

SAM HOUSTON SPEAKS OUT ABOUT  
THE UTAH WAR



In 1857, President James Buchanan ordered the U. S. Army to march to the Territory of Utah to quell a supposed insurrection of the Mormons in the newly organized territory. Now what, if anything, does that episode have to do with Texas? It turned out that Sam Houston, a U.S. Senator from Texas, became one of the most vocal critics of the expedition.

The expedition was initially commanded by General William S. Harney. Becoming needed elsewhere, Harney left the expedition while en route and was replaced by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston. The expedition then came to be known as Johnston's Army.

Sympathizing somewhat with the Saints' reactions to the inhumane treatment by corrupt and autocratic Federal officials in their territory, Sam Houston decried the sending of the army. In an oration on the U.S. Senate floor, Houston suggested that instead of having sent an army, "why not send them men to whom they could unbosom themselves." He further suggested that if the United States would send "honest men and gentlemen,

whose morals, whose wisdom, and whose character, comport with the high station they fill," that the Mormons would likely be willing to surrender to them and act in obedience with the laws of the United States.

Houston was especially incensed by one incident that occurred just outside of Utah. Being bogged down for the winter and running out of supplies, the army was in a state of severe hardship. Salt was especially needed by their cattle. Learning of the situation, Brigham Young sent a large supply of salt out to the army with the message that it was a free gift, but if the commander preferred, he could pay a fair price later. Being loathe to accept anything from the "rebellious Mormons," the Union commander refused to accept the salt at all.

To Houston, refusing the salt, besides being an act of needless discourtesy, meant that if the soldiers had to resort to eating their cattle, the unsalted meat could produce cholera which might be especially fatal to men in tents in such severe winter weather.

Continuing his oration on the Senate floor, Houston said, "What was the message the military officer sent back? I believe the substance of it was that he would have no intercourse with a rebel, and that when they met they would fight. They will fight; and if they fight, he (the commander) will get miserably whipped. That was a time to make peace with Brigham Young, because there is something potent in salt. It is the sacrament of perpetual friendship."

Peaceful arrangements finally prevailed, and Johnston's Army was allowed into the Salt Lake Valley the following Spring without shots being fired. Brigham Young accepted the new Territorial Governor appointee, Alfred Cumming, as an honest and fair-minded man, and the supposed rebellion existed no more. When the U. S. Government policies and actions became consistent with Sam Houston's expressed views, peace and harmony prevailed.



**Reference:**

*Writings of Sam Houston, 1858*, in Texas Archives, Austin, Texas.