impressions of the secretary of war, as to the line of conduct his duty required him to observe on that occasion; and added, in substance, according to my present recollection, that the very critical situation of affairs appeared to me to require all the aid that military skill and ability could afford; that on so important an occasion, considerations of delicacy, as to conflicting authority, should not, I presumed, be allowed to jeopardize, in any degree, the public interest; that I regretted the reserve apparently observed by the secretary of war, but understood from him, he acted on the ground, that, as general Winder was appointed to the command of the district, and the means designed for its defence placed at his disposal, he was considered as possessing the right to direct the manner of their application; and that interposing his opinion, without executive approbation, might be considered indelicate, and perhaps an improper interference with the commanding general's authority; but that if it was known to be the president's pleasure, he would afford any aid in his power, by his presence and advice; and, I believe, I also stated, that considering the extraordinary and menacing aspect of our affairs, I thought it my duty to make him this communication, that in case he should think it proper, the ground on which the secretary acted might be removed. The president replied.

as I understood him, that general Armstrong might have known, any proper order given by him, would readily meet with the executive sanction; and that there was no doubt, any suggestions from him would be duly attended to by general Winder. Upon my remarking, I had reason to believe, without his approbation, the secretary would not interpose his opinion, or take any part in the business of the day, the president observed, he would speak to him on the subject. The president, the secretary of war, and myself, were then on horseback. The president joined the secretary, and some conversation took place between them, the purport of which I did not hear.

The president after parting from the secretary, observed to me, he had spoken to general Armstrong on the subject I had named to him, and that no difficulty, he presumed, would occur in the case; that any suggestions made by the secretary would, without doubt, receive due attention from the commanding general; and should any objection be made on the ground of authority, the matter might readily be adjusted, as he would not himself be far distant, and the secretary's order, (I presumed it was meant in writing,) given on the field, if necessary, would be considered as carrying with it the executive sanction.

The foregoing is, according to the best of my recollection, the substance of what the president communicated to me after conversing with general Armstrong. It, however, occurred in the midst of much bustle, and where various other subjects presented themselves for consideration; it is therefore possible I may not have understood him correctly, or may not now recollect all that passed.

Some general conversation took place about this time respecting the probable force, movements, and objects, of the enemy; also respecting

the direction to be given to certain portions of our own troops, particularly those under commodore Barney, who had not then been put in motion, and whom the commodore appeared very desirous should be permitted, with himself, to take a share in the expected battle. Mention was also made of the precautionary measures proper to be taken in the possible event of the enemy's success against the city, respecting the public property at the navy yard, &c. and also, the propriety suggested in such case, of the members of the government convening at some suitable place to determine on ulterior arrangements, and Fredericktown was agreed on as best calculated for that purpose.

After parting with the president, I joined the secretary of war, then on his way to Bladensburg; he observed the president had spoken to him respecting the operations of the day; that he would proceed to the scene of action, and if there should be occasion, would suggest to the commanding general whatever occurred to him as likely to be useful; and should it become necessary, he would, on the field, give a written order that would carry with it, of course, official authority. He did not, however, state to me the particulars of the conversation that passed between the president and himself. Near the turnpike gate I parted with the secretary, the state of my health requiring that I should return to my lodging.

The foregoing contains all that occurs to me at present, in relation to the specific inquiries of the committee

On the subject of their general inquiry respecting the causes of the capture of the seat of government, it is not probable I can add any thing to the information they already possess, derived from other sources. A combination of circumstances, not easily accounted for, some of which could not

probably have been anticipated, and others against which it might have been difficult to provide by any precautions that could have been adopted, led, it is believed, to that event.

The sudden advance of the enemy after his arrival on our coast, so considerable a distance into the country, destitute as he was known to be of cavalry, and in a great degree, of artillery, as well as of the means of transporting provisions, without delaying to establish garrisons, or to otherwise provide for keeping open his communication with his shipping and supplies, was a measure that could not, it is presumed, be justified on any military principle, and may not therefore, have been anticipated in time to provide effectually against its consequences. On the other hand, the tardy movements of the militia called on from the neighboring states for the defence of the city, and their consequent failure to arrive in time at the scene of action, whatever may have occasioned it, may undoubtedly be considered as the principal cause of the catastrophe that followed.

How far the troops who had arrived and were present, might, under the guidance of different management, have succeeded in retarding the progress of the enemy, and, with the aid of the reinforcements hourly expected, in finally repulsing him, is not for me to decide; and it is a question on which even military men may not perhaps agree.

I have the honor to be, &c.

G. W. CAMPBELL.

Hon. R. M. Johnson, &c.



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