

## La Vérendrye's "Middle Ground": Village and Imperial Politics in the Northwest, 1731-1743

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### Abstract

The French explorer and fur trader, Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, has been commemorated as the "Pathfinder of the West." Although many historians have praised La Vérendrye for his tolerance and understanding of Aboriginal culture, he was nevertheless an imperial agent, fiercely loyal to the French Crown, and tasked to carry out the imperial policies of Versailles. Historian Richard White has developed the conceptual framework of the "middle ground" as a spatial metaphor to analyse the French-Algonquian alliance of the *pays d'en haut*. Using the conceptual framework of the middle ground, this essay seeks to restore autonomy to the Cree, Assiniboine, and Sioux by going beyond the simple stories of exploration, conquest, and settlement. La Vérendrye and the French Crown were unable to fulfill their role in the French-indigenous alliance of the Northwest. As a result, the Cree, Assiniboine, and Sioux refused to subjugate themselves to the French imperial politics and the middle ground, wherein the French could mediate and dictate the parameters of the alliance, diminished.

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye is fondly remembered in Canadian history as the "Pathfinder of the West," a man who learned and respected "the customs of the Aboriginals... [and] entertained good relations with the First Nations by respecting their way of life."<sup>1</sup> La Vérendrye's life has been celebrated as that of the archetypal *voyageur*. Denis

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Combet, *In Search of the Western Sea: Selected Journals of La Vérendrye* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2001), 165.

Combet's recent popular history book *In Search of the Western Sea* asserts that La Vérendrye's explorations spawned an "encounter between the two worlds [that] seems to be a positive one."<sup>2</sup> Most of the biographies of La Vérendrye written in the early to mid-twentieth century focused on his travel narrative, his 'heroic' character, and his bringing of civilization and Christianity to the "ignorant half-naked savages" or "redskins."<sup>3</sup> Many of these histories of La Vérendrye have contributed to the discourse of "mythic" French-Indian relations, a discourse first propagated by the works of Francis Parkman in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, early historical analyses of La Vérendrye agree with Parkman's oft-quoted observation that "Spanish civilization crushed the Indian; English civilization scorned and neglected him; French civilization embraced and cherished him."<sup>5</sup>

The La Vérendrye historiography has, until very recently, been shrouded by this heroic discourse of "mythic" French-Indian relations. This essay revisits the *Journals and Letters* of La Vérendrye and argues that French-Indian relations at the western posts in the eighteenth century were much more complex than the La Vérendrye historiography has hitherto indicated.<sup>6</sup> It does so by examining those documents, written by La Vérendrye from the western posts, through the conceptual framework of the "middle ground" that was first developed by historian Richard White. This framework is pertinent for an analysis of the complexities of the French-Indian alliance at the western posts. In his 1991 book, *The Middle Ground*, White conceived of the "middle ground" as a conceptual framework to analyse and comprehend French-Indian relations, interactions, and alliance in the *pays d'en haut*.<sup>7</sup> The middle ground existed as a cross-cultural realm of compromises and understandings

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence J. Burpee, *Pathfinders of the Great Plains* (Toronto: Brook & Company, 1914), 4, 59.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph L. Peyser, "The Fate of the Fox Survivors: A Dark Chapter in the History of the French in the Upper Country, 1726-1737," *The State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 73 (1990): 85.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston, 1867), quoted in Joseph L. Peyser, "The Fate of the Fox Survivors," 84.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence J. Burpee, trans., *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier De Varennes De La Vérendrye and his Sons* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1927).

<sup>7</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

that the French had to reach with the indigenous inhabitants of North America to maintain their colony in the New World. Compared to New England, French Canada had a much smaller population and was thus vulnerable in North America. The French were unable to rule over the First Nations as mere subjects of empire. Rather, the French had to turn their indigenous neighbours into allies to maintain their position against their imperial rivals. The French diligently courted their indigenous allies and bestowed upon them lavish gifts to win them over as both allies and metaphorical kinsmen. Canadian historian W. J. Eccles has remarked that it was “almost incredible that with a mere handful of men the French were able to lay claim to most of the continent for over half a century.”<sup>8</sup>

La Vérendrye was an imperial agent; he sought to expand the French alliance and influence into the Northwest. He attempted to carry out the orders of his superiors, which meant excluding the English from native trade and alliances in the territories west of Lake Superior, and finding a waterway leading to the Western Sea. Such a “discovery” would have given France a decisive economic advantage in the worldwide imperial struggle. Eccles comments that “New France was a mere instrument in French imperial policy, to contain the English colonies on the seaboard.”<sup>9</sup> Alan MacDonell has argued that La Vérendrye was a “colonial servant” whose own “loyalty to Quebec and Paris was unswerving.”<sup>10</sup> La Vérendrye personally sought to attain *la gloire* – recognition, renown, and wealth for himself and his sons. As MacDonell argues, La Vérendrye was hardly an “independent Canadian entrepreneur,” as many historians have anachronistically portrayed him.<sup>11</sup> Rather, La Vérendrye’s actions were intrinsically tied to the interests of the French Crown. His encounter with the indigenous nations of the Northwest

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<sup>8</sup> W.J. Eccles, “La Mer de l’Ouest: Outpost of Empire,” in *Essays on New France*, ed. W.J. Eccles (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 98.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>10</sup> Alan MacDonell, “Radisson and La Vérendrye: Two Frontiersmen, Two Frontiers,” *Western Humanities Review*, 2 (2006), 51.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Nellis Crouse, *La Vérendrye Fur Trader and Explorer* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956); Martin Kavanagh, *La Vérendrye His Life and Times* (Norwich: Fletcher & Son Ltd, 1967).

saw the collision of French imperial policy with the village-level politics and kinship obligations of the Cree and Assiniboine nations. Ultimately, La Vérendrye was unable to fulfill his role in the French-Indian alliance of the Northwest. As a result, his reputation diminished and the middle ground, wherein the French could mediate and dictate the parameters of the alliance, diminished.

Much of the Canadian historiography of La Vérendrye also diverges from the impressions of his contemporaries. He never attained *la gloire* of being the first Frenchman to reach the Western Sea. The slow pace of his explorations led many of his contemporaries to accuse him of greed and corruption and to presume that he had used the pretext of exploration to acquire a monopoly on the fur markets of the Northwest.<sup>12</sup> Nor was La Vérendrye's reputation rehabilitated after his death in 1749: French historian Daniel Royot notes that "La Vérendrye was not recognized as a major discoverer by early historians, who judged him uneducated, erratic, and venal."<sup>13</sup> In 1852 however, Pierre Margry, a French archivist, discovered a large quantity of La Vérendrye's journals, reports, and letters. Using these documents, Margry wrote a revisionist history wherein La Vérendrye was depicted as constantly misunderstood by the French government, a victim of the accusations of his detractors, and a valiant and dutiful explorer who put the good of the colony ahead of him and his family.<sup>14</sup> This *new* interpretation continued into the twentieth century, and La Vérendrye blossomed into one of the major figures of the history of New France.<sup>15</sup>

The rediscovery of the *Journals and Letters* by Margry, and their subsequent translation by Lawrence J. Burpee in 1927, led to a flurry of publications about La Vérendrye throughout the early twentieth century. Notably, Burpee praised La Vérendrye as "Canada's bravest son," who "gave

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Royot, *Divided Loyalties in a Doomed Empire: The French in the West from New France to the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2007), 229.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

all that he had, including his life, for the glory and welfare of his country.”<sup>16</sup> Angés Laut asserted that “every mile westward” of La Vérendrye’s travels “was consecrated by heroism.”<sup>17</sup> As late the 1970s, Antoine Champagne asserted that La Vérendrye departed on the quest for the discovery of the Western Sea, which he described as a “noble adventure of discovery.”<sup>18</sup>

Among these historians of New France, only Eccles took a more analytical and critical approach to La Vérendrye, noting that he “appears to have been neither a good disciplinarian nor a competent administrator. He was a manifestly poor businessman and his finances were always in disarray.”<sup>19</sup> Eccles criticized Antoine Champagne’s *Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l’Ouest* by pointing out “the author’s partisanship and his failure to appreciate the actual role of the western Indian nations.”<sup>20</sup> In a recent article, Karlee Sapoznik seeks to re-evaluate the heroic discourse by arguing that the La Vérendrye historiography must now turn its focus from his travel itinerary to an analysis of the intersection of gender, slavery, and race.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore a also suitable time for a more analytical revisionist approach to La Vérendrye’s *Journals and Letters*, which have hitherto been steeped in romanticism and a discourse of heroism.<sup>22</sup>

The conceptual framework of the “middle ground” reveals the complexities of the French-Algonquian alliance, which the French had been

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<sup>16</sup> Burpee, *Pathfinders of the Great Plains*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Agnes Laut, *Pathfinders of the West* (Ayer Co Pub, 1904), 197.

<sup>18</sup> Antoine Champagne, *Nouvelles Études sur Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l’Ouest* (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1971), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Eccles, *La Mer de l’Ouest: Outpost of Empire*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> W. J. Eccles, “Review of Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l’Ouest by Antoine Champagne,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27 (1970), 171.

<sup>21</sup> Karlee Sapoznik, “Where the Historiography Falls Short: La Vérendrye through the Lens of Gender, Race and Slavery in Early French Canada, 1731-1749,” *Manitoba History*, 62 (2009), 22.

<sup>22</sup> For more examples of ‘heroic’ La Vérendrye biographies and publications, see Irene Moore, *Valiant La Vérendrye* (Québec: L.S.A, Proulx, 1927); Louis Arthur Prud’Homme, “Pierre Gaultier de Varennes Sieur De La Vérendrye,” *Bulletin of the Historical Society of St. Boniface* 5 (1916), 1-48; T. J. Campbell, “Out of the Grave: The Discovery of Fort St. Charles in 1908,” *Bulletin of the Historical Society of St. Boniface* 5 (1915), 1-22.

carefully cultivating since the founding of Quebec in 1608.<sup>23</sup> The middle ground was a realm wherein the “the boundaries of the Algonquian and French worlds melted at the edges and merged.”<sup>24</sup> Together, the French and Algonquians created the middle ground to arrive at common conceptions of understanding and suitable ways of behaving. The middle ground created a realm wherein both the French and Algonquians sought to understand and be understood by the cultural other. White notes that “the central and defining aspect of the middle ground was the willingness of those who created it to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner’s cultural premises.”<sup>25</sup> The middle ground also created the French-Algonquian alliance, through which French imperial policies and indigenous kinship obligations were united.<sup>26</sup>

White’s seminal study analyzed the French-Algonquian alliance primarily in the Great Lakes Region. White’s analysis of the middle ground did not extend past the Great Lakes Region and makes no mention of La Vérendrye, the western posts, or the search for the Western Sea. It is, nevertheless, an appropriate conceptual framework within which to explore La Vérendrye’s *Journals and Letters* and the French-Algonquian alliance in the Northwest. Native American historian E. A. S. Demers has noted how many scholars have mistakenly “assumed that the middle ground refers primarily to the geographical region of the *pays d’en haut*.”<sup>27</sup> Demers contends that “In reality, the middle ground is a conceptual framework describing the process by which the people of different cultures and competing groups ... sought to

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<sup>23</sup> Richard White refers to the French allies of the *pays d’en haut* collectively as “Algonquians.” “I have, with some reluctance, referred to the people living within the *pays d’en haut* as the Algonquians... *Algonquian* refers to a language group... I have, however, taken the term as a collective name for the inhabitants of the *pays d’en haut* because Algonquian speakers were the dominant group, and because with the onslaught of the Iroquois, the Algonquians forged a collective sense of themselves as people distinct from, and opposed to, the Five Nations, or Iroquois proper.” White, *The Middle Ground*, xi.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 142-143.

<sup>27</sup> E. A. S. Demers, “Native-American Slavery and Territoriality in the Colonial Upper Great Lakes Region,” *Michigan Historical Review* 28 (2002), 164.

create common ground through an attempt to view situations through the eyes of the cultural other.”<sup>28</sup>

The French-Algonquian alliance “grafted together imperial politics and the village politics of kinship; the two became branches of a single tree.”<sup>29</sup> The French alliance system bound together distant indigenous groups through “their real or metaphorical kinship relations with one another as by their common standing as children of Onontio, who was the representative of the French king.”<sup>30</sup> The title of Onontio was used for the Governor-General by Algonquian-speaking natives. Onontio was the imperial centre of the French-Algonquian alliance, from which the French spread their influence to win over indigenous nations as allies rather than as subjects of empire.<sup>31</sup> The western posts established by La Vérendrye were the absolute peripherals of New France, the last outposts of empire. As Eccles has argued, “French sovereignty in the West existed only within French posts, beyond no farther than the range of French muskets... the French were not sovereign in the West; the Indian nations were.”<sup>32</sup> From these outposts of empire, La Vérendrye would seek out indigenous nations as allies, trading partners, and guides.

In 1731, La Vérendrye, his sons, his nephew, and fifty *engagés* canoed up the Saint Lawrence and through the Great Lakes, arriving at the Grand Portage on the western shore of Lake Superior. Throughout the 1730s, La Vérendrye and his family would establish trading posts west of Lake Superior: Fort St. Pierre on Rainy Lake, Fort St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods, Fort Maurepas on Lake Winnipeg, and Fort Rouge and Fort La Reine on the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Eventually La Vérendrye and his sons would travel onto the Great Plains, through the Dakotas; his sons even reached as far as the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>33</sup> La Vérendrye sought to coerce the Cree and Assiniboine to join the French-Algonquian alliance and to become

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Eccles, *Le Mer de l'Ouest*, 98-99.

<sup>33</sup> Although La Vérendrye was principally concerned with the “discovery” of the Western Sea, his explorations and travel narrative are beyond the scope of this paper.

children of Onontio. He employed the cross-cultural understanding of the middle ground to connect the indigenous politics of the village to the French imperial centre. The French in the Northwest, however, were hardly in a position to fulfill the role of Onontio. La Vérendrye was unable to be the generous benefactor that the Cree and Assiniboine demanded, as the posts in the Northwest were logistically too difficult to keep continuously well supplied. Unlike in the Great Lakes Region, La Vérendrye's attempts at mediation were unneeded and unwanted. As a result, the Cree and Assiniboine could hardly have been expected to be obedient children in the French alliance system.

White argues that "Onontio's children always remained prickly about their status; they accepted him as a father not as a master."<sup>34</sup> The Algonquians "demanded a father who mediated more often than he commanded, who forgave more often than he punished, and who gave more than he received."<sup>35</sup> The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701 had cemented the patriarchal alliance of mediation. The treaty involved almost forty First Nations groups and effectively ended the bloody Iroquois Wars of the seventeenth century. The Great Peace of Montreal extended a *Pax Gallica* to the immense geographic area of the *pays d'en haut*.<sup>36</sup> Canadian historian Giles Havard has noted that "The Crees, or at least one of their bands from the area Northwest of Lake Superior," were present at the Great Peace of Montreal.<sup>37</sup> The result of the Treaty of Montreal was the concretization of the French-Algonquian alliance, with the Governor-General as the "Father," or Onontio, and the Algonquians as his children. This resulted in "an odd imperialism where mediation succeeded and force failed, where colonizers gave gifts to the colonized and patriarchal metaphors were the heart of politics."<sup>38</sup>

When La Vérendrye arrived in the Northwest, at least some of the Cree were bound to Onontio through the Montreal peace treaty. The other

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>36</sup> Gilles Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, trans. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>38</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 145.

Amerindian nations that La Vérendrye encountered – Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa, and other Cree bands – were not present at the 1701 peace conference, and so were not bound by it. Unlike the Great Lakes Region, these remote nations of the Northwest and the Great Plains had not been grouped into refugee centres and “saved” from the Iroquois Wars by French intervention and mediation.<sup>39</sup> Rather, they had no need or want of French mediation, nor the patriarchal rhetoric of the middle ground. La Vérendrye, already familiar with the “careful management” of the French-Algonquian alliance of the Great Lakes Region, nevertheless sought to impose the alliance and middle ground rhetoric of unified village and imperial politics.<sup>40</sup> Another factor that separated the Amerindian nations of the Northwest from their Great Lakes Region counterparts was the presence of English traders on Hudson Bay. The importance of the ritual subordination to Onontio and the alliance diminished in the option of other lucrative trade opportunities.

Ultimately, La Vérendrye attempted to draw the Amerindian nations of the Northwest and the Great Plains under the umbrella of Onontio’s influence by employing the same rhetoric of village and imperial politics that had previously developed throughout the *pays d’en haut*. La Vérendrye’s inability to procure enough firearms and European goods to distribute, however, caused him to lose influence as Onontio’s representative in the Northwest. The Amerindian nations’ opportunities to trade with the Hudson’s Bay Company merchants only further endangered La Vérendrye’s standing. For these Cree and Assiniboine, who had never seen the impressive French settlements of Quebec, Montreal, or even Michilimackinac, the French were a small, motley, and unimpressive group of men who had few gifts to distribute. La Vérendrye attempted to graft Cree and Assiniboine village politics to the French imperial centre, and failed. Although the Cree and Assiniboine agreed to become the children of Onontio for a time, they ultimately became dissatisfied and shook off the yoke of the French alliance. As a result, La Vérendrye’s influence diminished further, making his travels more difficult.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 185.

Provisions fell short and the trading posts were eventually abandoned, because the Cree and Assiniboine were unwilling to support and assist the French imperial project in the Northwest.

White has described the French-Algonquian alliance of the eighteenth century as a “Janus-faced alliance.”<sup>41</sup> Facing east towards their imperial rivals, Onontio appeared at the head of a powerful Algonquian force. White comments that “This was the alliance armed and breathing fire in the service of imperial France, the alliance that cowed the Iroquois and repeatedly fought the far more numerous British to a standstill.”<sup>42</sup> Facing west, Onontio and his officers “carried the calumet, not the hatchet.” To preserve their powerful position in Canada as the Father and mediator of all the Great Lakes nations, the French sought to extend the alliance and bring even more children into their family. When La Vérendrye first established the French posts in the Northwest in the 1730s, he acted as an imperial agent and presented himself as the mouthpiece of the great chief, the Father in Montreal. When a group of Assiniboine delegates first presented themselves to the French and requested that they establish a trading post in their vicinity, La Vérendrye made a solemn speech welcoming them into the trade alliance and Onontio’s family:

I then began by telling them that our Father, the great chief, would be very glad that they had come to see me at fort St. Charles: in his name I received them into the number of his children; I recommended them never to listen to any other word than his, which would be announced to them by me or by someone in my place... the French were numerous, there was no land unknown to them, and there was only one great chief among them, whose mouth piece I was, and whom all the others obeyed. If they obeyed him also as his children, every year he would send Frenchmen to them to bring them such things as they required to satisfy their needs.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 147-148.

At this point, the Assiniboine were eager to become part of the French alliance. The promises that La Vérendrye made were compelling, and the Assiniboine were sufficiently satisfied to adhere to French imperial policy; La Vérendrye was thus able to forbid the Assiniboine from trading with the English on Hudson Bay. As long as Onontio was adequately able to provide for his children, it was possible for the Assiniboine to abide to the strict parameters of the alliance.

The emergence of the middle ground becomes most evident for the historian in the realm of diplomatic councils, recorded in documentary records by French imperial agents.<sup>44</sup> Diplomatic assemblies and councils were realms in which the middle ground was in a constant process of mutation and invention. Compromises were sought to accommodate both imperial and village politics. For La Vérendrye, the pressing issue of warfare would be a reoccurring theme in his diplomatic negotiations with the Cree and Assiniboine chiefs, as he was unable to force a peace between the Cree-Assiniboine and the Sioux, who had all been forcibly designated children of Onontio.

In January 1734, La Vérendrye learned from Marin Urtesbise, one of his merchant associates at Fort St. Pierre on Rainy Lake, that a party of 300 Monsoni men were preparing to march against the Sioux.<sup>45</sup> At this point, La Vérendrye had already been in the Northwest for more than three years and had established two trading posts, Fort St. Pierre and Fort St. Charles on the Lake of the Woods. The Monsoni chief near Fort St. Pierre feared that the 300 warriors would depart on the warpath without French consent, because they were being “strongly urged thereto by some old women who were weeping day and night mourning over the death of their relatives and beseeching them to go to war to avenge them.”<sup>46</sup> La Vérendrye left Fort St.

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<sup>44</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> According to G. Hubert Smith, the Monsoni were a smaller group living around Rainy Lake who were closely related to the Cree, “in some now obscure manner.” For whatever reason, La Vérendrye always distinguishes the Monsoni from the other Cree bands. G. Hubert Smith, *The Explorations of the La Vérendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738-43* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 7.

<sup>46</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 165.

Charles on the Lake of the Woods in haste and arrived at Fort St. Pierre by the end of the month seeking to prevent the war against the Sioux. Upon arrival, he gathered an assembly of prominent warriors and war chiefs in the house of Urtesbise. La Vérendrye was confident that he could prevent the outbreak of war. His actions, however, would only tie the French to the Cree-Monsoni political system. La Vérendrye began the assembly by openly berating and admonishing the recognized war chief:

By this flag I bind you to myself; by this collar I bar against you the road to the Saulteur and the Sioux; and I give you this tobacco in order that your warriors may smoke it and understand my word... Peace is proposed, yet you seek to trouble the land. Do you want to strike the Saulteur and the Sioux? You needn't leave the fort; here are some (pointing to the Frenchmen), eat if you are bold enough, you and your warriors... I pity you; I know you love war.<sup>47</sup>

La Vérendrye attempted to shame the war party into aborting the expedition. The assembly deliberated on the best course of actions. Finally, the chief rose and told La Vérendrye, "My Father, I agree to all you ask on condition, nevertheless, that you will not prevent us from going to war, and that you will let us have your son as a witness of our actions."<sup>48</sup> La Vérendrye seems to have agreed to these conditions and put on a good performance, "In presenting the hatchet to him I sang the war song, after which I wept for their dead."<sup>49</sup> At this point, the war was delayed until the spring, whereupon the warriors would reconvene at Fort St. Charles to collect powder, munitions, and most importantly his eldest son, Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye.

La Vérendrye distributed tobacco, presented the hatchet, sang the war song, and even wept for the dead. As White notes, "those operating in the middle ground acted for interests derived from their own culture, but they had to convince people of another culture that some mutual action was fair and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 168-169.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

legitimate.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, La Vérendrye understood the importance of adhering to the legitimacy of Cree-Monsoni culture. He also understood the importance of exchanging gifts for Algonquian societies; goods exchanged hands virtually every time the French-Algonquian alliance came to a diplomatic compromise or decision.<sup>51</sup> French imperial politics also emerged in the deliberations: La Vérendrye attempted to bind the recognized war chief to him through the symbolic use of a French flag. Moreover, La Vérendrye analogously compared the Sioux to Frenchmen, by openly inventing the assembly to attack the Frenchmen sitting in attendance. Despite La Vérendrye’s use of Cree-Monsoni cultural conventions and efforts to bind them to the imperial centre of the alliance, however, he was unable to prevent the war against the Sioux. He only managed to delay the war party until spring, and at the expense of his son’s accompaniment.

In May 1734, the French who had wintered at Fort St. Pierre arrived at Fort St. Charles with nearly 400 Monsoni warriors armed for war, “who began singing the war song the same evening.”<sup>52</sup> The war chief repeated the conditions that had been stated by both sides at Fort St. Pierre in the winter. The war chief also demanded that Jean-Baptiste accompany them on the warpath: “If you are willing to let us have your son to come with us, we will go straight wherever you tell us; but if you refuse I cannot answer for where the blow may fall... I am chief, it is true, but I am not always the master of their will.”<sup>53</sup> The war chief confessed that only Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye would be able to lead the war party to the most suitable enemy; otherwise, as the war chief threatened, the blow could very well fall upon the Sioux, who La Vérendrye certainly wanted to avoid provoking to war.

While Jean-Baptiste was “passionately desirous of going,” La Vérendrye was reluctant and having second thoughts: “I was agitated, I must confess, and cruelly tormented by conflicting thoughts.”<sup>54</sup> Naturally, La

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<sup>50</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 52.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 174.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

Vérendrye feared for his son's safety as the Cree and Monsoni sought to war against the Mascoutens Poïanes, a nation with which he was unfamiliar. He wondered, "how am I to entrust my eldest son to barbarians whom I did not know [Cree-Monsoni], and whose name even I scarcely knew, to go and fight against other barbarians of whose name and of whose strength I knew nothing?"<sup>55</sup> If La Vérendrye refused them his son, he worried that "there was much reason to fear that they would attribute it to fear and take the French for cowards, with the result of their shaking off the French yoke."<sup>56</sup> Wishing to solidify and consolidate his alliance with the Cree-Monsoni, La Vérendrye permitted Jean-Baptiste to accompany the war party, but in a limited capacity. The Cree-Monsoni had wished to place Jean-Baptiste "at their head and make him their first chief."<sup>57</sup> La Vérendrye would only permit him to accompany them "as their counsellor and witness of their valour."<sup>58</sup>

La Vérendrye warned the Cree-Monsoni war party to listen obediently to Jean-Baptiste, to "consider him as another myself," and to take care of him, "as he is not as accustomed to fatigue as you."<sup>59</sup> A dispute arose almost immediately over Jean-Baptiste between the Cree and Monsoni. Both Cree and Monsoni warriors seem to have greatly desired to carry him in their canoes. Jean-Baptiste was able to resolve the situation rather diplomatically, "My brothers, do not be vexed, I beg of you, if I embark with the Cree; we are all marching together; your cabins are mine and we are all one."<sup>60</sup> Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye seems to have been of paramount importance as a figurehead to both the Cree and Monsoni. The Governor-General Beauharnois later wrote of Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye that "the young man had turned back and had not taken any part in the war."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 175-176.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>61</sup> La Vérendrye himself left no account of the Cree and Monsoni war expedition against the Sioux in 1734. Ibid, 264.

Two years later, on 8 June 1736, a tragedy occurred when a Sioux war party ambushed and massacred Jean-Baptiste, along with the Jesuit missionary priest Father Aulneau and nineteen other Frenchmen, on a small island in the Lake of the Woods. Immediately, La Vérendrye's allies clamoured for vengeance for Jean-Baptiste's murder, after which his status as chief became even more apparent. In August 1736, two Cree-Monsoni deputies told La Vérendrye that "they were weeping incessantly day and night, they, their women and their children, for the death of my son whom they had adopted as chief of the two nations."<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the Assiniboine seemed to have also adopted Jean-Baptiste as their chief for the role that he played in the establishment of Fort Maurepas on the Red River in 1734. The Lake Winnipeg Cree and the Assiniboine told La Vérendrye, "to let them know if I intend to go and avenge the blood of the French, and particularly that of my son, whom they had adopted as their chief from the time when he was building that fort [Maurepas] in their country, and whose death they had all never ceased to bewail."<sup>63</sup>

The war chiefs of the Cree and the Monsoni proposed "to place me [La Vérendrye] and go avenge the death of my son and the other Frenchmen."<sup>64</sup> La Vérendrye seems to have personally desired to undertake a war of vengeance for the death of his son and the other Frenchmen. Colonial politics, however, prevented the course of vengeance against the Sioux. La Vérendrye told his native allies that he had written to the Governor-General Beauharnois and would thus have to "first wait to get word from their Father and that I would communicate it to them," and he "thanked them for their goodwill."<sup>65</sup> The following week, two other chiefs told La Vérendrye that they were also weeping incessantly over the death of Jean-Baptiste; the chiefs assured him that "they were all ready to move against the enemy, and asked me for vengeance."<sup>66</sup> Once again, La Vérendrye made the same awkward and

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<sup>62</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 221.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

clumsy reply that he could not act until instructions arrived from Montreal. Concerning the death of his eldest son, La Vérendrye could only say: “know, my children, that the French never undertake war without having consulted their Father and only do it by his order: you see therefore that, however angry I may be, my arms are tied.”<sup>67</sup>

In an attempt to prevent further bloodshed, La Vérendrye harangued the war chiefs to make peace and not war because the Cree, Assiniboine, and Sioux were all “children of the same Father.”<sup>68</sup> The Cree and Assiniboine were not pleased to learn that the Sioux, their traditional enemies, were now being designated as their brothers. Thirty years earlier, the Sioux had not been included in the 1701 Treaty of Montreal due to the adamant refusal of the Great Lakes nations. Havard notes that the Algonquian allies, “who were at war with the Sioux, refused to extend the roots of the Tree of Peace westward; unlike the French, they did not want to include the Sioux in the alliance.”<sup>69</sup> In 1701, the French had desired to broaden the network of alliance to the Sioux; however, the Great Lakes nations imposed a limit on who could become one of Onontio’s children. The Cree, who had been present at the peace conference in some capacity, agreed to the “limits on the westward extension of the roots of the Tree of Peace.”<sup>70</sup> The Sioux, for their part, had not sent any delegates to the general peace conference in Montreal.<sup>71</sup>

The French had reopened commercial ties with the Sioux following the French-Algonquian alliance defeat of the Wisconsin Fox in 1732.<sup>72</sup> The Sioux sided with the French traders and even clashed with the Foxes over the issue of French commercial presence. Gary Clayton Anderson has described

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>69</sup> Havard, *The Great Peace of Montreal*, 123.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>72</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Fox Wars see David Edmunds and Joseph L. Peyser, *The Fox Wars: The Mesquakie Challenge to New France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Joseph L. Peyser, “The Fate of the Fox Survivors: A Dark Chapter in the History of the French in the Upper Country, 1726-1737,” *The State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 73 (1990): 83-110; Brett Rushforth, “Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006): 777-808.

the Fox Wars as an event with a “momentous implications for the Dakotas, who no longer remained isolated from consistent colonial exploitation.”<sup>73</sup> A larger trading post was established near Lake Pepin, and the Dakota Sioux were brought into the Onontio’s family and turned into “a commercially responsive people.”<sup>74</sup> Commercial exchange could simply not exist outside of the alliance. As White argues, the fur trade “was structured by the overarching political relationship of French fathers to their Algonquian children. This alliance provided the means for linking the Algonquian system of exchange, with its emphasis on the primacy of social relation, to a much larger world economy.”<sup>75</sup>

Anderson argues that European traders were forced into the kinship obligations of the indigenous socioeconomic system: “Kinship and economic ties also allowed access to the Dakota political system... [by] the creation of kinship ties, entire native descent groups could be obligated to hunt for their benefit and to turn their pelts over to their new relative, the trader.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Paul C. Thistle has argued that “in band societies such as that of the Cree, trade automatically encompasses social relationships and obligations, and all exchange is a social – not merely an economic process.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the establishment of a trade agreement with the Cree or Sioux automatically instigated a sociopolitical protocol of kinship and reciprocity; trade was not simply an economic exchange or process. In indigenous societies, gift giving was a sign and function of kinship bonds, a lasting familial bond that was constructed through reciprocal material exchange. Thistle argues that the Cree sought to “impose their conceptions of proper kin-like behaviour on the traders.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Gary Clayton Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650-1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>75</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 104-105.

<sup>76</sup> Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 30-31.

<sup>77</sup> Paul C. Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1986), 18.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

The French had thus extended the alliance to the Sioux, against the greater wishes of the Cree and Assiniboine. Similarly, the Sioux were not content with the inclusion of the Cree and Assiniboine as children in Onontio's family. In particular, the Sioux were aggrieved by the amount of firearms and ammunition that La Vérendrye was placing directly in the hands of their sworn enemies, the Cree and Assiniboine. As Anderson comments, "the French seemed oblivious to the impact their growing commercial system was having on intertribal relations."<sup>79</sup> The sole hope for the preservation of French presence would have been a policy of strict neutrality; however, village politics and kinship obligations had dictated that La Vérendrye allow his son, Jean-Baptiste, to accompany the war party against the Mascoutens Poüanes. Unbeknownst to La Vérendrye, the Mascoutens Poüanes were prairie Sioux. Moreover, the woodland Sioux, amongst whom the French had established themselves around Lake Pepin, now spent much of the summers hunting buffalo on the prairies. This made clashes between the Sioux and the Cree-Assiniboine coalition inevitable.<sup>80</sup>

The negotiation of the parameters of the French-Algonquian alliance would have taken precedent in the realm of economic exchange and trade. The exchange of captives, or slaves, was symbolically a more powerful gesture than the exchange of furs and pelts. Ultimately, the enslavement of indigenous people was a symbolic device used in the French-Algonquian alliance to both consolidate and define the parameters of the alliance on the middle ground. Demers has argued that although the European enslavement and exchange of native people was heavily influenced by the "Native-American constructions of captivity and slavery, [these] Native-American constructions in turn grew out of interactions within a culturally diverse middle ground."<sup>81</sup> The Cree and Assiniboine exchanged captives as a symbolic consolidation of the French-Algonquian alliance. For the French, the acquisition of indigenous slaves meant the opening of a new and lucrative market for the colony, which suffered from a monocultural economic dependence on the fur trade. Despite

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<sup>79</sup> Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind*, 42-43.

<sup>80</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 137-139.

<sup>81</sup> Demers, *Native-American Slavery and Territoriality*, 164.

its importance to the French-Algonquian alliance, a discussion of the slave trade has been largely omitted or dismissed in the historiography. As Eccles has noted, La Vérendrye's "role in the western slave trade is glossed over."<sup>82</sup> Eccles has also argued that during the years of La Vérendrye's expedition for the Western Sea, "the trade in Indian slaves at the western posts became a sizable item, up to sixty a year being shipped to Montréal."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, La Vérendrye's own *Journals and Letters* attest to the scope of the slave trade. La Vérendrye boasted about the great profits procured through his enterprises in the West, writing "of the persons to whom this enterprise means a living, of the slaves that are obtained for the country, and the furs of which formerly the English got the benefit."<sup>84</sup> Eccles has also contended that the Cree and Assiniboine were particularly successful slave traders: "Indian slaves, up to sixty a year by the mid-eighteenth century, were purchased from the Crees and Assiniboines at Michilimackinac."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, La Verendrye was able to open up an active and lucrative slave market to the Cree and Assiniboine, who were already very active in wars of capture and prisoner taking.

Before the arrival of the French in North America, indigenous peoples practiced ritualised capture in warfare, torture, and adoption ceremonies.<sup>86</sup> For example, in the Cree-Inuit context, Charles A. Bishop and Victor P. Lytwyn comment that "Raiding was also done to take captives. Women were sometimes taken as wives... and children were adopted, perhaps to fill a void following the death of a Cree child. Some captives were purchased by the HBC, often to prevent them from being killed by the

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<sup>82</sup> Eccles, *Review of Les La Vérendrye et le Poste de l'Ouest*, 171.

<sup>83</sup> W.J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier 1534-1760* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 149.

<sup>84</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 451-452.

<sup>85</sup> W.J. Eccles, *The French in North America 1500-1783* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1998), 86.

<sup>86</sup> See for example, Daniel P. Barr, *Unconquered: The Iroquois League at War in Colonial America* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 13; Martin Fournier, *Pierre-Esprit Radisson* (Sillery: Septentrion, 2002), 35; Charles A. Bishop and Victor P. Lytwyn, "Barbarism and Ardour of War from the Tenderest Years: Cree-Inuit Warfare in the Hudson Bay Region," in *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence*, ed. Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza (Tucson: the University of Arizona Press, 2007), 50-51.

Cree.”<sup>87</sup> In the pre-contact period, the Assiniboine and Cree seem to have warred against the Mandan and Hidatsa nations of the Missouri River Valley, and from them procured a number of slaves. In a 1733 report, Beauharnois wrote, “The Cree and the Assiniboin have constantly made war upon them and have captured several children from them.”<sup>88</sup> According to the report, some of these Mandan children were purchased by La Vérendrye’s nephew, the Sieur de la Jemeraye, who brought them with him when he returned to Montreal at the end of the summer of 1733.

Brett Rushforth has argued that the French-Indian slave trade was derived from the indigenous customs of alliance making on the middle ground, “allied Indians offered captives to French colonists as culturally powerful symbols of their emerging partnership.”<sup>89</sup> Captives were symbolically powerful gifts because they signified the opposite of warfare, “the giving rather than the taking of life.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the slave trade became a symbolically viable exchange in the consolidation of the alliance. Starting in the early eighteenth century, however, western traders, prominent merchants, minor colonial officials, and even the Governor-General Philippe de Rigaud Vaudreuil began to acquire Indian slaves.<sup>91</sup> These slaves, originally exchanged as symbolic representations of flesh and life, were now being purchased by various traders and urbanites in Montreal and Quebec for both labour and domestic work.<sup>92</sup>

The marketability of native slaves altered the symbolic practice of captive exchanges. Rushforth argues, “As French colonists demanded a growing number of Indian slaves from their allies, Native American captive customs also evolved to meet the new realities of New France’s slave market.”<sup>93</sup> The meanings of the wars of capture and captive-taking were thus

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<sup>87</sup> Bishop, *Cree-Inuit Warfare*, 50-51.

<sup>88</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Brett Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003), 779.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 785.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 798.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Rushforth, *A Little Flesh We Offer You*, 808.

adjusted to suit the demands of the slave market. For example, captives were now seen as commodities of trade rather than symbols of life and alliance, and “this caused rituals of humiliation and torture to decline because the resulting injuries diminished a captive’s value.”<sup>94</sup> The interests of the French and indigenous participants compromised and accommodated each other on the middle ground. The Cree and Assiniboine would, however, manipulate the slave market to define the parameters of their own position in Onontio’s family.

Similarly, in his analysis of the Fox Wars, Rushforth argues that the Algonquians defined the beginning and the ending of the Fox Wars through the use of captive taking. By manipulating the slave trade, Onontio’s children created a wedge between the French and the Fox which inevitably led to war. These allies of New France – the Illinois, Ottawas, Ojibwa, Miami, and Hurons, to name a few – despised the Fox and denied the French the necessary control to define properly the parameters of “their” alliance.<sup>95</sup> By taking Fox captives in raids, and gifting them to Onontio, the Great Lakes nations prevented reconciliation between the Fox and the French, which depended on the return of the Fox slaves. The slave trade was the main point of contention between the Fox and the French, as the Fox demanded that their enslaved kin be released from bondage and returned to them.<sup>96</sup> The Governor-General even wrote that “it is [unnatural] to think that peace can be made with people whose children we are withholding.”<sup>97</sup> The divide deepened as the allies continued to attack Fox villages and to trade or gift Fox slaves to French officers as symbols of amity and alliance.<sup>98</sup> Rushforth argues that the “Indians’ use of intervillage violence” was a tactical ploy to limit, control, and direct France’s commercial and territorial ambitions in North America.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Brett Rushforth, “Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006), 61.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 77.

Similarly, the Cree and Assiniboine were able to employ slavery as a device to isolate the French from any sort of reconciliation or rapprochement with the Sioux. This tactic was especially evident in 1741, when the Cree, Monsoni, and Assiniboine converged upon Sioux territory and made war, capturing a “number of slaves so great that, according to the report and the expressions of the savages, they occupied in their march more than four arpents.”<sup>100</sup> In his report, Beauharnois wrote that because of the war, “there will be more slaves than packages.”<sup>101</sup> Certainly, the Sioux would have been unwilling or unable to become one of Onontio’s children with the knowledge that he held a great number of their own kin in bondage. Although La Vérendrye benefited economically from the slave trade, he was unable to define the contentious parameters of Onontio’s family in the Northwest.

Following the 1736 Lake of the Woods massacre, La Vérendrye’s reputation and ability to mediate and negotiate on the middle ground seems to have diminished significantly. This might have occurred for two separate reasons. First, La Vérendrye’s own personal reputation diminished because he seemed unwilling or unable to avenge the death of his own son, Jean-Baptiste, whom the Cree and Assiniboine had adopted as the “chief of the two nations.” La Vérendrye no longer seemed to be a suitable representative or “mouth piece” of Onontio. Second, Onontio failed to provide for the needs of his children. As White argues, “the obligation of Onontio to provide for the needs of his children became the basis for trade, and this in turn obligated the Algonquians, as good and satisfied children, to obey and aid him... to conceptualize exchange as the means by which their father provided for their needs.”<sup>102</sup> The politics of the village began to supersede the interests of the French imperial centre.

Initially, La Vérendrye had taken careful measures to construct a French reputation of courage and valour. Indeed, La Vérendrye understood the tenets of the Cree-Assiniboine culture of warfare and sought to emulate those attributes. La Vérendrye attempted to justify his own actions in the

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<sup>100</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 380-381.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 381.

<sup>102</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 112.

terms of what he perceived to the cultural premises of his allies.<sup>103</sup> In 1734, La Vérendrye “gave them [Cree-Monsoni] a brief account of the manner of making war in France, where men did not fight behind trees but in open country, etc. I showed them the wounds I had received in the battle of Malplaquet, which astonished them.”<sup>104</sup> In Cree society, storytelling and the recounting of previous battles was an essential component of a warrior’s reputation in society. John S. Milloy has argued that “throughout his life the warrior was given the opportunity to reinforce his status by recounting his war record.”<sup>105</sup> If a man were foolish enough to falsify or exaggerate his deeds, he would certainly be challenged by anyone who had been on the party with him.<sup>106</sup> La Vérendrye was unable to substantiate the French warrior reputation that he had constructed through storytelling and bravado. La Vérendrye’s denial of the Cree-Assiniboine warpath against the also Sioux denied some of the principal indigenous tenets and codes of warfare – honour, prestige, vengeance and blood feuds, and the wars of mourning.<sup>107</sup> Jean-Baptiste de la Vérendrye had been adopted as kin amongst the Cree-Assiniboine and had been hailed as the “chief of the two nations.” Therefore, La Vérendrye was not only disallowing the Cree-Assiniboine from avenging the death of his own son, but he was also preventing them from avenging the death of their own kin and chief.

White argues that the “failure to secure a *bon marché* strained the alliance to the breaking point.”<sup>108</sup> La Vérendrye’s inability to adequately

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>104</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 181-182.

<sup>105</sup> John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 76-77.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>107</sup> For a more in depth analysis of Native American warfare, see for example Wayne E. Lee, “Peace Chiefs and Blood Revenge: Patterns of Restraint in Native American Warfare, 1500-1800,” *Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), 701-741; Douglas B. Bamforth, “Indigenous People, Indigenous Violence: Precontact Warfare on the North American Great Plains,” *Man*, 29 (1994), 95-115; Katherine L. Reedy-Maschner and Herbert D. G. Maschner, “Marauding Middlemen: Western Expansion and Violent Conflict in the Subarctic,” *Ethnohistory* 4 (1999), 703-743; Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare 1675-1815* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Patrick Malone, *The Skulking Way of War* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991).

<sup>108</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 116.

maintain supplied trading posts put considerable strain on the French-Algonquian alliance in the Northwest. The Cree and Assiniboine framed the French failure to provide for their needs within the familial logic of the alliance. It was proof that the French no longer “loved” them.<sup>109</sup> La Colle, a Monsoni chief, having conferred with the Cree and Assiniboine chiefs, made a speech to La Vérendrye in which he stated:

My Father, when you came into our land brought us things that we needed, and promised to continue doing so. For two years we lacked nothing, now we lack everything... You forbade us to go to the English and we obeyed you, and if now we are compelled to go there to get guns, powder, kettles, tobacco, etc, you must only blame your own people. This collar is to tell you go yourself to see our Father at Montreal and represent our needs to him so that he may have pity on us. You will assure him that we are his true children.<sup>110</sup>

Appeals to Onontio’s paternal duty were tactics employed by the Algonquian participants in the fur trade.<sup>111</sup> By 1736, the Cree and Assiniboine were beginning to doubt Onontio’s “love for them.” La Vérendrye forbade them to trade with the Hudson’s Bay Company traders; however, with French goods lacking, the Cree and Assiniboine willingly returned to trade with the English.

La Vérendrye’s role in the formation of war parties also seems to have completely dissipated. Upon the formation of a war party to attack the Sioux, La Colle assured La Vérendrye that “it is no longer you who are taking any part in it [the war]; it is I and the chiefs of the three tribes.”<sup>112</sup> Despite his exclusion, La Vérendrye wrote that he nevertheless spoke to the Cree and Assiniboine of the French King’s victories in the War of the Polish Succession – “I spoke of the victories which the King had gained, the towns he had taken

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>110</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 231-232.

<sup>111</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*, 118.

<sup>112</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 232.

from his enemies, etc.”<sup>113</sup> Optimistically, he wrote that the Cree audience “listened with attention,” and that the news of King Louis XV’s victories “seemed to give them pleasure.”<sup>114</sup> However, these were merely stories of a far-removed war in a faraway country. The Cree and Assiniboine were dissatisfied with the lack of substantiated French bravado, and of Onontio’s failure to provide for their needs.

Several incidents during La Vérendrye’s 1738/1739 voyage to the Mandan villages on the Missouri River Valley also indicate that the French reputation had diminished amongst the Cree and Assiniboine. Being completely at the mercy of his Assiniboine guides, La Vérendrye complained that “We spent forty-six days covering a distance which we might easily have covered in sixteen, or twenty at the most... nothing that I could say to the guide to make him hasten had any effect.”<sup>115</sup> The Assiniboine were not merely traveling for the purpose of trading. They traveled with whole families and deliberately moved slowly to hunt and to build up a surplus of meat en route. The Assiniboine exploited the grassland environment in the process of carrying out their annual trading expedition to the Mandan.<sup>116</sup> En route to the Mandan, a “rascally” Assiniboine youth stole La Vérendrye’s bag, “in which were my papers and many things for my own use.”<sup>117</sup> After the party had arrived at the Mandan village, La Vérendrye’s Assiniboine interpreter decamped and chased after an Assiniboine woman with whom he was enamoured, despite the fact that he had “assured me [La Vérendrye] that he would always stay with me and never abandon me.”<sup>118</sup> La Vérendrye and his sons were reduced to “trying to make ourselves understood by signs and gestures.”<sup>119</sup> A promise made to Onontio’s representative seems to have had

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 312-313.

<sup>116</sup> Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 38-39.

<sup>117</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 324.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 334.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

little consequence by this period, and could be broken without significant repercussions.

In the spring of 1741, the war chief of the Monsoni, La Colle, had undertaken a devastating campaign against the Sioux. La Colle's war party killed seventy Sioux warriors and captured about two-hundred slaves.<sup>120</sup> "Beauharnois reported that La Colle had only lost six men in the successful campaign and that "they [the Monsoni and Cree] had already sung the war song" for a new campaign the following season.<sup>121</sup> La Vérendrye wrote that "I made every possible effort to get them to abandon their design, but without success, in spite of all the presents which I gave and caused to be given for that purpose."<sup>122</sup> It seems by this point that the material basis of the alliance and French patriarchy could not dissuade the Cree and Assiniboine from fulfilling the more immediate political needs of the village. In 1741, a middle ground wherein La Vérendrye could operate no longer existed. Village politics and rivalries overruled the French imperial centre and Onontio's desires.

La Vérendrye resigned in 1743 and returned to Montreal. His finances were in ruin and he could no longer keep the trading posts adequately supplied; the majority of them had to be completely abandoned by the French. Because of his inability to avenge his son's death, La Vérendrye's personal reputation was thoroughly discredited in the Cree and Assiniboine culture of warfare, which perceived his refusal as an act of cowardice. Moreover, the Cree and Assiniboine were dissatisfied with French mediation and the imposition of the Sioux – their enemies from "time immemorial" – as their brothers and allies. Onontio's failure to provide adequately for the needs of his children discredited the French imperial centre of the alliance. Therefore, indigenous village politics superseded the interests of the Father in Montreal, as well as his mouthpiece and imperial agent, La Vérendrye. The French presence in the Northwest cannot be adequately explained or analysed through simple stories of exploration, conquest, and settlement. The

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<sup>120</sup> Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 245.

<sup>121</sup> Burpee, *Journals and Letters*, 380-381.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 454-455.

conceptual framework of the middle ground has the potential to produce a more complex analysis of French-Indian relations in the Northwest. An understanding of the mechanisms of the French-indigenous alliance and the rhetoric middle ground restores autonomy and presence to the Cree, Assiniboine, and Sioux as historical actors in their own right.

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