
The American Northern Plains Indian Wars: A Clash of Cultures

Jona Lunde

Introduction

In the Black Hills of South Dakota, there exists a monument in stone to four of the greatest leaders of the United States of America—Mount Rushmore. Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor, chose George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt “to communicate the founding, expansion, preservation and unification of the United States.”¹ How ironic it is that this monument to American ideals exists in a location that the Lakota Sioux have long considered sacred. Just as Jews, Christians, and Muslims have fought for control over the Holy Land for thousands of years, the Lakota and Cheyenne have fought over and revered the Black Hills country. The Lakota have often interpreted the existence of Mount Rushmore, somewhat comparable to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, as a symbol of the white man’s arrogant dominance over the Lakota people. “[Borglum] could have just as well carved this mountain into a huge cavalry boot standing on a dead Indian,” according to John (Fire) Lame Deer.² In the years 1851 to 1891, a clash of cultures existed between the white man and the Northern Plains Indians based on arrogance, deception, and greed, resulting in the near elimination of an entire culture that could easily have been avoided.

A state of peace had existed between the white man and the Northern Plains tribes when America started its westward expansion early in the nineteenth century. The Indians and early trappers had long traded peacefully for furs, glass beads, and other assorted items and sundries such as metal knives, black powder muskets, and rifles. Many of the trappers married native women and had children with them, and some of these children later became interpreters and guides for early travelers and even for the US Army. William Bent gained notoriety on the Colorado and Kansas plains working with the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples. William Garnett, the son of a Confederate general and a Lakota woman, worked tirelessly with the Lakota until his death in 1930.³ Both men played important, yet often overlooked roles in the Great Sioux War. It was not until the conflicts began in earnest that the majority of the white population would look at such men as half-breeds and treat them with contempt.

Beginning in 1844, settlers began the long trek to the Oregon territory. Jumping off near Independence, Missouri, and following the Missouri River north to the confluence with the North Platte River near present day Omaha, Nebraska, they turned west, creating the Oregon Trail. This trail cut through the heart of the Lakota hunting grounds. While the Indians at first traded with and often guided these early settlers, it would not be long before the white settler numbers and their contempt for resources revered by the Lakota proved to be more than the Lakota could tolerate. When gold was discovered in California in 1849, the westward tide of white men through the region increased, leading to greater conflict with the indigenous tribes. A semblance of peace was needed, and the idea of a formal agreement between the Indians and the white man was decided upon by the Indian Department in Washington, D.C.⁴

The Treaty of 1851

In the autumn of 1851, at Fort Laramie in Wyoming, D. D. Mitchell, superintendent of Indian Affairs, along with Thomas Fitzpatrick, the Indian agent, issued a call for all of the tribes in his jurisdiction to meet at Fort Laramie for a peace conference. Mitchell knew the only way to achieve peace was through a treaty based on negotiations outlining specific items for the Indians and white man alike. Amazingly, most of the tribes came to Laramie, including bands from the Crow and Lakota, who were deadly enemies. Cheyenne, Arapaho, and other tribes all sent representatives as well, bringing the total to nine tribes and approximately ten thousand Indians gathered outside of the fort. A gathering of this magnitude would not be seen on the Plains for another seventeen years. This treaty set the boundaries for Indian hunting grounds, and allowed the white man to establish roads and army posts in their territory, both as protection for the Indians from the white men and to protect the white man's interests. As recompense, the Indians would receive annuities valued at \$50,000 per year for the next fifty years. However, this treaty provision was reduced to a ten-year term, without the Indians' knowledge—until it was too late—before the Senate would ratify the treaty in 1852.⁵

As the number of white immigrants to the West Coast increased, the attitude toward the Indian deteriorated. Sarah Royce wrote in her memoirs titled *A Frontier Lady*, "The country we were traveling over belonged to the United States, and . . . these red men had no right to stop us."⁶ This statement illustrates as no other statement could the attitude of whites toward the Indians at that time. While

the Treaty of 1851 allowed whites to travel through Lakota land, the level of destruction by the thousands of wagons, livestock, and hunters had not been taken into account. The Indians were horrified at the brazen disregard the white man had for natural resources, adding to already tense relations. Then men discovered gold in Montana in 1852, increasing travel along the Bozeman Trail extending from Fort Laramie to Virginia City in southwestern Montana Territory. In accordance with the 1851 Treaty, forts were built along the Bozeman Trail, ostensibly to protect the Indians from the white man; however, it was the other way around, the white man needed protection from the outraged Indians.⁷

The situation came to a head in 1854 near Fort Laramie when a Brulé Sioux brave slaughtered a lame cow that had either strayed from a wagon train, or more likely, had been abandoned. When the owner found out what had happened, he demanded the return of his cow, now dead and butchered, from the Indians through the Fort Laramie commander, Lieutenant John Grattan. Being somewhat hotheaded, Grattan set forth to arrest the Indian, indicating that he could defeat the entire Indian nation. However, the chief, Mato Oyuhi, in accordance with the 1851 Treaty, attempted to make restitution without turning the brave over to the Army. Grattan would not hear of it, and deployed his men around the camp in fighting formation along with two mountain howitzers. As the brave and a few of his friends began to load their guns, one or two soldiers fired their weapons and fighting broke out. Grattan's entire force fell. The chief, Mato Oyuhi, died days later of wounds he suffered from the fight.⁸

By deploying aggressively and firing first, the white man had indeed broken his word. The situation deteriorated from that point forward. While many of the Lakota chiefs, such as Spotted Tail and Man Afraid of His Horse, attempted to maintain the peace, the white man assumed the Indians were to blame, based on often exaggerated reports, and tensions continued to grow. In 1855, General William S. Harney was dispatched to Lakota territory and in September came up against the group of Brulés involved in the Grattan killing. Harney used the ruse of a peaceful talk to give his men time to surround the camp, and then he gave the order to attack. At least eighty-six Indians were killed, more than forty-three of them women and children.⁹

In 1862, with the North and the South locked in Civil War, the frontier state of Minnesota felt the fury of an even more fundamental internal conflict. The Santees, an Eastern branch of the Sioux Nation, having endured a decade of

traumatic change in a narrow reservation along the upper Minnesota River, launched the first great attack in the Indian Wars that would rack the West for many years to come. Starving due to lack of promised rations, they burst from the reservation killing more than 450 settlers in the region before a force that Col. Henry Sibley hastily assembled of raw recruits defeated them.¹⁰ The Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota, Henry Whipple described the killings as “the most fearful Indian massacre in history.”¹¹ After the uprising, many horrified whites adopted the precept that naked force was the only law western Indians could learn while others like Whipple argued for peace. There followed alternating periods of fighting and truce, which the US Army set out to end, once and for all, in 1876.

On August 29, 1864, Cheyenne chief Black Kettle dictated a letter proposing peace. Three months later Colonel J. M. Chivington, in command of 700 troops of the First Colorado Volunteer Cavalry, Third Colorado Cavalry and a company of First New Mexico Volunteers, massacred Black Kettle’s band of 123 Cheyenne at Sand Creek in the eastern Colorado territory. The attack came at dawn on November 29, 1864, when Chivington and his men surrounded Black Kettle’s village on Sand Creek, even though Black Kettle had hoisted an American flag and the white flag of peace above his lodge. Black Kettle was not killed; however, many of the Indians killed were mutilated horribly and exhibited in Denver City by the returning troopers. Of the Cheyenne massacred, most were women and children. Ironically, Col. A. B. Greenwood, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, had issued an assurance to Black Kettle that by flying the American flag in his village, he would never be attacked by the US Army. That same American flag flew four years later—almost to the day—when Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry carried out an almost identical attack against Black Kettle on the Washita River in Oklahoma.¹²

Red Cloud’s War

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Indian policy was in utter disarray. On the frontier, troops were combating plains tribes, who fought an intermittent, but ferocious guerrilla war against white encroachment. Atrocities and massacres by both sides ignited passions and troubled consciences, splitting whites and Indians alike into war and peace factions. In 1866, tired of the increased soldier activity along the Bozeman Trail, the Lakota nation, led by a charismatic Oglala war chief named Red Cloud, began a series of attacks known as Red Cloud’s War that culminated in a battle that left Captain William J. Fetterman and all eighty of his troopers dead. Fetterman had professed little regard for the Indians’ fighting ability,

claiming that with eighty men he would ride over the entire Sioux nation. On December 21, a group of warriors supposedly led by none other than the venerated chief Crazy Horse, lured Fetterman and his men into a canyon where an ambush had been set up. None of the troopers survived. Fetterman and his assistant each apparently shot the other in the head, thereby denying the Indians the honor.¹³

General Custer, as he would forever be known, had finished up his volunteer enlistment in 1866 and had mustered out of the army after a stellar performance as a cavalry commander during the Civil War. Custer was the youngest officer to advance to Major General (Brevet, or temporary) and had earned the moniker Boy General. Custer was present and received the flag of truce when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse ending the war; Grant would later give the desk used to sign the terms of surrender to the Custers. In July of 1866, Congress authorized the formation of four more cavalry units to be used in the Indian Wars on the western plains. Custer was reduced in rank to Lt. Colonel, but he had the command of the newly formed Seventh Cavalry, a command he would keep for nine of the next ten years. Custer then made a name for himself as an Indian fighter under General Winfield Hancock fighting the Comanche and Southern Cheyenne. However, the Seventh would see only one major battle prior to their demise on the Little Bighorn River; the 1868 massacre on the Washita River against Black Kettle's peaceful village. Once again, the white man broke another treaty, providing the final crack that violently ended the tottering peace.¹⁴

In 1868, General Philip Sheridan developed the idea of using the same scorched earth strategy against the Plains Indians that he had employed in the South toward the end of the Civil War, and he wanted Custer to lead the charge. However, the Army had relieved Custer of command and suspended him for one year, based on the outcome of a court martial that found him guilty of being absent without leave following an unauthorized 150-mile ride he had taken to see his wife. The charges included conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline. Custer had ordered deserters shot, a practice still legal in the military, although only with a proper trial, a stipulation that Custer ignored in his fury. Sheridan convinced President Grant to commute the remaining two months of Custer's sentence and Custer again joined his beloved Seventh Cavalry just south of Fort Dodge, Kansas.¹⁵

After bringing the Seventh into fighting condition, Custer received orders from Sheridan to commence a winter campaign against the Southern Cheyenne and

Arapahoe that had been raiding white settlements in western Kansas, Oklahoma, and the Texas panhandle. Custer led the Seventh toward the Washita River in the midst of a heavy snowstorm. Sheridan's winter campaign designed to catch the Indians in their winter camps was under way. Custer found Black Kettle's village camped on the banks of the Washita just before dawn on the morning of November 28, after following the trail of a few warriors who had apparently raided a small town and taken prisoners to their camp further down the river. Custer divided his forces and attacked without warning at dawn. Black Kettle had chosen to spend the winter with his southern brethren and was still known as a peace chief. Not only had he signed the Treaty of 1851, he had also signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 and the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 that saw a previously unheard of number of tribes come together for the last great treaty signing of the century. None of this mattered, as Custer had not reconnoitered to determine what village he was attacking.¹⁶

Death on the Washita River

The Indians awoke that morning to the charge of the Seventh Cavalry through their camp from every direction. Kate Bighead, only a child at the time but a young woman ten years later at Custer's demise on the Little Bighorn, remembered that morning well. She later related how the cavalry massacred women and children in the most horrific ways; that soldiers removed unborn children from their mothers' wombs after killing the mothers. Kate had hidden along the river and was one of the few that escaped the Seventh's bloody rampage through the village. Black Kettle and his wife had survived the Sand Creek massacre four years earlier but did not survive this time, even though his American flag was once again flying over his peaceful village. The irony is that further up the river hundreds of Southern Cheyenne warriors that had heard the shooting were prepared to fight Custer, who took the women and children captives and returned to Camp Supply in heroic fashion.¹⁷

While many in the nation were horrified at the idea of women and children, including babies, being massacred by the US Army, this ancient war strategy was exhibited by commanders such as Genghis Khan and as recently as Hernando Cortés in his epic conquest of the Aztecs in Mexico. Armies had long held the belief that in order to be victorious, drastic measures would need to take place. What exacerbated the situation was the attitude toward the Indian that they were little more than savages, an opinion fueled by inflamed accounts of

debauchery against the whites by the Indians. Sheridan wanted a fast and complete victory over the Indian; public sentiment had to be turned against the Indians in order for Sheridan to have their support for his scorched earth campaign. These rumors about the Indians, however, could not be farther from the truth.

Indian Culture

Indians had long fought each other to acquire new hunting lands and horses, to avenge the death of a family member, or in the defense of one's honor. The highest military honor an Indian could achieve was the role of leader, known as *Canumpa Yuha* in Lakota, or keeper of the pipe. Counting coup, or striking an enemy, was considered to be more honorable than the killing of that enemy, and, contrary to the belief of many whites, the taking of a scalp was the lowest of the honors of the battlefield. With the acquisition of the horse, the Lakota became one of the most powerful nations on the plains. The horse enabled them to hunt the buffalo, as well as move great distances with ease. With the ability to move farther and follow the great herds of buffalo, the Lakota people spread onto the plains of present-day Nebraska, the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana. Along the way, they displaced their longtime enemy the Crow, a fact that would play a significant role in the upcoming war with the white man. While the Lakota were fierce warriors, they were also a very spiritual people, placing family above all else and gaining knowledge of the medicinal properties of the plants in their new lands.¹⁸

The Lakota "lived in daily interaction with the seen and unseen spirit forces that comprised their universe."¹⁹ The Lakota believed that the Great Spirit was everywhere and that Mother Earth was the giver of all life. The Lakota, as did many other tribes, believed in an afterlife, and they would often mutilate their slain enemies to hinder their progress in the next world. Removing hands and eyes, cutting off extremities, removing genitals and in some cases the head, all rendered their enemies unable to meet them in battle in the afterlife, if they were even able to make the journey. Many western cultures considered these practices barbaric. Burials included weapons and often included the killing of the warrior's favorite warhorse in order that the Indian may have a horse to ride on the journey to the Great Spirit. Much of this symbolism also existed among the ancient Egyptians, and yet conversely they were not looked upon as savages.²⁰

Family was extremely important to the Indians and remains so to this day. The Lakota are matriarchal, meaning that the warrior would move in with his wife's family; marriages were as simple as moving in together while divorces were

just as simple as moving out. Men were warriors, hunters, and makers of tools, yet they would find time to play with the children and create artworks such as pictographs. Women were considered holy as they were the givers of life, much as Mother Earth. Women ran the household, fed the family, took care of the children, set up and broke down the tepee, and often were allowed to attend and sometimes speak in the councils. The various bands had their own chief, a fact that proved difficult for the white man to understand. There was not one head chief of the nation, nor was there even a central government. Councils were held among leaders within the band as well as among the different bands that would periodically join for the winter or the spring hunts. This dispersal of authority frustrated the white man, as the signature of one Indian leader was not binding beyond his band.²¹

Treaty of 1868

Confusion over who signed and who did not led to much consternation among the Indians as well since many leaders such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse never touched the pen, meaning they never signed a treaty with the white man. Other chiefs such as Red Cloud, Spotted Tail, and Man Afraid of His Horse had signed the 1868 Treaty. Red Cloud worked especially hard for his people, traveling often to Washington D.C. to meet with the President of the United States, referred to by the Indians as the Great Father of the white man. The reservations that had been set aside for the Indians in the 1868 Treaty and the annuities promised did not fit with the way of life the Lakota were accustomed to. Red Cloud and Spotted Tail understood that the white man could not be stopped, and that a compromise had to be reached before the Indians were exterminated. The problem seemed to lie with the inability of the white man to keep his word as promised in the various treaties. While treaties promised the Lakota unlimited access to the unceded lands of the Powder River country of southern Montana, the western half of present-day South Dakota including the Black Hills in their entirety, was ceded, or set aside, as the Great Sioux reservation. The treaties forbade white men, except those authorized, from entering a reservation, let alone settling there. This lasted until 1874 when Lt. Colonel Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills following the rumors of the presence of gold.²²

Once again, just as in 1849 in California, during 1852 in Montana, and during 1858 in Colorado, white men invaded the Indians' world, this time illegally. The Lakota and various other tribes had long held the Black Hills as sacred ground,

from the Wind Cave where life is believed to have originated, to Bear Mountain and Devil's Tower, where the Indians would often go to receive visions. The Great Spirit and Mother Earth are believed to infuse the entire area. This belief is quite similar to the manner in which Christians and Jews consider the Holy Land sacred as the origin of their people and the birthplace of God's Son. While Christianity holds the belief in angels and, in some cases saints, the Indians believe in many spirits as well, both good and evil. While Christians do not believe in maiming their enemies after death, the Indians believe in doing so to hinder their enemy's progress to the afterlife. Much of it was symbolic, such as puncturing eardrums because the victim did not listen in life, removing eyes to show that the person did not see clearly in life, and therefore he would be forever blind. Additionally, Indians would sometimes bleed out a body to weaken it in the afterlife, and, in rare cases, destroy the body to prevent that spirit from ever making the journey to the afterlife.²³

Loss of the Sacred Black Hills

In the eyes of the Indians, Custer violated the Treaty of 1868 when he led his expedition to the Black Hills. This was the worst thing the white man could have done in the interest of peace for it stirred up a hornets' nest that would take another fifteen years and hundreds of deaths to resolve. The Indians had not forgotten Custer; in fact they knew him well, calling him Long Hair or Son of the Morning Star due to his flowing blonde hair and the fact that he liked a dawn attack, appearing to come out of the sunrise. Custer, on the other hand, did not know or understand his enemy very well. Their battle tactics of strike and regroup then strike again did not follow the classic tactics and strategies taught at West Point. The Lakota did not know nor did they care who Napoleon was or what his tactics were; they only knew that to be victorious, guerilla warfare worked very well. The Plains Indians were often called the best irregular light cavalry the world had ever known and they did not stand and fight as the white man did. This frustrated Custer to no end for, being a West Point graduate, he expected an enemy that would stand up and fight.

By 1875, the Indians were divided into those who lived poorly on the reservation surviving on what the government handed out and the non-reservation Indians who continued to live the life they had long known, hunting buffalo, and fighting other tribes as well as the white man. Sheridan once again convinced the powers in Washington that the problems associated with the non-reservation

Indians needed to be solved once and for all. Therefore, an edict was issued to the non-reservation Indians to return to the reservation by January 31, 1876, or face the wrath and might of the US Army. Many Indians did not understand ultimatums, and those that did chose to ignore this one; after all, they were simply hunting on the unceded lands per the agreement of the Treaty of 1868. They did not understand that essentially the treaty was considered null and void by the United States and that the Indians no longer had any right to any lands other than the reservation land provided by the government. The US government wanted total control over the Indians and believed that confining them to reservations was the only way to achieve that control. The Indians wanted to simply abide by the agreement and live as they had always lived, free and happy. When the Indians with Sitting Bull chose not to come in, Sheridan developed a plan to gather them peacefully if possible, or through force if necessary to bring them to the reservation.

The Indians' Last Stand on the Little Bighorn

By June 1876, the country was in full celebration of its one-hundredth birthday. Many on the East Coast were not even aware of the trouble brewing in the West. The US Army implemented a three-pronged approach toward the Powder River country in central Montana where a large village under the leadership of Sitting Bull was determined to be located. Sitting Bull had become very powerful among the non-reservation Indians by this time for not believing anything the white man said, because every treaty ever signed the white man had broken. Crazy Horse, considered one of the most powerful of the war chiefs, having never so much as sustained an injury in battle, was a member of this village. It was rumored that bullets and arrows could not harm Crazy Horse, and he would often taunt the enemy, riding through a hail of bullets without a scratch. His leadership resulted in many victories, and the white man considered him along with Sitting Bull as the leaders of the Indians. The simple fact was the Indians gathered for one last great hunt before going to live on the reservation; many of the Indians would leave the great gathering on the Little Bighorn River prior to the battle on June 25 and go back to their reservations. Sitting Bull had no intention of going to the reservation. Instead, he planned to move north of the border into Canada while Crazy Horse had decided that life on a reservation was not worth living, that he would rather die free than live as a captive. June 25, 1876 would prove the pivotal point in the Great Sioux War.²⁴

The plan was for Colonel John Gibbon to leave Fort Ellis in western

Montana, Brigadier General George Crook to drive north from Fort Fetterman in Wyoming, and General Alfred Howe Terry, with Custer commanding the Seventh Cavalry, to leave Fort Abraham Lincoln in Illinois and push west. Terry had overall command of the entire action; however, Crook would act independently as he had started before Terry and Gibbon and had the least distance to travel. The plan was to flush the Indians toward one of the other columns, capture the Indians, and return them all to their reservations. Crook intended to find the Indians before the others arrived in the theater and solve the problem on his own. Crook would have his chance sooner than he thought. He traveled up the Rosebud River and on June 15 came to within twenty-five miles of Sitting Bull's great village. A war party sent for the purpose ousted Crook. Crook had not taken provisions on his excursion and, after his defeat, returned to Fetterman where he would remain for the next six weeks, waiting too long to be able to assist the other columns. Crook notified Sheridan of his setback; however, the information did not reach Terry until July 7, well after the battle that resulted in the deaths of over two hundred troopers under Custer's command.²⁵

Perhaps surprisingly, the Indians did not expect to be attacked again within days of defeating Crook on the Rosebud. The warriors returned to their camp and celebrated their victory by feasting and dancing all night. On the morning of June 25, the Indian village was unaware there were troops nearby. The women were pulling wild turnips from the ground near the Bighorn River while the children played in the water or helped the women around the camp. The men, having stayed up all night in celebration, had elected to sleep in and have a lazy morning of bathing and eating. Some of the young men and older boys were checking on the horse herds, getting ready to move them. Later that day the village intended to move as grazing was getting scarce. It had been a good spring, buffalo were plenty, and the village was in high spirits; that would soon change with the arrival of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry.²⁶

Major Marcus Reno's attack on the south side of the village was the first indication many warriors had that troops were nearby. The village had received an initial warning of troopers in the area from men sent back by the bands headed to the reservation; however, the first warriors of the village did not have time to prepare themselves fully for the upcoming battle. They rushed to meet the soldiers with their weapons and maybe a favorite shirt. Many warriors in the interior of the camp prepared themselves with paint and ceremony, gathering their horses, and then

joined the battle. The records from the Indians indicate that many of the warriors who repelled Major Reno's attack then joined in the action against Custer. He did not have a chance in this battle. The Indians far outnumbered his force, and as in previous battles, he did not have good intelligence concerning the size of the force he was facing. Custer had divided his force into three prongs, Reno to the south of the village, and Captain Frederick Benteen with his men even further south as reserves. Custer would go to the north end of the village to block the escape of the Indians. His battle philosophy of charging through the village would not work on an encampment of this magnitude. By dividing his forces he allowed many of the warriors further up the valley time to prepare themselves, and the Indians took advantage of it. Sitting Bull's vision of a sure victory a few days earlier at the Sun Dance held on the Rosebud following the Crook rout gave the warriors a sense of confidence that enabled them to go into this battle sure of a decisive victory. This victory, however, made a lifelong enemy of the entire Seventh Cavalry, which would come to fruition four and one-half years later on the Pine Ridge reservation along Wounded Knee Creek.²⁷

The Final Curtain

On June 26, following the battle on the Little Bighorn River, the village packed up and proceeded to depart the traditional hunting grounds. Sitting Bull and his followers turned north for the Canadian border while Crazy Horse and his followers turned south. Those who wished to return to the reservations did so without incident. For the next year, the US Army under Crook would hunt down those who did not want to live the life of a reservation Indian. Sitting Bull eventually returned to the United States after facing the possibility of starvation in Canada. From 1881 until 1883, Sitting Bull was kept as a prisoner of war at Fort Randall before returning to the Standing Rock Agency, also known as the Spotted Tail Agency after the peace chief Spotted Tail. In 1885, Sitting Bull joined Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show and toured the United States; however, when offered the chance to go to England in 1887, Sitting Bull turned Cody down, indicating that he was needed at home due to more rumors of unrest and reduction in Sioux lands. By 1889, the Lakota were dying of malnutrition and disease; action had to be taken.

In 1889, rumors of a new Indian redemption came from Nevada in the form of the Ghost Dance. Supposedly, by performing this dance the white man would be washed from the face of the earth by a great flood and the Indian would survive. The buffalo and all the creatures of the land would be returned, and the life

of the old ways could be resumed. By this time, the Lakota people were so destitute that they were willing to believe almost anything to restore their former honor and glory. Kicking Bear brought the Ghost Dance to the Sioux after traveling to Nevada to see the mystic and receive the instructions. The Lakota added one feature to the process; a shirt called a ghost shirt that was rumored to repel bullets. This alarmed the whites, for why would the Indians need to repel bullets unless they were planning an uprising? Rumors abounded, and tribal police closely monitored the Ghost Dancers. Sitting Bull tried the dance; however, after receiving no visions he dismissed the process. During this time the authorities, fearing Sitting Bull would once again rise to power, sought to have him arrested. His own people, the tribal police, killed Sitting Bull when one of his followers fired at a policeman after Sitting Bull was reported to have said he was not going with them.²⁸

By 1890, the situation was once again uncertain as Sitting Bull's followers hurried toward the camp of Big Foot, a well-known chief. As Big Foot's band, with Sitting Bull's followers now counted among them, tried to return peacefully to their village, the Army ordered Colonel Samuel S. Sumner of the Eighth Cavalry to remove them to Camp Cheyenne. Big Foot's people then stole away under the cover of darkness toward the Pine Ridge Reservation. General Nelson A. Miles ordered Major Samuel Whiteside and the Seventh Cavalry to intercept the band, which he did. Carrying a white flag, Big Foot asked for and received permission to speak with Whiteside. Big Foot then agreed to go with Whiteside, who took them to Wounded Knee Creek and surrounded them as they set up camp. During the night Colonel James Forsyth and Custer's regiment of the Seventh Cavalry arrived and joined Whiteside's forces. The next morning, as Forsyth prepared to disarm the Indians by searching through their belongings, a rifle belonging to a deaf Indian discharged as he handed it over to a soldier. This was all it took for the troopers to open fire from their positions surrounding the peaceful band. Indians who had yet to hand over their weapons returned fire. This appeared to be the fulfillment of the final warning Sitting Bull had issued to his people before the battle on the Little Bighorn; to loot the fallen soldiers would be a curse on the Sioux nation. Custer's old regiment, the Seventh Cavalry, would, it seems, fulfill this curse as they massacred nearly 300 Indians, predominantly women and children, on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek. Once again, a peaceful village trying to comply would pay the ultimate price for hatred and scorn.²⁹

Conclusion

It took only forty years to defeat a proud and noble people and turn them into a destitute, landless nation. Dee Brown illustrated the irony very well in his book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* in the closing words:

The wagonloads of wounded Sioux (four men and forty-seven women and children) reached Pine Ridge after dark. Because all available barracks were filled with soldiers, they were left lying in the open wagons in the bitter cold while an inept Army officer searched for shelter. Finally, the Episcopal mission was opened, the benches taken out, and hay scattered over the rough flooring. It was the fourth day after Christmas in the Year of Our Lord 1890. When the first torn and bleeding bodies were carried into the candlelit church, those who were conscious could see Christmas greenery hanging from the open rafters. Across the chancel from above the pulpit was strung a crudely lettered banner: **PEACE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TO MEN.**³⁰

Notes

1. National Park Service, *Mount Rushmore: National Memorial, South Dakota*, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.nps.gov/moru/historyculture/index.htm>.

2. John (Fire) Lame Deer, and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 93.

3. Thomas Powers, *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), xi.

4. James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn, the Last Great Battle of The American West* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008), 18.

5. Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 18; Charles J. Kappler, "Treaty of Fort Laramie with Sioux, Etc., 1851." *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties, Vol. II, Treaties*, (1904), accessed May 1, 2013, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/sio0594.htm>.

6. Jeffery Ostler, *The Lakotas and the Black Hills* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 37.

7. Kappler, "Treaty of Fort Laramie with Sioux, Etc., 1851."

8. Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 19-20.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009),

- 54; Minnesota Historical Society, *The U.S. Dakota War of 1862*, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://usdakotawar.org/>.
11. Minnesota Historical Society, *The U.S. Dakota War of 1862*, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://usdakotawar.org/>.
12. Native American Legends—Chief Black Kettle, accessed May 2, 2013, <http://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-blackkettle.html>; Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 24-26.
13. Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 24-26.
14. Ibid.
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Jona Lunde was born and raised in Colorado; spending half of her life on a dry land wheat farm forty-five miles southeast of Cheyenne, WY on the Great Plains. The elder of two children, Jona grew up with a deep appreciation of history, especially of the American West. In 2012, Jona made the decision to finally pursue her Bachelor's degree in Transportation and Logistics Management; effectively combining 28 years of experience in the transportation industry as a driver and later in middle management with a degree. In conjunction with her major, Jona was influenced by Dr. Larry Fliegelman at American Public University to pursue a minor in History. Her appreciation of the events in the American West following the Civil War led her to research the cultural differences between American settlers and the native tribes of the Great Plains. Jona will graduate in June 2016, and plans to pursue her Master's in Transportation and Logistics with the intention of becoming a college professor in her field. She lives with her husband in North Texas.