

LAKOTAS LOST HOPE:
WOUNDED KNEE MASSACRE

807151

HIST-190-Intro to the Study of History

Professor Reginald Jayne

May 14, 2022

On December 29, 1890, nearly three hundred Lakota Indians succumbed to the seventh calvary regiment in Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The infiltration of Wounded Knee reservation was the U.S. Army's way of repressing the Lakota Indians' culture and religion, and to assimilate to white American culture. The Lakotas resisted government and military control for years before the massacre to protect their traditional way of life, but the military broke any resistance, like the Ghost Dance movement. The Ghost Dance movement, led by a Paiute religious leader named Wakova, was the primary reason that the military were sent to Wounded Knee and this event led to the ultimate defeat of the Lakota tribe. The Wounded Knee Massacre was the turning point in history because it marked the end of the Lakota Indians' hope of being free from the federal government.

Historians have different interpretations of Wounded Knee massacre. Historians, like David W. Grua, have argued that the U.S. government racial assumptions were the main reason the race-war between the United States army and the Native Americans began.¹ In Grua's book, *Surviving Wounded Knee: The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory*, he mentions Patrick Gass, a sergeant in the Lewis and Clark expedition, and his comment that the Lakotas were friendly at first, but he was afraid that they would steal from him and that reflected the racial beliefs of Americans in the nineteenth century that would call them savages.²

However, even though the U.S. army were known for the massacre of the Lakota Indians in Wounded Knee, there were other theories of how it began. In Jeffrey Ostler's article, "Conquest and the State: Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance," he states that there were rumors about reservation agents and white

¹ David W. Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee: The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

² Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 12.

settlers being the cause of the military intervention of Wounded Knee.³ It mentions that the reservation agents and the white settlers were alarmed by the Ghost Dance and demanded military interference. They feared that the Lakota Indians were about to go to war, which had caused the panic. Although, there was no evidence of it in the newspapers at that time.⁴ Ostler states that the newspapers had a more biased stance when they reported about military intervention because they wanted settlers to run away. Eventually after the military intervened, the newspapers would report about how the white settlers were alarmed by the Lakotas, but they reduced the amount of talk about a war possibly starting. This alarmed most of America when it was reported in the newspaper and their fear of the Lakotas grew.

The Native Americans would resist the American development, which they were hunted down by the U.S. government and U.S. soldiers and Wounded Knee massacre marked the end of the Lakota resistance. In historian and author of Native American history Merrill J. Mattes' article, "The Enigma of Wounded Knee," he wrote that the Lakota would resist and protest when the government took their land and controlled how the Lakotas lived their life.⁵ The Lakota were fighters and stood up for their beliefs and culture whenever the federal authorities tried to change that. This resistance came to an end on December 29, 1890, in Wounded Knee, South Dakota and it marked the last chapter of the ongoing Plains Indian Wars and started a new chapter of reservation life. The Lakota survivors that were involved with the massacre eventually surrendered and any hostility that was left over came to an end.

³ Jeffrey Ostler, "Conquest and the State: Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance," *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (January 1996): 223, <https://www-jstor-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/stable/3639984>.

⁴ Ostler, "Conquest and the State," 218.

⁵ Merrill J. Mattes, "The Enigma of Wounded Knee," *Plains Anthropologist* 5, no. 9 (1960): 1–11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25666256>.

The first example of the Lakotas losing hope of being free from the government was when the Ghost Dance movement slowly destroyed the Lakotas' way of life and loss of land due to American expansion. In David W. Grua's book, *The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory: Surviving Wounded Knee*, he talks about how the federal authorities forced the Lakotas to farm instead of hunting buffalo, which was their main source of food, and live in permanent residencies instead of migrating.⁶ The U.S. government and army would pressure the Lakotas onto reservations that split the Great Sioux Reservation into six smaller divisions and eventually did split into even more divisions as time went on.⁷ This land separation took up half of the remaining Lakota land and was transformed into American government owned reservations. The government not only took the Lakota land, but they also forced separation of the progressive Lakotas and the traditionalist Lakotas. The government essentially forced the Lakotas to depend on them for food and resources to survive in these reservations or else they would starve to death. Some of the progressive Lakotas liked the idea of living a civilian life because if they complied with the government, they were free. Regardless, most of the Lakotas did not like being put in reservations due to the belief that it was government control by suppressing the traditional Lakota way of life, and they would never be free to live how they did before. The government would promise the Lakotas treaties to not take their land, but they did not uphold those agreements.

The Lakotas turned to the Ghost Dance also known as the spirit dance as a response to the government taking their land. In American historian Louis S. Warren's journal article, "Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance: Christian Prayer, American Politics, and Indian Protest,"

⁶ Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 16.

⁷ Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 16.

he wrote that, “They found growing numbers of adherents in South Dakota as the U.S. Congress stripped away Sioux land and handed it to white settlers, then reduced rations on which the Indians depended on for survival.”⁸ Two weeks after the Ghost Dance movement started to increase throughout South Dakota, the Wounded Knee massacre occurred. “Miles ordered so many soldiers to the Sioux reservations that the ‘Ghost Dance War’ of 1890-91 became ‘the largest military operation in the United States since the Civil War.’”⁹

The second example of the Lakotas losing hope of being free was when the U.S. government tried to force the Lakotas to sign their agreements, and to conform to the American culture. The U.S. government efforts of reforming the Lakota culture and religion with American influence is just the beginning of the Wounded Knee history in the nineteenth century. Their main goal was to “kill the Indian, save the man.”¹⁰ They forced the Lakota families to reform their children to American customs. They did this by cutting off their hair, sending them to schools, changing their clothing to citizen clothes, only allowing them to speak English and would be punished for speaking in their native language.¹¹ Forcing the Lakotas to be Americanized was an ongoing issue that lasted even after the Wounded Knee Massacre occurred. In historian R. David Edmunds’ article, “Native Americans, New Voices: American Indian History, 1895-1995,” it states, “Meanwhile, throughout the 1890s, federal agents busily implemented the Dawes Act, legislation designed to allot the reservations into small individual farms and to force Indian people into the American mainstream.”¹² He further explains that the

⁸ Louis S. Warren, Review of *Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance: Christian Prayer, American Politics, and Indian Protest*, by Rani-Henrik Andersson, Heather Cox Richardson, and Gregory E. Smoak, *Reviews in American History* 39, no. 4 (2011): 666, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41348922>.

⁹ Warren, *Wounded Knee and the Ghost Dance*, 666.

¹⁰ Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 16.

¹¹ Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 16.

¹² R. David Edmunds, “Native Americans, New Voices: American Indian History, 1895-1995,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995): 718, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2168602>.

American public were promised that after the reservations were given that the Native Americans would have their own land and to get assimilated. In the map created by the Office of Indian Affairs, *Indian Reservations west of the Mississippi River*, it illustrates the locations of the reservations and how it changed from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. It shows that former reservations in South Dakota were taken for American expansion, leaving the Native Americans with little land to live on. The newer reservations that were established were not as big as what the Native Americans had before. This reservation assimilation was one of the main ways the government would Americanize the Native Americans by making them learn how to live like the average American citizen. Even though they were expected to live in these reservations, the space they lived in was not upkept.

In economics professor Christian Dipple's article, "Forced Coexistence and Economic Development: Evidence from Native American Reservations," he wrote about how the government would force the Native Americans into reservations and the effects of forced coexistence. Dipple also wrote that, "The government's objective in forming reservations was to maximize the amount of land that could be freed up for settlement and to be able to easily monitor Native Americans once they were on the reservation."¹³ Dipple wrote that the most important reason for this was to prevent the Native Americans from leaving their reservations. Many of the conflicts in the nineteenth century between the U.S. Army and the Native Americans was because the Native Americans would try to leave their reservations. Like mentioned above, every time the Native Americans would resist the American development, they were hunted down by the U.S. government and U.S. soldiers.

¹³ Christian Dipple, "Forced Coexistence and Economic Development: Evidence from Native American Reservations," *Econometrica* 82, no. 6 (November 2014): 2136, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43616909>.

The third example is the death of Sitting Bull, Big Foot, and Lakota tribe members that played a huge part into why the Lakotas lost hope to being free from the government. The Lakotas lost both their leaders and members of their tribe in a short period of time. In historian Robert M. Utley's book, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, he mentions that Daniel Royer, a United States Indian agent, reported that "Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy," and "We need protection and we need it now."¹⁴ Therefore, the U.S. Army sent the Seventh Cavalry Division to put an end to the Ghost Dance, which was the only source of hope for a lot of the Lakotas to remove the white settlers from their land. In Native American history specialist Karl Jacoby's article, "Of Memory and Massacre: A Soldier's Firsthand Account of the 'Affair on Wounded Knee,'" he wrote as Sitting Bull was being taken away by troops, his followers and some of the soldiers had conflict between them, which resulted in Sitting Bull being shot in the head and chest.¹⁵ Not only was Sitting Bull shot, his son and six of his followers were also shot and caused a panic. This marked the first killing of the Lakota people in the nineteenth century due to the Ghost Dance movement. Approximately two weeks after this happened, the Lakotas fled to Big Foot's reservation at Wounded Knee Creek in hopes of being saved from the military. Wounded Knee was the closest reservation that they could find, and they needed to find somewhere to stay since the food was scarce and winter was closing in. The Lakotas had to rely on the government to supply food and resources on the reservations, which they had fled from. James William Forsyth and his army disarmed the Lakotas of all their weapons at Wounded Knee Creek and made sure they did not run away. Forsyth ordered the soldiers that if they were to fight back, they were ordered to defeat them. This made the Lakotas

¹⁴ Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 111.

¹⁵ Karl Jacoby, "Of Memory and Massacre: A Soldier's Firsthand Account of the 'Affair on Wounded Knee,'" *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 64, no. 2 (2003): pp. 337, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.25290>.

completely defenseless for the violence that was to come. Not only were they disarmed, but their leader Big Foot that was supposed to be protecting them could not help them fight and he surrendered to the soldiers. The Lakotas wanted to surrender as well because they were putting all their families in danger. Eventually, the soldiers ended up killing Big Foot by shooting him, therefore leaving the Lakotas hopeless without either of their leaders.

The fourth example of when the Lakotas lost hope of being free from the government was when hundreds of Lakotas were massacred at the hands of the seventh cavalry. Only a few of the Lakotas had fled from the scene, but some of those who tried to flee were shot. This battle quickly turned into an avoidable massacre and the soldiers took complete control of the situation. The Lakotas were prepared to surrender due to being outnumbered and out armed by the soldiers surrounding them.¹⁶ Since the Lakotas were surrounded by the heavily armed soldiers, there would be no way that they would fight back. In history professor and author Priscilla Murolo's article, "Wars of Civilization: The US Army Contemplates Wounded Knee, the Pullman Strike, and the Philippine Insurrection," she wrote that there were approximately eight thousand soldiers that were sent by Forsyth, which was way more than necessary.¹⁷ It was seen as an overreaction because of the Army's defeat from the Battle of the Little Bighorn in June 1876. A witness of the massacre from the Nebraska National Guard stated, "the battle became really a hunt on the part of the soldiers, the purpose being total extermination."¹⁸ He also mentions how the soldiers abandoned their orders and that their only goal was to kill all the Native Americans in Wounded Knee Creek. Therefore, the Lakotas felt hopeless against the seventh cavalry. In a photograph

¹⁶ Jacoby, "Of Memory and Massacre," 338.

¹⁷ Priscilla Murolo, "Wars of Civilization: The US Army Contemplates Wounded Knee, the Pullman Strike, and the Philippine Insurrection," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 80 (2011): 84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41307194>.

¹⁸ Murolo, "Wars of Civilization," 84.

posted by American investigative journalist, James A. Miller, the seventh cavalry is surrounding the Lakotas in Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890.¹⁹ This photograph put into perspective how intimidating it was for the Lakotas to be closed in by the soldiers with threatening weapons with no escape. The Lakotas were not able to resist or protest the soldiers because any act of violence would provoke the soldiers to shut it down.

The Wounded Knee massacre solidified the U.S. government's control on the Lakota people. The Lakota way of life was destroyed by the U.S. government and military, and it cannot be taken back. After the massacre, the Native Americans were still forced to live on reservations, and it became their new way of life. Merrill wrote in his article, "Convinced that resistance was hopeless and impressed by friendly overtures of General Miles and the persuasion of friendly chiefs, all Indians involved in the 'outbreak' had surrendered by January 16."²⁰ The Lakota had eventually given up on their old religion, the Ghost Dance, because it had failed them. In Robert M. Utley's book, he states, "Religion had failed to restore the old life. For the Indians of the West, there was no choice but to submit to the new life."²¹ If it were not for the government takeover of the Native American tribe and their ways of life, there would be no so-called new life. Unfortunately for the Lakotas, they did not have a choice and were forced to comply. So, what was the new life for the Lakotas?

The Native Americans in the West were still under governmental control months after the Wounded Knee Massacre and living in poor conditions. In the excerpt from the "Inspection of Government Schools by Superintendent of Indian Schools Daniel Dorchester," it shows that the

¹⁹ James A. Miller, *U.S. troops surrounding the Indians on Wounded Knee battlefield*, (Library of Congress: 1913), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004666593/>.

²⁰ Mattes, "The Enigma of Wounded Knee," 4.

²¹ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 261.

Native American children were still attending a government run school in Pine Ridge on May 27, 1891, months after the massacre occurred. Even though the Lakotas were forced to go to schools, they were not in the best condition. The beginning of the report describes it as follows, “It was very evident, at first, to the most casual observation, that this school had recently passed through trying experiences, on account of which much allowance must be made for its condition.”²² It further explains that supplies, like bedding and food, were missing due to being taken to the hospitals and the Episcopal Church for those who were wounded. One of the things that also stood out in this inspection report is when it states, “The recent hostilities culminating close to and around the school itself, with threatening masses of Indians in sight, soldiers encamped in and around the school grounds.”²³ So, even after the massacre, the soldiers still surrounded the Native Americans in their new everyday life. Not only were the children forced to go to school, but the school was also not in good condition. This is one of the many examples of the harsher realities of Native American life after the massacre. The Lakotas lived in poor conditions, whether it was at the school they were attending or the reservation they were living on. The government did not supply them with resources that were needed to survive. Which essentially means that the government did not keep their promises and did not uphold their treaties at that time.

The Wounded Knee Massacre marked the end of the Lakotas hope of being free from the federal government, because it marked the end of the Plains Indian Wars and the end of the Lakota resistance. This massacre was the last important clash between North American Indians and the white man. When the Lakotas were surrounded and massacred by the seventh cavalry, it

²² “Inspection of Government Schools by Superintendent of Indian Schools Daniel Dorchester,” *Digital Public Library of America*, 1891: 1, <http://catalog.archives.gov/id/285065>.

²³ “Inspection of Government School by Superintendent of Indian Schools Daniel Dorchester,” 1.

crushed the hope of being able to restore their way of life and life on the reservations became the new way of life. The massacre was a symbolic representation of betrayal and broken promises of the federal government. The Lakotas eventually had to accept that the resistance to the federal government was hopeless.

Bibliography

- Dippel, Christian. "Forced Coexistence and Economic Development: Evidence from Native American Reservations." *Econometrica* 82, no. 6 (November 2014): 2131–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43616909>.
- Edmunds, R. David. "Native Americans, New Voices: American Indian History, 1895-1995." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995): 717–40. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2168602>.
- Grua, David W. *Surviving Wounded Knee: The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- "Inspection of Government Schools by Superintendent of Indian Schools Daniel Dorchester", In the *Digital Public Library of America*, 1891: 1-30, <http://catalog.archives.gov/id/285065>.
- Jacoby, Karl. "Of Memory and Massacre: A Soldier's Firsthand Account of the 'Affair on Wounded Knee.'" *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 64, no. 2 (2003): 333–62. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.25290>.
- Mattes, Merrill J. "The Enigma of Wounded Knee." *Plains Anthropologist* 5, no. 9 (1960): 1–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25666256>.
- Miller, James A. *U.S. troops surrounding the Indians on Wounded Knee battlefield*. In the *Library of Congress*, 1913. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004666593/>.
- Murolo, Priscilla. "Wars of Civilization: The US Army Contemplates Wounded Knee, the Pullman Strike, and the Philippine Insurrection." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 80 (2011): 77–102. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41307194>.
- Ostler, Jeffrey. "Conquest and the State: Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance." *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (1996): 217–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3639984>.
- United States Office of Indian Affairs. *Indian Reservations west of the Mississippi River*. [S.l.: s.n., 1923] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/99446198/>.
- Utley, Robert M. *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Warren, Louis S. Review of *Wounded Knee and The Ghost Dance: Christian Prayer, American Politics, and Indian Protest*, by Rani-Henrik Andersson, Heather Cox Richardson, and Gregory E. Smoak. *Reviews in American History* 39, no. 4 (2011): 665–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41348922>.