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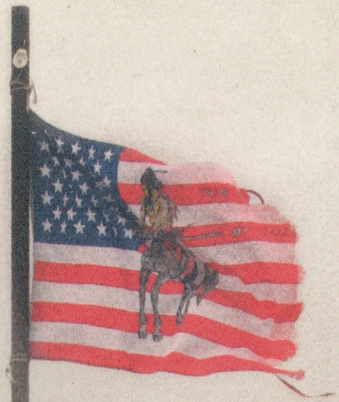

The Heartbeat *of* Wounded Knee

Native America from 1890 to the Present

DAVID TREUER

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The

Heartbeat

of

Wounded Knee

NATIVE AMERICA FROM
1890 TO THE PRESENT

DAVID TREUER

corsair

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In Memory

—

Robert Treuer, Sean Fahrlander, Dan Jones


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For Elsina, Noka, and Bine

as always and forever


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The Heartbeat *of* Wounded Knee


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Prologue

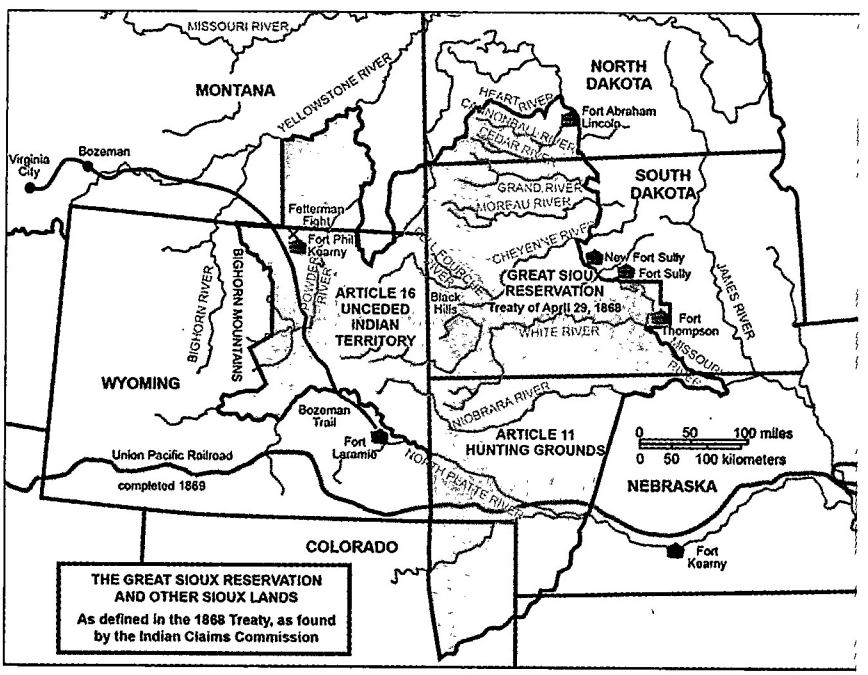
This book tells the story of what Indians in the United States have been up to in the 128 years that have elapsed since the 1890 massacre of at least 150 Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota: what we've done, what's happened to us, what our lives have been like.* It is adamantly, unashamedly, about Indian life rather than Indian death. That we even *have* lives—that Indians have been living in, have been shaped by, and in turn have shaped the modern world—is news to most people. The usual story told about us—or rather, about "the Indian"—is one of diminution and death, beginning in untrammeled freedom and communion with the earth and ending on reservations, which are seen as nothing more than basins of perpetual suffering. Wounded Knee has come to stand in for much of that history. In the American imagination and, as a result, in the written record, the massacre at Wounded Knee almost overnight assumed a significance far beyond the sheer number of lives lost. It became a touchstone of Indian suffering, a benchmark of American brutality, and a symbol of the end of Indian life, the end of the frontier, and the beginning of modern America. Wounded Knee, in other words, stands for an end, and a beginning.

What were the actual circumstances of this event that has taken on so much symbolic weight?

In 1890, the Lakota were trying to make the best of a bad situation.

*Throughout this book, I use the word "Indian" to refer to indigenous people within the United States. I also use "indigenous," "Native," and "American Indian." These terms have come in and out of favor over the years, and different tribes, not to mention different people, have different preferences. The Red Lake Nation refers to itself as the "Home of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians," for example. Many Native people prefer to describe themselves in their Native languages: Piikuni for Blackfeet, Ojibwe for Chippewa, and so on. My own choices of usage are governed by a desire for economy, speed, flow, and verisimilitude. A good rule of thumb for outsiders: Ask the Native people you're talking to what they prefer.

Ever since the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, the U.S. government had been trying to solve the "Indian problem" on the Plains with a three-pronged approach: negotiation and starvation in addition to open war. Open war on its own had not been going too well. Led by Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, American Horse, Ten Bears, and Sitting Bull, the Plains Indians had won such decisive victories that they had forced the government to the treaty table, not the other way around. This resulted in the second Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 and secured a large homeland for the Lakota in southwestern South Dakota and northern Nebraska.

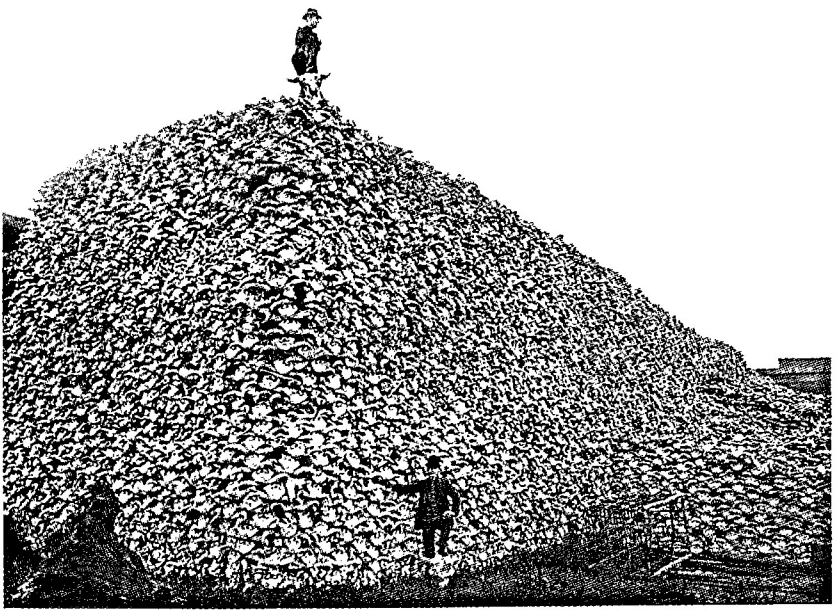


Map of the Great Sioux Reservation, 1868

But the terms of the treaty were violated by the United States shortly thereafter, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills. In response, the Lakota attempted to throw out the gold-seekers and enforce the terms of the treaty. This is what led, directly, to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were wiped out. During the final hours of

the battle, the Lakota and Cheyenne dismounted, put away their guns, and killed the remaining cavalry with their war clubs and tomahawks in a ritual slaughter. Some Dakota women, armed with the jawbones of buffalo, were given the honor of dispatching the soldiers with a sharp blow behind the ear.

After that rout, the U.S. government switched tactics. Instead of confronting the Indians head-on, it encouraged widespread encroachment by settlers (one sees the same tactics in play in the West Bank today), reneged on treaty promises of food and clothing, and funded the wholesale destruction of the once vast buffalo herds of the Plains. The hides and bones were shipped east, the hides for use in industrial machine belts, decoration, blankets, and clothing, the bones and skulls for fertilizer and china. It is estimated that by the late 1870s about five thousand bison were being killed per day.



Buffalo skulls waiting to be ground for use in china and as fertilizer

Without the bison, the Lakota and other Plains tribes could not hope to survive, at least not as they had been surviving. The reservations might have been designed as prisons, but now they became places of refuge.

With the vast buffalo herds no more, and hemmed in by a burgeoning white population of ranchers, hunters, railroad workers, prospectors, homesteaders, and soldiers, the Plains Indians did what many disenfranchised people have done when threatened on all sides: they turned to God. To a government that had long bemoaned the unwillingness of Indians to get with the program and assimilate, this might have been good news. The Indians, however, turned to God in the form of the Ghost Dance.

The Ghost Dance religion initially manifested itself among the Paiute in Nevada, where it was promoted by an Indian named Jack Wilson, who later exclusively used his Paiute name, Wovoka. The dance, the story goes, came to Wilson in a vision during a solar eclipse on January 1, 1889. In his vision he stood near God and looked down on Indian people in the afterlife while they hunted and played. God told Wilson that he had to return home and tell his people to live in harmony with one another, to not drink or steal, to work hard, and to make peace with white people. This was a pretty big leap beyond the divine directives any Indians had claimed to have received in the past. And there was a payoff: if Indians lived lives of peace and worked hard and danced the Ghost Dance, they would find peace on earth, and they would be reunited with the spirits of their ancestors in the afterlife.

As the religion spread from Nevada, it changed. By the time it reached the Lakota, it had taken on a more millennialist flavor: if they did the Ghost Dance the right way and lived by its precepts, the Lakota believed, not only would they find peace in this world and the next but all the white people would be washed away and the New World returned to its Edenic state. If Indians returned to their traditional ways of life and forms of religious observance, the belief went, the world would return to them.

Such a movement greatly alarmed the U.S. government, and it redoubled its ongoing efforts to break up the Great Sioux Reservation into five smaller reservations, so that Indians would have a harder time gathering in large numbers. The government also continued its missionary efforts, pushed through the policy of allotment that sought to impose individual property ownership on the Lakota, and stepped up the removal of Indian children to boarding schools far from the reservation. The Ghost Dance

religion was banned, despite the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution (Indians were thirty-four years away from citizenship, in any case), and government troop presence on the Pine Ridge Reservation was increased. A former Indian agent at Pine Ridge, Valentine McGillycuddy, spoke out against the military buildup with rare lucidity: "The coming of the troops has frightened the Indians. If the Seventh-Day Adventists prepare their ascension robes for the second coming of the Savior, the United States Army is not put in motion to prevent them. Why should not the Indians have the same privilege? If the troops remain, trouble is sure to come."

Trouble came. Sitting Bull, the famous Hunkpapa Lakota chief who had led his people to victory against the U.S. military during the Indian Wars and who, with help, wiped out Custer's Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn, had returned to Standing Rock after formally surrendering to government forces in 1881 and touring with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show for most of the next decade. The Indian agent at Standing Rock, James McLaughlin, was afraid that Sitting Bull would use his considerable influence to promote the Ghost Dance, and therefore issued an order for his arrest on December 15, 1890. A scuffle ensued, and one of Sitting Bull's followers shot an Indian police officer, Bull Head, as he was trying to force the chief onto his horse. Bull Head in turn shot Sitting Bull in the chest. Red Tomahawk, another police officer, raised his rifle and shot Sitting Bull through the head.

Afraid for his life and the life of his band, Spotted Elk (also known as Chief Big Foot) left Standing Rock Reservation with 350 followers around December 20, headed for the sanctuary of Pine Ridge at the invitation of Chief Red Cloud. It was thought that Red Cloud, one of the most experienced and able Lakota statesmen, could broker a peace. Before he could get there, on December 28, Spotted Elk and his band were intercepted by a detachment of the Seventh Cavalry under the leadership of Major Samuel M. Whitside and escorted five miles to a camping spot on Wounded Knee Creek. It was bitterly cold. Before dawn the next day, the rest of the Seventh showed up with Colonel James W. Forsyth and set up four rapid-fire Hotchkiss cannons around the band. The soldiers searched the camp

and rounded up thirty-eight weapons. When one of the young Lakota men got upset and exhorted his tribemates not to give up their guns so easily, a fight broke out.

What happened next is not clear. Some reported that the Indians opened fire on the government soldiers. Others said that a deaf elder didn't understand the command to give up his rifle, and when a soldier grabbed it to take it away, it went off. Then five young warriors shrugged off their blankets and exposed concealed rifles. They shot at the soldiers. The soldiers opened fire on the entire camp with their rifles and the Hotchkiss guns. The Indian men put up a desperate resistance but were mowed down. The rain of fire from U.S. troops also claimed the lives of many of the soldiers, in one of the deadliest incidents of friendly fire in U.S. military history. The women and children took off running down the frozen creek bed; the soldiers broke formation and, mounted, chased them down and killed them. The fighting lasted an hour, and when it was over, more than 150 Lakota lay dead or dying in the snow. The actual number of dead is still in dispute, with some putting the number at more than three hundred. More than half were women and children. A survivor, the chief American Horse, testified later that "there was a woman with an infant in her arms who was killed as she almost touched the flag of truce. . . . A mother was shot down with her infant; the child not knowing [that] its mother was dead was still nursing. . . . The women as they were fleeing with their babies were killed together, shot right through . . . 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 . . . 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."

General Nelson A. Miles, touring the scene of the carnage after a three-day blizzard that shrouded the dead in snow, was shocked by what he saw. "Helpless children and women with babes in their arms had been chased as far as two miles from the original scene of encounter and cut down without mercy by the troopers. . . . Judging by the slaughter on the battlefield it was suggested that the soldiers simply went berserk. For who could explain such a merciless disregard for life?"

Mass grave at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, January 1891

One of the most poignant stories to come out of Wounded Knee involves a Lakota child named Zintkala Nuni, or Lost Bird. Her mother had been among those shot as she attempted to run with her infant daughter down the frozen creek. It wasn't until four days later that the child was discovered—frostbitten, starving, but alive—in her dead mother's arms. She was passed among the occupying soldiers as a kind of living souvenir of the massacre until, a few weeks after the conflict, a general named Leonard Colby adopted her. Raised partly by his wife, she suffered horribly—she was sent from one isolated boarding school to another, was later impregnated (most likely by Colby), and still later was found working in Wild West shows and in vaudeville, before she died of influenza in 1920, in abject poverty.

THE MASSACRE WAS COVERED by more than twenty newspapers, and the responses it provoked represented the polarized attitudes toward the entire conflict between Indians and government. If white people were

determined to take Indians' land, opined a writer named Susette La Flesche in the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1891, "they can go about getting it in some other way than by forcing it from them by starving or provoking them to war and sacrificing the lives of innocent women and children, and through the sufferings of the wives and children of officers and soldiers." General Nelson Miles relieved Colonel James Forsyth of his command and brought action against him in military court for the wanton bloodshed that had occurred under his leadership, provoking immediate opposition from Forsyth and his supporters. (Later in life General Miles would fight for compensation for the Lakota and raise money for survivors of the massacre.)

Some saw Wounded Knee from the opposite angle. "Why," asked a reporter from the Deadwood, South Dakota, *Times*, "should we spare even a semblance of an Indian? Wipe them from the face of the earth." Writing for the Aberdeen, South Dakota, *Saturday Pioneer* after the murder of Sitting Bull, L. Frank Baum—the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—said it would be better if all Indians died rather than live as "the miserable wretches they are." Two weeks later, after the massacre, he hit the same note but held it longer: "The *Pioneer* has before declared that our only safety depends upon the total extermination of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth."

The moment crystallized something more than sympathy for Indians and Indian causes on the one hand, and bitter and bloody American progress on the other. Rather, both sides joined in seeing the massacre as the end not just of the Indians who had died but of "the Indian," period. There had been an Indian past, and overnight, there lay ahead only an American future.

Frederick Jackson Turner elaborated on this idea in his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," delivered in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (itself a celebration of the Indian past and the American future, as if the two eras existed on either side of an unbreachable wall). "The United States lies like a huge page in the

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