

# ■ Wounded Knee Massacre: Statements and Eyewitness Accounts

**Date:** 1891

**Author:** Various

**Genre:** Testimony

## Summary Overview

The Wounded Knee Massacre of December, 1890 marked the end of organized resistance to federal domination of Native American tribes and the Reservation system that would keep Tribes confined to strictly defined geographical regions. It was also—as may be clear from these selections for the great number of statements and testimonials from the disaster—a direct result of the careless, haphazard, and damaging way these policies were implemented and subsequently enforced. Even the testimony of government officials involved in the massacre acknowledge that the policies they had been ordered to enforce contributed to the situation that, ultimately, erupted in violence. The Native Americans who speak about their experiences convey a deep sense of betrayal by a government whose policies and regulations they tried to obey.

There is also, within the testimonies of Valentine T. McGillicuddy and General Nelson Miles, attempts to explain the situation and, especially, to affix blame for the loss of life that occurred on that cold December day at Wounded Knee Creek. From inexperienced government officials to supposed “natural race antagonism,” there is no shortage of culpable parties. Pay attention, also, to the Sioux interviewed and the divisions within their community that they discuss as a contributing factor.

## Defining Moment

The incident at Wounded Knee—commonly referred to as the Wounded Knee massacre—took place near Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota on December 29, 1890. Although the exact number of casualties is the subject of controversy, as are many facts about the incident, at least 150 men, women, and children of the Lakota Sioux tribe were killed by soldiers of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry. Wounded Knee took place at a time when the United States was

finalizing its plan of assimilation of the Sioux and all Indian tribes onto reservations such as Pine Ridge. (See also “Treaty of Fort Laramie” and “Dawes Severalty Act”).

Into this turbulent atmosphere came the “Paiute Messiah” Wovoka, who created the Ghost Dance ceremony, which promised the return of Indian spirits and the departure of the white man from Indian lands. The Ghost Dance movement was seen by whites as a threat, one that could unite the various tribes and lead to renewed wars between Indians and whites. Another significant figure was Chief Sitting Bull, who whites saw as a figurehead who could help unite Indians around the Ghost Dance. A group of Indian police were dispatched to his home to arrest him. Violence ensued, and Sitting Bull and eight of his men were killed on December 15, 1890.

Fearing additional violence, a group of Lakota Sioux Indians led by Chief Spotted Elk, sought shelter in Pine Ridge. On December 28 some 350 Lakota (including 230 were women and children) were intercepted by the Seventh Cavalry and directed to Wounded Knee Creek. During the night the soldiers surrounded the camp and set up four Hotchkiss guns. At dawn the Indians were ordered to surrender their weapons and told they would be taken to waiting trains to be shipped away from the area. Due, possibly to misunderstanding of the instructions, both sides opened fire. Accounts differ, but it has been argued that women and children were deliberately targeted and that those attempting to flee were run down by soldiers on horseback. Many of the twenty-five dead cavalry were believed to have died from “friendly fire” during the hour-long battle. In the aftermath, soldiers loaded fifty-one surviving Indians onto wagons and sent them to Pine Ridge.

## Author Biography

While there is no single author in this collection of testimony about the Wounded Knee Massacre, a brief sketch

of the careers of Valentine T. McGillicuddy and General Nelson A. Miles is valuable for our understanding of the relationship between American political and military forces and the Native American tribes of the Great Plains.

Valentine T. McGillicuddy was born on Valentine's Day, 1849, in Wisconsin. After attending medical school in Detroit, he worked in the city for a year before heading west to indulge his desire to live in less developed parts of the country. He worked for several years as a topographer and surgeon for the expedition that surveyed the border between the US and Canada and on other surveying assignments. He was, later, attached as a surgeon to military forces in the Dakotas, where he came into contact with various native American groups. McGillicuddy treated the gunshot wounds of Native leader Crazy Horse and, after Crazy Horse's death appealed to officials in Washington for more merciful treatment of Native prisoners at western forts. In 1879, he received

an appointment as the Indian Agent at Pine Ridge. Despite contentious relationships with leaders such as Red Cloud, McGillicuddy found ways to maintain peace and order on the reservations without the use of Army intervention, establishing a native police force. He also worked to establish a boarding school on the reservation.

The career of General Nelson A. Miles spanned decades, from the Civil War to the Spanish-American War. His role in the wars on the western frontier began in 1866 as the commander of the 5th Infantry Regiment, having an active role in most of the major campaigns against the Great Plains tribes through the subjugation of Geronimo and the Apache in the 1880s. At the time of the Wounded Knee Massacre, Miles was the commander of the Division of the Missouri, overseeing military operations across the Great Plains. Though not present at the scene of the massacre, Miles was affected by the event, describing it to his wife in a letter as an "abominable criminal military blunder."

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

### **Former Pine Ridge Agent Valentine T. McGillicuddy's Letter to General Leonard W. Colby (January 15)**

Sir: In answer to your inquiry of a recent date, I would state that in my opinion to no one cause can be attributed the recent so-called outbreak on the part of the Sioux, but rather to a combination of causes gradually cumulative in their effect and dating back through many years—in fact to the inauguration of our practically demonstrated faulty Indian policy.

There can be no question but that many of the treaties, agreements, or solemn promises made by our government with these Indians have been broken. Many of them have been kept by us technically, but as far as the Indian is concerned have been misunderstood by him through a lack of proper explanation at time of signing, and hence considered by him as broken.

It must also be remembered that in all of the treaties made by the government with the Indians, a large portion of them have not agreed to or signed the same. Noticeably was this so in the agreement secured by us with them the summer before last, by which we secured one-half of the remainder of the Sioux reserve, amounting to about 16,000 square miles. This agreement barely car-

ried with the Sioux nation as a whole, but did not carry at Pine Ridge or Rosebud, where the strong majority were against it; and it must be noted that wherever there was the strongest opposition manifested to the recent treaty, there, during the present trouble, have been found the elements opposed to the government.

The Sioux nation, which at one time, with the confederated bands of Cheyennes and Arapahos, controlled a region of country bounded on the north by the Yellowstone, on the south by the Arkansas, and reaching from the Missouri river to the Rocky mountains, has seen this large domain, under the various treaties, dwindle down to their now limited reserve of less than 16,000 square miles, and with the land has disappeared the buffalo and other game. The memory of this, chargeable by them to the white man, necessarily irritates them.

There is back of all this the natural race antagonism which our dealings with the aborigine in connection with the inevitable onward march of civilization has [sic] in no degree lessened. It has been our experience, and the experience of other nations, that defeat in war is soon, not sooner or later, forgotten by the coming generation, and as a result we have a tendency to a constant recur-

rence of outbreak on the part of the weaker race. It is now sixteen years since our last war with the Sioux in 1876—a time when our present Sioux warriors were mostly children, and therefore have no memory of having felt the power of the government. It is but natural that these young warriors, lacking in experience, should require but little incentive to induce them to test the bravery of the white man on the war path, where the traditions of his people teach him is the only path to glory and a chosen seat in the “happy hunting grounds.” For these reasons every precaution should be adopted by the government to guard against trouble with its disastrous results. Have such precautions been adopted? Investigation of the present trouble does not so indicate.

Sitting Bull and other irreconcilable relics of the campaign of 1876 were allowed to remain among their people and foment discord. The staple article of food at Pine Ridge and some of the other agencies had been cut down below the subsisting point, noticeably the beef at Pine Ridge, which from an annual treaty allowance of 6,250,000 pounds gross was cut down to 1,000,000 pounds. The contract on that beef was violated, inasmuch as that contract called for northern ranch beef, for which was substituted through beef from Texas, with an unparalleled resulting shrinkage in winter, so that the Indians did not actually receive half ration of this food in winter—the very time the largest allowance of food is required. By the fortunes of political war, weak agents were placed in charge of some of the agencies at the very time that trouble was known to be brewing. Noticeably was this so at Pine Ridge, where a notoriously weak and unfit man was placed in charge. His flight, abandonment of his agency, and his call for troops have, with the horrible results of the same, become facts in history.

Now, as for facts in connection with Pine Ridge, which agency has unfortunately become the theater of the present “war,” was there necessity for troops? My past experience with those Indians does not so indicate. For seven long years, from 1879 to 1886, I, as agent, managed this agency without the presence of a soldier on the reservation, and none nearer than 60 miles, and in those times the Indians were naturally much wilder than they are to-day. To be sure, during those seven years we occasionally had exciting times, when the only thing lacking to cause an outbreak was the calling for troops by the

agent and the presence of the same. As a matter of fact, however, no matter how much disturbed affairs were, no matter how imminent an outbreak, the progressive chiefs, with their following, came to the front enough in the majority, with the fifty Indian policemen, to at once crush out all attempts at rebellion against the authority of the agent and the government.

Why was this? Because in those times we believed in placing confidence in the Indians; in establishing, as far as possible, a home-rule government on the reservation. We established local courts, presided over by the Indians, with Indian juries; in fact, we believed in having the Indians assist in working out their own salvation. We courted and secured the friendship and support of the progressive and orderly element, us against the mob element. Whether the system thus inaugurated was practicable, was successful, comparison with recent events will decide.

When my Democratic successor took charge in 1886, he deemed it necessary to make general changes in the system at Pine Ridge, i.e., a Republican system. All white men, half-breeds, or Indians who had sustained the agent under the former administration were classed as Republicans and had to go. The progressive chiefs, such as Young Man Afraid, Little Wound, and White Bird, were ignored, and the backing of the element of order and progress was alienated from the agent and the government, and in the place of this strong backing that had maintained order for seven years was substituted Red Cloud and other nonprogressive chiefs, sustainers of the ancient tribal system.

If my successor had been other than an amateur, or had had any knowledge or experience in the inside Indian politics of an Indian tribe, he would have known that if the element he was endeavoring to relegate to the rear had not been the balance of power, I could not for seven years have held out against the mob element which he now sought to put in power. In other words, he unwittingly threw the balance of power at Pine Ridge against the government, as he later on discovered to his cost. When still later he endeavored to maintain order and suppress the ghost dance, the attempt resulted in a most dismal failure.

The Democratic agent was succeeded in October last by the recently removed Republican agent, a gentle-



Map of Wounded Knee battlefield scene. Aut: James W. Forsyth (died 1906)

man totally ignorant of Indians and their peculiarities; a gentleman with not a qualification in his make-up calculated to fit him for the position of agent at one of the largest and most difficult agencies in the service to manage; a man selected solely as a reward for political services. He might possibly have been an average success as an Indian agent at a small, well-regulated agency. He endeavored to strengthen up matters, but the chiefs and leaders who could have assisted him in so doing had been alienated by the former agent. They virtually said among themselves, "We, after incurring the enmity of the bad element among our people by sustaining the government, have been ignored and ill-treated by that government, hence this is not our affair." Being ignorant of the situation, he had no one to depend on. In his first clash with the mob element he discovered that the Pine Ridge police, formerly the finest in the service, were lacking in discipline and courage, and, not being well supplied with those necessary qualities himself, he took the bluff of a mob for a declaration of war, abandoned his agency, returned with troops—and you see the result.

As for the ghost dance, too much attention has been paid to it. It was only the symptom or surface indication of deep-rooted, long-existing difficulty; as well treat the eruption of smallpox as the disease and ignore the constitutional disease.

As regards disarming the Sioux, however desirable it may appear, I consider it neither advisable nor practicable. I fear that it will result as the theoretical enforcement of prohibition in Kansas, Iowa, and Dakota; you will succeed in disarming the friendly Indians, because you can, and you will not so succeed with the mob element, because you can not. If I were again to be an Indian agent and had my choice, I would take charge of 10,000 armed Sioux in preference to a like number of disarmed ones; and, furthermore, agree to handle that number, or the whole Sioux nation, without a white soldier.

Respectfully, etc, V. T. McGillycuddy.

P. S.—I neglected to state that up to date there has been neither a Sioux outbreak nor war. No citizen in Nebraska or Dakota has been killed, molested, or can show the scratch of a pin, and no property has been destroyed off the reservation.

#### **Statement of General Nelson A. Miles**

Cause of Indian dissatisfaction.—The causes that led to the serious disturbance of the peace in the northwest last autumn and winter were so remarkable that an explanation of them is necessary in order to comprehend the seriousness of the situation. The Indians assuming the most threatening attitude of hostility were the Cheyennes and Sioux. Their condition may be stated as follows: For several years following their subjugation in 1877, 1878, and 1879 the most dangerous element of the Cheyennes and the Sioux were under military control. Many of them were disarmed and dismounted; their war ponies were sold and the proceeds returned to them in domestic stock, farming utensils, wagons, etc. Many of the Cheyennes, under the charge of military officers, were located on land in accordance with the laws of Congress, but after they were turned over to civil agents and the vast herds of buffalo and large game had been destroyed their supplies were insufficient, and they were forced to kill cattle belonging to white people to sustain life.

The fact that they had not received sufficient food is admitted by the agents and the officers of the government who have had opportunities of knowing. The majority of the Sioux were under the charge of civil agents, frequently changed and often inexperienced. Many of the tribes became rearmed and remounted. They claimed that the government had not fulfilled its treaties and had failed to make large enough appropriations for their support; that they had suffered for want of food, and the evidence of this is beyond question and sufficient to satisfy any unprejudiced intelligent mind. The statements of officers, inspectors, both of the military and the Interior departments, of agents, of missionaries, and civilians familiar with their condition, leave no room for reasonable doubt that this was one of the principal causes. While statements may be made as to the amount of money that has been expended by the government to feed the different tribes, the manner of distributing those appropriations will furnish one reason for the deficit.

The unfortunate failure of the crops in the plains country during the years of 1889 and 1890 added to the distress and suffering of the Indians, and it was possible for them to raise but very little from the ground for self-support; in fact, white settlers have been most unfortu-

nate, and their losses have been serious and universal throughout a large section of that country. They have struggled on from year to year; occasionally they would raise good crops, which they were compelled to sell at low prices, while in the season of drought their labor was almost entirely lost. So serious have been their misfortunes that thousands have left that country within the last few years, passing over the mountains to the Pacific slope or returning to the east of the Missouri or the Mississippi.

The Indians, however, could not migrate from one part of the United States to another; neither could they obtain employment as readily as white people, either upon or beyond the Indian reservations. They must remain in comparative idleness and accept the results of the drought—an insufficient supply of food. This created a feeling of discontent even among the loyal and well disposed and added to the feeling of hostility of the element opposed to every process of civilization....

**Indian Reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs: The Indian Story of Wounded Knee**

**Turning Hawk, Pine Ridge (Mr Cook, interpreter).**

Mr Commissioner, my purpose to-day is to tell what I know of the condition of affairs at the agency where I live. A certain falsehood came to our agency from the west which had the effect of a fire upon the Indians, and when this certain fire came upon our people those who had farsightedness and could see into the matter made up their minds to stand up against it and fight it. The reason we took this hostile attitude to this fire was because we believed that you yourself would not be in favor of this particular mischief-making thing; but just as we expected, the people in authority did not like this thing and we were quietly told that we must give up or have nothing to do with this certain movement. Though this is the advice from our good friends in the east, there were, of course, many silly young men who were longing to become identified with the movement, although they knew that there was nothing absolutely bad, nor did they know there was anything absolutely good, in connection with the movement.

In the course of time we heard that the soldiers were moving toward the scene of trouble. After awhile some of the soldiers finally reached our place and we heard that

a number of them also reached our friends at Rosebud. Of course, when a large body of soldiers is moving toward a certain direction they inspire a more or less amount of awe, and it is natural that the women and children who see this large moving mass are made afraid of it and be put in a condition to make them run away. At first we thought that Pine Ridge and Rosebud were the only two agencies where soldiers were sent, but finally we heard that the other agencies fared likewise. We heard and saw that about half our friends at Rosebud agency, from fear at seeing the soldiers, began the move of running away from their agency toward ours (Pine Ridge), and when they had gotten inside of our reservation they there learned that right ahead of them at our agency was another large crowd of soldiers, and while the soldiers were there, there was constantly a great deal of false rumor flying back and forth. The special rumor I have in mind is the threat that the soldiers had come there to disarm the Indians entirely and to take away all their horses from them. That was the oft-repeated story.

So constantly repeated was this story that our friends from Rosebud, instead of going to Pine Ridge, the place of their destination, veered off and went to some other direction toward the "Bad Lands." We did not know definitely how many, but understood there were 300 lodges of them, about 1,700 people. Eagle Pipe, Turning Bear, High Hawk, Short Bull, Lance, No Flesh, Pine Bird, Crow Dog, Two Strike, and White Horse were the leaders.

Well, the people after veering off in this way, many of them who believe in peace and order at our agency, were very anxious that some influence should be brought upon these people. In addition to our love of peace we remembered that many of these people were related to us by blood. So we sent out peace commissioners to the people who were thus running away from their agency.

I understood at the time that they were simply going away from fear because of so many soldiers. So constant was the word of these good men from Pine Ridge agency that finally they succeeded in getting away half of the party from Rosebud, from the place where they took refuge, and finally were brought to the agency at Pine Ridge. Young-Man-Afraid-of-his-Horses, Little Wound, Fast Thunder, Louis Shangreau, John Grass, Jack Red Cloud, and myself were some of these peacemakers.

The remnant of the party from Rosebud not taken to the agency finally reached the wilds of the Bad Lands. Seeing that we had succeeded so well, once more we sent to the same party in the Bad Lands and succeeded in bringing these very Indians out of the depths of the Bad Lands and were being brought toward the agency. When we were about a day's journey from our agency we heard that a certain party of Indians (Big Foot's band) from the Cheyenne River agency was coming toward Pine Ridge in flight...

When we heard that these people were coming toward our agency we also heard this. These people were coming toward Pine Ridge agency, and when they were almost on the agency they were met by the soldiers and surrounded and finally taken to the Wounded Knee creek, and there at a given time their guns were demanded. When they had delivered them up, the men were separated from their families, from their tipis, and taken to a certain spot. When the guns were thus taken and the men thus separated, there was a crazy man, a young man of very bad influence and in fact a nobody, among that bunch of Indians fired his gun, and of course the firing of a gun must have been the breaking of a military rule of some sort, because immediately the soldiers returned fire and indiscriminate killing followed.

**Spotted Horse.** This man shot an officer in the army; the first shot killed this officer. I was a voluntary scout at that encounter and I saw exactly what was done, and that was what I noticed; that the first shot killed an officer. As soon as this shot was fired the Indians immediately began drawing their knives, and they were exhorted from all sides to desist, but this was not obeyed. Consequently the firing began immediately on the part of the soldiers.

**Turning Hawk.** All the men who were in a bunch were killed right there, and those who escaped that first fire got into the ravine, and as they went along up the ravine for a long distance they were pursued on both sides by the soldiers and shot down, as the dead bodies showed afterwards. The women were standing off at a different place from where the men were stationed, and when the firing began, those of the men who escaped the first onslaught went in one direction up the ravine, and then the women, who were bunched together at another place, went

entirely in a different direction through an open field, and the women fared the same fate as the men who went up the deep ravine.

**American Horse.** The men were separated, as has already been said, from the women, and they were surrounded by the soldiers. Then came next the village of the Indians and that was entirely surrounded by the soldiers also. When the firing began, of course the people who were standing immediately around the young man who fired the first shot were killed right together, and then they turned their guns, Hotchkiss guns, etc., upon the women who were in the lodges standing there under a flag of truce, and of course as soon as they were fired upon they fled, the men fleeing in one direction and the women running in two different directions. So that there were three general directions in which they took flight.

There was a woman with an infant in her arms who was killed as she almost touched the flag of truce, and the women and children of course were strewn all along the circular village until they were dispatched. Right near the flag of truce a mother was shot down with her infant; the child not knowing that its mother was dead was still nursing, and that especially was a very sad sight. The women as they were fleeing with their babes were killed together, shot right through, and the women who were very heavy with child were also killed. All the Indians fled in these three directions, and after most all of them had been killed a cry was made that all those who were not killed or wounded should come forth and they would be safe. Little boys who were not wounded came out of their places of refuge, and as soon as they came in sight a number of soldiers surrounded them and butchered them there.

Of course we all feel very sad about this affair. I stood very loyal to the government all through those troublesome days, and believing so much in the government and being so loyal to it, my disappointment was very strong, and I have come to Washington with a very great blame on my heart. Of course it would have been all right if only the men were killed; we would feel almost grateful for it. But the fact of the killing of the women, and more especially the killing of the young boys and girls who are to go to make up the future strength of the Indian people, is the saddest part of the whole affair and we feel it very sorely.

I was not there at the time before the burial of the bodies, but I did go there with some of the police and the Indian doctor and a great many of the people, men from the agency, and we went through the battlefield and saw where the bodies were from the track of the blood.

**Turning Hawk.** I had just reached the point where I said that the women were killed. We heard, besides the killing of the men, of the onslaught also made upon the women and children, and they were treated as roughly and indiscriminately as the men and boys were.

Of course this affair brought a great deal of distress upon all the people, but especially upon the minds of those who stood loyal to the government and who did all that they were able to do in the matter of bringing about peace. They especially have suffered much distress and are very much hurt at heart. These peacemakers continued on in their good work, but there were a great many fickle young men who were ready to be moved by the change in the events there, and consequently, in spite of the great fire that was brought upon all, they were ready to assume any hostile attitude. These young men got themselves in readiness and went in the direction of the scene of battle so they might be of service there. They got there and finally exchanged shots with the soldiers. This party of young men was made up from Rosebud, Ogalalla (Pine Ridge), and members of any other agencies that happened to be there at the time. While this was going on in the neighborhood of Wounded Knee—the Indians

and soldiers exchanging shots—the agency, our home, was also fired into by the Indians. Matters went on in this strain until the evening came on, and then the Indians went off down by White Clay creek. When the agency was fired upon by the Indians from the hillside, of course the shots were returned by the Indian police who were guarding the agency buildings.

Although fighting seemed to have been in the air, yet those who believed in peace were still constant at their work. Young-Man-Afraid-of-his-Horses, who had been on a visit to some other agency in the north or northwest, returned, and immediately went out to the people living about White Clay creek, on the border of the Bad Lands, and brought his people out. He succeeded in obtaining the consent of the people to come out of their place of refuge and return to the agency. Thus the remaining portion of the Indians who started from Rosebud were brought back into the agency. Mr Commissioner, during the days of the great whirlwind out there, those good men tried to hold up a counteracting power, and that was “Peace.” We have now come to realize that peace has prevailed and won the day. While we were engaged in bringing about peace our property was left behind, of course, and most of us have lost everything, even down to the matter of guns with which to kill ducks, rabbits, etc, shotguns, and guns of that order. When Young-Man-Afraid brought the people in and their guns were asked for, both men who were called hostile and men who stood loyal to the government delivered up their guns.

## GLOSSARY

**aborigine:** original inhabitants; the Native American tribes

**allotments:** individual grants of land

**falsehood:** a lie

**“the Messiah delusion”:** a reference to the Ghost Dance movement

## Document Analysis

### ***Former Pine Ridge Agent Valentine T. McGillicuddy's Letter to General Leonard W. Colby (January 15)***

McGillicuddy begins his statement by saying that there is no single cause for the “so-called” aggression by the Sioux. Instead, the events were the result of years of the “faulty” US policy toward Native American tribes, with “many” of the nation’s treaties with tribes having been broken. McGillicuddy presses this point, reminding his audience that many treaties were not signed with the consent of the tribe as a whole. The Sioux, in particular, had seen their possessions shrink drastically.

McGillicuddy then shifts to the “natural race antagonism” that he believes exists between the Native and white peoples. He explains that there is a pattern of successive generations forgetting the horrors of war and that the current generation of Sioux warriors were children during the last outbreak of hostilities in 1876, which is one of the reasons that conflict had broken out. The leaders the old generation have influenced the young people. Compounding this was the fact that food supplies at Pine Ridge were low and the government had not kept its agreements on things like beef deliveries. As conflict grew, McGillicuddy argues that the “notoriously weak and unfit man” in charge precipitated the crisis by calling for troops. He goes on to explain that while he was agent, he did his job with no military presence for 60 miles around. No matter how fraught the situation became, he was able to keep the peace with the assistance of “progressive chiefs” and “Indian policemen.” The difference lies in the new agent, appointed by the Democratic administration in 1886. Relations with the natives worsened under his control. Subsequent agents were just as incompetent. Conditions worsened and even without the Ghost Dance (which McGillicuddy dismisses as a symptom of larger issues).

### ***Statement of General Nelson A. Miles***

Miles places blame for the conflict on a long series of incidents rooted in the aftermath of the 1876 conflict. While the Natives were disarmed and given land and farming supplies, the destruction of buffalo and other large hunting game meant that the supplies the possessed were “insufficient,” leading the natives to target cattle herds owned by whites. Miles points out that most of the Indian Agents were “frequently changed and often inexperienced” and tribes began to rearm. Food and supplies continued to be in short supply. Crop failures in 1889 and 1890 made conditions worse. While white

settlers could migrate out of the area (as many had) the natives were unable to do so, leading to feelings of “discontent” that contributed to existing hostility.

### ***Indian Reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs: The Indian Story of Wounded Knee***

Turning Hawk discusses the coming of the Ghost Dance movement to the reservation (the “certain falsehood” he mentions). While some at the reservation took a stand against this movement, others were enthralled by it. He then discusses the number of soldiers that came through the area, driving scared women and children to Pine Ridge from other reservations. There was a rumor that the troops were going to disarm the natives and take their horses. The rumor became widespread and, eventually, a large number of natives came to Pine Ridge. Troops rounded up Natives and took them to Wounded Knee, demanding their weapons and separating men from their families. A “crazy man” fired his gun and the soldiers fired back “and indiscriminate killing followed.”

Spotted Horse testified that the “crazy man” shot an officer and the soldiers gave the natives a chance to “desist” that was refused before the firing started.

Turning Hawk continued his testimony explaining that some men escaped the first volley of fire, going down into a ravine. Soldiers were able to fire down into the ravine. Women were also shot by the soldiers at this time.

American Horse recounts that the soldiers used Hotchkiss guns against the women who had presented a flag of truce, which should have protected them against such actions and, in fact, were fired upon as they attempted to escape. American Horse describes in great detail the killing of women carrying children. The soldiers also killed the young children of dead parents in cold blood. American Horse explains that he had always been supportive of the government despite the deprivations that the tribes had suffered during the late 1880s. The killing of innocent women and children, however, has motivated him to come to Washington to testify against the soldiers. The children, he explained, were “the future strength of the Indian people.” He finishes his testimony by explaining that he was able to tell the position of the bodies “from the track of the blood.”

Turning Hawk echoes some of these sentiments, explaining that the massacre had been the most difficult for those who had been loyal to the government and had worked the hardest for a continuing peace. Young men, especially, wanted to fight but peace eventually prevailed. As a result of this peace, however, they have

lost their property, including the guns with which they would hunt.

### Essential Themes

Cursory, thumbnail sketches of the Wounded Knee Massacre (and, indeed, of the entire history of the interactions between Native Americans and the American settlers, soldiers, and government officials in the Trans-Mississippi West) often tend to reduce the complexity of the narratives and of the parties involved. We hear of two forces in opposition to each other: “Whites” and “Native Americans.” Each of these blocks, in this too-simplified approach, are uniform in their motivations, beliefs, and goals. The truth of such things, as demonstrated by the testimony from McGillicuddy, Miles, Turning Hawk, Spotted Horse, and American Horse, is much more complex. Within the “white” or “American” side, tensions exist between political appointees of different approaches and levels of experience (as we see in McGillicuddy’s complaints about his successors) and between military officials and civilian officials. Officials pledged to work for the welfare of those on the reservation for which they’re responsible come into conflict with officers and soldiers who have their own agendas. Within the “Native American” side, generational conflicts between those who wish to work for the best possible life under the American regime and those who urge resistance and join with outlawed movement illustrate that the story of the Wounded Knee Massacre—and the story of the relationships between different populations in the American west—are far more complex than they first appear.

—Aaron Gulyas, PhD, and Keith E. Sealing, JD

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