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From Red Fears to Red Power: The Story of the Newspaper Coverage of Wounded Knee 1890 and Wounded Knee 1973

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FROM RED FEARS TO RED POWER: THE STORY OF THE NEWSPAPER
COVERAGE OF WOUNDED KNEE 1890 AND WOUNDED KNEE 1973

by

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A THESIS

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FROM RED FEARS TO RED POWER: THE STORY OF THE NEWSPAPER
COVERAGE OF WOUNDED KNEE 1890 AND WOUNDED KNEE 1973

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This thesis examines newspaper coverage of the Wounded Knee massacre, which occurred in December 1890, and the takeover of Wounded Knee, S.D., by members of the American Indian Movement in 1973. In 1890, 21 reporters covered the massacre in which 25 soldiers and 250 Indians were killed, while dozens of radio, television and newspaper reporters covered the 1973 siege in which two Indians were killed. Some historians say newspaper coverage leading up to the massacre, including sensational, false stories about Indians attacking settlers, contributed to Indian agent Dr. D.F. Royer's calling upon the military to suppress a feared Indian rebellion, a decision that led to the massacre at Wounded Knee. The mostly white journalists who covered the massacre largely failed to interview the Indian survivors, many of who couldn't speak English. In 1973, journalists provided much more balanced coverage of the Indian activists' and government's perspectives. The Indians in 1973 actively manipulated the media, and many Indian reporters even covered the event for Indian publications.

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Introduction

The obelisk bears names, so many names engraved deeply into its gray stone skin. Names of men, women and children. Names like Wolf Skin Necklace, Bird Shakes and Big Skirt.

To many who have passed through the arched gate at Wounded Knee Cemetery, these names are simply the slaughtered, a tired and hungry band of Miniconjou Lakota killed on that unseasonably warm day in December 1890. To the Lakota, they are the *oyate*, the people. So much more than frozen, stiff bodies found in the dirty snow. So much more than faceless names on a stone marker.

The last conflict of the Indian Wars began Dec. 28, 1890, when the Seventh Cavalry caught Chief Big Foot's band of Miniconjou Sioux near Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The Seventh was the same division that had been wiped out at the Little Bighorn Battlefield along with its flamboyant commander, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, 14 years earlier by Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho under Chief Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. On Dec. 29, as the cavalry soldiers attempted to disarm the Indians, a shot rang out and all hell broke loose. About an hour later, nearly 25 soldiers and 250 Indian men, women and children lay dead or dying.

And so the Lakota returned to Wounded Knee in 1973, to fight again for their people and to honor the sacrifices made by so many so that their children's children might live. They brought with them the eyes and ears of a nation that had watched wearily for nearly a century as the Lakota and their Indian brethren wasted away on reservations, their cultures and religions stifled by governmental and religious

oppression, their governments corrupted by tribal leaders and federal officials seeking to control and gain economic benefit from tribes.¹

For this paper, I have examined daily newspaper coverage of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre and the 1973 takeover of Wounded Knee, as well as literature that was written after both events, including books, magazine articles and articles written for scholarly journals. I focused my examination of the 1890 massacre on five Nebraska newspapers: the Omaha Daily Bee, the Omaha World-Herald, the Lincoln Evening News, the Nebraska State Journal (Lincoln) and the Dawes County Journal (Chadron). All five of these newspapers sent reporters to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to cover the events leading up to the massacre, and three of them had reporters at or near Wounded Knee Creek when the massacre occurred.

I focused my examination of the 1973 Wounded Knee siege on the Omaha World-Herald, the Lincoln Evening Journal, the Lincoln Star, the New York Times and the Chadron Record. Each of those newspapers sent correspondents to cover the siege. However, unlike the 1890 siege, none of those newspapers had reporters at the scene when Indian activists took over the village of Wounded Knee. That's likely because the grinding violence between the Indian activists and supporters of Oglala Sioux President Dick Wilson that eventually led to the takeover didn't offer the same sensational images and rich historical context that the takeover of Wounded Knee readily provided.

To better understand both events, I also have examined literature written about both events. Most of the literature written after the Wounded Knee massacre has come from historians. The literature written after the 1973 siege has included books written by historians and by several Indian activists involved in the siege who attempted to present

their version of the 1973 event. The literature that has examined the 1973 takeover also has examined the methods and impact of television coverage of that event. Much of the literature I examined that was written about the media's methods of covering the Wounded Knee siege has come from magazines, such as Harper's and Time.

Based on the literature that has been written about the Wounded Knee massacre, I expected to find some stereotypical terminology used to describe Indians, as well as a general tendency toward sensationalism by the newspapers when it came to describing the growing tension on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. I certainly found stereotypical terminology used to describe the Indians but also found an even greater degree of sensationalism by the newspapers than I expected to find. I also found that the newspapers tended to criticize either military or government officials depending on the newspapers' political bent and that few reporters interviewed Indians either before or after the massacre.

Based on the literature that has been written about the Wounded Knee siege of 1973 by non-Indian authors, I expected to find some Old West stereotyping by the newspapers I examined, as well as a tendency by reporters to glorify the Indian activists' actions. I certainly found some stereotyping of Indians by newspapers but not as much as I expected, and I did find evidence of bias toward the Indian activists and against the government and tribal government officials opposed to the activists. I also found the newspapers covered the siege like they would a war with a strong focus on the weapons used and ammunition expended by both sides. Reporters interviewed both the Indian activists and government officials nearly in equal measure, except when the reporters were denied access to Wounded Knee.

As they flocked to the promise of conflict in the days before the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890, reporters swarmed the Pine Ridge Reservation again in 1973 when more than 200 Oglala Lakota and members of the American Indian Movement entered the village of Wounded Knee and declared their intentions to remain there until their concerns about government corruption were addressed. I expected the method and impact of the news reporters' coverage of the 1890 and 1973 events to be very different.

Chapter I: The literature of Wounded Knee I and II

The literature that has examined news coverage of the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 has primarily come from historians such as Elmo Scott Watson, who wrote in a September 1943 article for *Journalism Quarterly* of “newspaper jingoism” and “yellow journalism” and how newspapers’ efforts to sell papers by sensationalizing tension on the Pine Ridge Reservation contributed to the conflict between soldiers and Indians. Later historians, including Dee Brown, author of “Bury My Heart at Wounded,” and William S.E. Coleman, author of “Voices of Wounded Knee,” have examined the broader origins and implications of the conflict, including news coverage as a mostly sideline issue that was not among the factors that caused the massacre.

While much has been written about the Wounded Knee massacre, only in recent years has a focus on the contribution of news coverage to the conflict emerged among historians. However, at least one historian, Oliver Knight, author of “Following the Indian Wars,” wrote a chapter on news coverage of Wounded Knee in his 1953 book that described the state of newspaper coverage during the late 19th century as a competitive period marked by newspapers being willing to report sensational rumors in order to win wider readership.

As late as the 1890s, most newspapers aligned themselves with and were funded by political parties, a practice that had begun after 1765, when conflict with England heated up, according to authors Michael Schudson and Susan E. Tifft, who wrote an essay on the state of journalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for the 2005 book “The Press.”⁹³ However, by the time the Civil War ended in 1865, newspapers had begun

to become profitable enterprises and began to compete with each other for readers through sensational news coverage rather than political pandering.⁹³

When publisher William Randolph Hearst arrived in New York in 1895, he introduced comics, sensational news coverage and self-promotion to compete with New York World publisher Joseph Pulitzer. Both publishers called for war with Spain in the late 1890s. However, while some historians have blamed Hearst and Pulitzer for causing the Spanish-American War, Schudson and Tiftt argued that contention is mostly the result of Hearst gleefully taking credit for the war. “The pull of dollars and the popularity of sensationalism helped move newspapers away from parties,” according to Schudson and Tiftt.⁹³ Reporters who arrived at Wounded Knee in 1890 would bring with them this same inclination toward sensationalism.

Later historical books, such as “Eyewitness at Wounded Knee” by Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul and John E. Carter (1991) and “The Frontier Newspapers and the Coverage of the Plains Indian Wars” by Hugh J. Reilly (2010), have looked much more skeptically at the efforts of correspondents on the cold plains of South Dakota in 1890 and 1891. Later historians, such as Watson and Rex Alan Smith, have demonstrated that the media contributed to the fear and paranoia felt by many settlers and government agents in the weeks and months leading up to the massacre through sensational news coverage that often relied on rumor and hearsay. That fear, in turn, led a nervous Indian agent to call military units to the reservation.

As for the Wounded Knee siege of early 1973, the literature that has examined news coverage of that event has included magazine articles written during and shortly

after the event in publications such as “Harper’s Magazine” and “National Review” that lambasted the media for becoming focused on a staged “pseudo-event.”

That literature also has included books written many years later by participants on both sides of the event, including American Indian Movement leaders Russell Means, who wrote “Where White Men Fear to Tread,” and Dennis Banks, author of “Ojibwa Warrior,” as well as Stanley David Lyman, former Pine Ridge, S.D., Bureau of Indian Affairs superintendent and author of “Wounded Knee: A Personal Account.”

Historians also have examined news coverage of the siege, including Mary Ann Weston, author of “Native Americans in the News: Images of Indians in the Twentieth Century Press,” who found newspapers and magazine often relied on western stereotypes of cowboys and Indians in their coverage.

Including the voices of Indian leaders distinguishes the literature that examines coverage of the 1973 siege from coverage of the 1890 massacre. Those Indian leaders have attempted to allay criticism of their alleged “handling” of the media during the siege and portray their endeavors in the most heroic light by denying they posed certain events and took hostages during the event.

Flocking to Wounded Knee

By late 1890, the Indian Wars were drawing to a close. Custer had been whipped at the Little Bighorn, and the Lakota leaders who had been architects of his demise, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, were dead. Reporters came to document what was shaping up to be one last act of resistance by Lakota taking part in the Ghost Dance.

Of the 21 reporters who came to the reservation, just three witnessed the actual massacre: William F. Kelley of the Nebraska State Journal, Charles W. Allen of the Chadron Democrat and Charles H. Cressey of the Omaha Daily Bee. Kelley, according to witnesses, took a much more direct role in the conflict, emptying his revolver at a warrior who charged him and then picking up a soldier's rifle and killing at least two more Indians.²

The correspondents who flocked to the reservation were working in a period that historian Oliver Knight called "New Journalism," a time he said was defined by newspapers struggling for circulation and competing aggressively for readers, often casting aside accuracy in favor of sensationalism.³

Characterizing the situation, Knight wrote:

Unverified rumors became reports from reliable sources, idle gossip was reported as fact. As the distortion of an imminent Indian outbreak spread across the newspapers, terror in turn swept across Nebraska, the Dakotas and even as far east as Iowa. Mass hysteria sent settlers flocking into the nearest railroad towns, telling stories – made of whole cloth – about murder, scalping and desolation.³

In all, 21 correspondents – more than had covered all of the other Indian War campaigns before then – gathered at Pine Ridge, S.D., from as far away as Washington, D.C., and as near as Chadron – 30 miles away – to tell the story of the final clash between the U.S. Army and "red savages."³ Their dispatches made it clear that the Ghost Dance

signaled the beginning of yet another Indian uprising, despite credible claims from the Indians and other witnesses to the dancing who said it was a non-violent, if misguided, attempt to revive the dying culture of the plains tribes.²

Historian Coleman described many instances of inaccuracy and exaggeration on the part of reporters at Wounded Knee. He described conflicting dispatches sent from the reservation and nearby communities, including alarmist reports of “roving bands of Sioux” by the Rapid City Journal on Nov. 23, 1890.⁴ Only a day later, the Omaha Daily Bee quoted Bishop Hare of the Episcopal church, who had done missionary work among the Lakota for nearly a decade, as saying the Ghost Dance would run its course if allowed to continue uninterrupted. If the military intervened in the dance, however, “It will precipitate war with absolute certainty,” Hare warned.⁴

Several historians, including Watson and Coleman, described how newspapers closer to the reservation called for calm in the face of sensational reports by regional and national media about growing tension. The Custer Chronicle of South Dakota complained: “The Indian scare continues unabated, having been intensified rather than diminished by the startling and (in) many instances highly exaggerated reports emanating from newspaper correspondents at the front who seem inclined to report the situation in its most alarming possible phrase.”⁴ Residents of Chadron, less than 30 miles from Pine Ridge, got so fed up with the alarmist news reports that they circulated a petition demanding the Daily Bee and the World-Herald stop printing such “incredible and provocative reports.”⁵

Some historians, including Rex Alan Smith, have gone so far as to call their sensational coverage a contributing factor to the massacre.⁶ That coverage could be seen

in such alarmist front page headlines as: “THE TURBULENT REDS, Latest Intelligence from the Scene of the Threatened Outbreak” (Omaha Daily Bee, Nov. 22, 1890) and “Squaws Swarming at Pine Ridge, Each One Armed With a Knife” (Daily Bee, Dec. 17, 1890). But once the shooting had ended, those same reporters began to blame the same soldiers and government agents they had earlier described as valiant defenders of the plains. The “treacherous red devils” and “murderous savages,” as they had called the Indians prior to the massacre, then became the hapless victims of an uncaring and bloodthirsty government and military war machine that had starved them and then slaughtered them.²

While Watson pulls no punches when it comes to criticizing press coverage, he lays most of the blame for the massacre on the “timorous and inept agent at Pine Ridge,” Dr. D.F. Royer. He describes Royer as a political appointee who lacked the skills to handle explosive situations. “Royer played into the hands of these volunteer propagandists by bombarding his superiors in Washington with requests that troops be sent to Pine Ridge.”²

Historians Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul and John E. Carter took a different approach to examining news coverage of Wounded Knee, focusing on the images produced by the photographers there. Their book, “Eyewitness at Wounded Knee,” examines the personal histories of those photographers, as well as the quality of their work and their motivations, which primarily consisted of profit. In 1890, selling photos of the dying Plains Indian culture was lucrative, especially when the photos illustrated conflict. As a result, the photographers who captured images of “people frozen in death, on a land frozen by cold” made their photos not as documents attesting to the Indians’

decline but as a means to “feed the news-hungry public.”⁵ In their efforts to give their viewers what they wanted – images of savage Indians fighting for their way of life – “Fact became subordinate to stereotype.”⁵

In addition, the reporters who arrived at Chadron and other communities near the reservation in late 1890 colored their dispatches to “conform to the political affiliations of the journals they represented.”² The Democratic newspapers saw the rising tension as the result of the corrupt and inefficient administration of Indian affairs under Republican President Benjamin Harrison. Republican newspapers viewed the potential uprising as the result of the failed Indian policies of former Democratic President Grover Cleveland.² That politically tinted coverage could be seen most clearly in the two most prominent newspapers in Omaha, Neb. – the Republican-leaning Omaha Daily Bee and the Democratic-leaning Omaha World-Herald. While the Daily Bee heralded the efforts of Indian agent Royer, even deflecting criticism of Royer from the World-Herald, the World-Herald made it clear that nearly all of the blame for the impending violence rested with Royer and the inept government officials at Pine Ridge.⁹ The World-Herald, meanwhile, glorified the military’s efforts and called for military leaders to take control of the reservation’s affairs.⁹

Perhaps the most eloquent of those voices calling for military control of Pine Ridge was Suzette La Flesche, one of the nation’s first female Indian reporters. An Omaha tribal member, she became an advocate for the Indians at Pine Ridge and appealed on their behalf for military commanders to replace Interior Department leadership at the reservation.

“I am the only Indian speaking to the public through the press for the Indians, and I demand in the name of the race and for their welfare that it shall be done,” she wrote.

La Flesche’s presence at Wounded Knee would presage the eventual creation of Indian media and the evolution of Indian activism that would seek greater control of news coverage during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.

A Return to Wounded Knee

In February 1973 – drawn by images of Indians hoisting rifles and shaking their fists – the national media fixated quickly on the looming violence as hundreds of FBI agents and U.S. marshals surrounded the lightly armed Wounded Knee occupiers with tanks and armored personnel carriers. The scene echoed that other great conflict that had scarred this land, that day in 1890 when shots rang out near a creek named Wounded Knee.

“It virtually guaranteed them a good press,” reporter Terri Schultz noted cynically when commenting on the activists’ choice of ground in a June 1973 article in Harper’s Magazine.¹¹

A March 1973 article in Time described how the stunning images coming from Wounded Knee created a kind of trap for the media, especially TV news stations, which were lured to the reservation and then forced to remain there throughout much of the 71-day siege.¹² Time quoted Interior Department Aide Charles Soller as saying: “It could have been settled in a week if it weren’t for this horde (of reporters).” Newsmen watched “helplessly as the thin line between covering and creating news wavered,” according to the Time article, “Trap at Wounded Knee.”¹²

Whether already aware of Wounded Knee’s history or reminded by the Indian activists surrounded there, newspaper, television and radio reporters took every possible opportunity to compare the two conflicts. Their coverage, at least at first, focused on the romantic noble warrior fighting valiantly against an oppressive, powerful government.¹³ But the government’s decision to enforce the blockade around Wounded Knee severely limited press access and curtailed the occupiers’ efforts to get their message to the outside

world.¹³ Thus, the media grew tired of the lack of stunning images and engaging interviews with activists and began to contemplate what drew them to Wounded Knee in the first place.

Headlines like “Bamboozle Me Not at Wounded Knee,” “Trap at Wounded Knee” and “Of Fallen Trees and Wounded Knees” reflected a growing skepticism by the national media over the occupiers’ theatrics. The Chicago Tribune described the Indians as militant criminals, though The New York Times called them “rebels” and urged patience by the government.¹³ Some reporters called the action at Wounded Knee make-believe, thus allowing their readers to view the issues as fictional.¹³ And few, if any, reporters actually investigated the charges made by the occupiers against Oglala Sioux Chairman Dick Wilson, whom the activists described as a criminal who had killed without provocation many traditional Lakota and embezzled from his tribe.¹³

However, the occupiers failed to adequately communicate to the American public the vast, complex changes in Indian policy they sought, a failure that hurt their cause, according to some historians.¹⁴ Schultz of Harper’s described the conflict between Wilson and the activists as “not all that complicated,” as basically a struggle between a power-hungry tribal chairman and a bunch of alcoholic, equally power-hungry militants.¹¹

Those reporters who arrived at or near Wounded Knee covered the event as they would a war, describing in great detail the arms that both sides used and the daily tit-for-tat between the two sides.¹³ Too often, their coverage lacked context, both cultural and historical. Reporters routinely evoked western images of cowboys and Indians dueling on the plains.¹³

The Indians reinforced those stereotypes, according to some magazine writers at the time. “They dress and act as if they believe everything the white man has written about them,” Schultz wrote for Harper’s. ¹¹ She described activists directing cameramen and restaging events that reporters missed, as well as parading before the media “hostages” who later turned out to be willing participants in the occupation. ¹¹ Writing for the National Review in April 1973, author Victor Gold described a young Indian man guarding a roadblock who had to be reminded that he didn’t look very warlike with “an expensive camera dangling next to his rifle. So he put the camera aside as he posed as a warrior for a photograph.” ¹⁶

Gold assailed the Native American activists’ handling of media as a desperate attempt to revive a dying form of political theatre. “It is like watching the Dead End Kids after they became the East Side Kids; a performance of ‘Streetcar’ with Jon Voight playing the old Brando role; or a rendition of the new Brando non-accepting an Oscar with Sandra Dee standing in for Sacheen Littlefeather,” Gold wrote. ¹⁶ “What’s left to watch is only the final, banal exercise of an overexposed political art form.”

In reality, Schultz wrote, the activists were anything but real Indians. Instead, they were urban Indians who knew little about their traditional cultures and, by and large, couldn’t speak their Native American languages. She lampooned the activists’ inability to put up a tipi or shoot and kill a cow to eat. ¹¹

Still, others blamed stereotypical depiction of Indians in film and the government’s neglect of tribes for their deplorable conditions. When a young Indian woman named Sacheen Littlefeather stepped up to the microphone at the March 1973 Oscars, she informed those in the audience and those watching from home that Marlon

Brando would not be accepting the award for best actor for his role in “The Godfather” because of how badly the government and the media had treated Indians.⁹² “He very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award, and the reasons for this being are the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry, excuse me, and on television in movie re-runs and also with recent happenings at Wounded Knee.”⁹¹ Brando, through Littlefeather, expressed support for the activists at Wounded Knee.

Schultz and many other reporters at the time, however, lapsed into more modern stereotypes of Indians as drunks and impoverished. Schultz described how militants and tribal chairman Wilson’s family drank heavily as they were being interviewed.¹¹ She then described one of the lead activists as a poor man with bad teeth and a Napoleon complex. Schultz wrote: “Standing in the rubble behind his house the next morning, feet spread, arms crossed, the four remaining teeth in his mouth gleaming in the sun, Aaron DeSersa tells a group of reporters: ‘I have ordered the caravans to come from St. Louis, Des Moines, St. Paul and Oklahoma, to avenge the firebombing of my house by Wilson’s goon squads.’”¹¹

Schultz pointed out that a state fire marshal later determined that faulty wiring caused the fire in DeSersa’s home, not a firebomb. But Schultz wasn’t alone in her demeaning descriptions of Indians. The Chicago Daily News described how many reservation residents “don’t seem to mind” being poor, thus portraying Indians as a degraded people content with conditions that others would find intolerable.¹³ At the same time, local media largely focused their coverage on interviews with government officials and non-Indians who expressed fear of spreading violence by militants. Schultz interviewed James Kuehn, longtime executive editor of the Rapid City Journal, who told

her: “We’re so close to the situation and things are so tense, you can’t say anything about the Indians without offending somebody.”¹¹

Historian Weston described the 1960s and 1970s as a period of American journalism marked by a sea change in coverage of Indians. Unlike in 1890 and 1891, when just one Indian reporter, Suzette La Flesche, could be found to speak on behalf of the Indians killed at Wounded Knee, a century later, Indians had established their own media and had access to mainstream media.¹³ They could call on such Native American intellectuals as author Vine Deloria and Mohawk activist Richard Oakes to speak for them in such hallowed pages as *The New York Times Magazine*.¹³

Indians had become their own spokespeople and exercised influence on the highest levels of government. They also could, and did, write their own version of the occupation’s history. Activists like Russell Means, Dennis Banks and “Lakota Woman” author Mary Crow Dog painted their own portraits of the events of early 1973. This was a far different Indian than the one the Seventh Cavalry encountered and destroyed at Wounded Knee in 1890. Rather than sit mute as their ancestors did when the media told the story of the 1890 massacre, these Indians would attempt to rewrite history, to explain their actions themselves – without media like newspapers, radio or television.

In his autobiography, “Ojibwa Warrior,” Banks attempted to portray the takeover as approved by traditional Native Americans, an assertion no doubt meant to counter criticism that the occupiers were mostly urban, non-reservation Indians.¹⁷ He also attempts to explain that the activists never meant to portray the farmers and store owners held at Wounded Knee as hostages, despite numerous press reports and video footage that showed the activists herding the men and women around with their hands tied. Banks

said the media helped prevent greater violence at Wounded Knee. “We were thankful for their attention. As long as the press were there, we could not be attacked.”¹⁷

In his autobiography, “Where White Men Fear to Tread,” Russell Means also addressed the question of the “hostages.” “All around the country, the headline news was that a bunch of savages – radical, militant Indians – was holding white hostages.”¹⁸ On the contrary, like Banks, he argued the hostages were willing participants, a fact that the activists never meant to portray otherwise, Means said.

Means was more forthcoming about the activists’ handling of the media than Banks, however, and described how the occupiers used the media to trick the government into thinking they had heavy weapons that could pierce an armored personnel carrier.¹⁸ He also poked fun at cameramen who too often focused on the pageantry of Indian religious ceremonies, including a morning prayer ceremony held at the Wounded Knee gravesite that always drew reporters’ attention.¹⁸ But Means betrayed the activists’ and his own infatuation with their temporary celebrity, writing in great detail about getting to dine with celebrity media figures like CBS producer Phil O’Connor and NBC correspondent Fred Briggs.¹⁸

However, Indians who occupied Wounded Knee weren’t the only participants in the siege who wrote their versions of the events there. Government officials and tribal leaders who opposed the activists also have written personal accounts of the siege. Among them is Stanley David Lyman, who served as the Bureau of Indian Affairs superintendent in Pine Ridge in 1973. In his autobiography, “Wounded Knee: A Personal Account,” Lyman described the efforts of government officials as well intentioned though frustrated by the illegal actions of the activists. He criticized press coverage of the

siege as largely inaccurate and biased toward the activists. He described at length an ABC News piece that erroneously described all the businesses in Pine Ridge as being owned by non-Indians.¹⁹ He also described the government's efforts to get the media to focus on the other side of the story, including the plight of displaced Wounded Knee residents. But the media, according to Lyman, didn't seem to want to get anyone but the activists' version of events. "After a time, I felt that the press was no longer listening to these people," he said of a press conference the government organized featuring displaced Wounded Knee residents. "(The press) stopped taking notes, and it seemed like nothing was going to be accomplished."¹⁹

However, even Lyman conceded the activists had some cause for their actions. He described how he failed at first to understand why the activists had taken over Wounded Knee. However, after listening to the impassioned plea of a tribal council member who shared the activists' beliefs that tribal government needed to change, Lyman began to feel disillusioned about his cause. "As he talked I realized that this man has known for a long time what I have come to know only in the last few months: that tribal government is an overlay, it does not reach the people."¹⁹

An evolving Indian voice

By the time Native American activists took over the small village of Wounded Knee on the impoverished Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of South Dakota in February 1973, American media had evolved into a many-tentacled beast. Not only did newspaper reporters arrive at Wounded Knee to cover the takeover, as they had to cover growing tension on the reservation in 1890, television and radio reporters also arrived with their cameras and voice recorders. America would learn about the events taking place in a forgotten, windswept corner of South Dakota on their television sets and in their cars, as well as in their newspapers. But while the media had evolved technologically, it remained tethered to a news-hungry public that enjoyed the sounds and images of Indian activists opposing the government. As a result, much as it did in 1890 and 1891, the media proved vulnerable to sensationalism and relied on old stereotypes when it came to covering the second Wounded Knee conflict.

A major difference between news coverage of both events, however, was the inclusion of Native American voices within the media coverage of Wounded Knee 1973. This time, Indians wouldn't watch helplessly as white photographers and correspondents told their story of government betrayal and neglect. They would help shape coverage of the events and write their own versions of history, and like the non-Indian reporters of 1890 and 1891, their stories would be an imperfect mix of truth, lies and exaggerations.

Chapter II: Wounded Knee 1890

The two reporters – one an Indian, the other her husband and a friend to the Indians – handed the old woman a tin cup full of water to give to the little girl whose pleas for *mni, mni* (Lakota for water) were the only sounds in the church full of wounded and dying Indians. As the woman poured the water into the girl's mouth, water seeped from a gash in the girl's throat. A banner hanging above the room read: "Peace on earth, good will to men." ²⁰

Suzette La Flesche, an Omaha tribal member and reporter for the Omaha World-Herald covering the unfolding 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, wrote of the scene: "I have been thus particular in giving horrible details in the hope of rousing such an indignation that another such causeless war shall never again be allowed by the people of the United States." ²¹

Many years later, her husband, Thomas H. Tibbles, a reporter for the World-Herald who also covered the massacre, would say of the tragedy: "Nothing I have seen in my whole varied life has ever affected or depressed or haunted me like the scenes I saw that night in that church, under the festival decorations of the Prince of Peace, which hung above the rows of suffering, innocent women and children." ²⁰

Going to War

As the Indian Wars drew to a close on the Great Plains, the newspapers of Nebraska and the East Coast dispatched their reporters to the Pine Ridge Agency of South Dakota and its nearby white communities to document the last days of Indian resistance. As those correspondents began wiring their stories, the nation and the world became ever aware of a growing tension on the reservation, where Indian “bucks” and “squaws” engaged in the Ghost Dance, which correspondents described as a last desperate attempt to return to the old ways and wash their land of invaders. Those correspondents would go so far as to say the Ghost Dance signaled the start of a major uprising among the Sioux and, perhaps, other tribes of the Great Plains who would join them in that fight.

However, among the Sioux, the Ghost Dance was never meant to start the massive uprising so feared by some settlers and trumpeted by nearly all of the correspondents. Rather, the dance was a final desperate attempt to revive the dying culture of the plains tribes, mixed with a certain religious fever akin to religious revivals that have swept white America at various times throughout its history.⁹

In his posthumously published 1957 memoir, Tibbles described arriving with La Flesche at the Pine Ridge Agency to find “war correspondents” from all over the country already there to produce “thrilling ‘war news.’”²⁰ Many were all too happy to write stories of Indian skirmishes, battles and outbreaks that had never occurred, according to Tibbles.²⁰ They wrote of Indians firing burning arrows into agency buildings and attacking settlers and soldiers alike.

But, there at the agency, Tibbles and La Flesche saw a much different scene than that portrayed by writers from the eastern U.S. and elsewhere in Nebraska. Tibbles and La Flesche saw Indian children and adults going to church and school and shopping at the trader's store, going about their normal lives.²⁰ Tibbles and La Flesche attempted to allay their readers' fears by dispelling rumors and granting little weight to unconfirmed reports.²⁰ However, even Tibbles and La Flesche were buffeted by the prevailing journalistic winds of the day. Tibbles described his own newspaper, as well as the Chicago Express, which was publishing the World-Herald's stories from Pine Ridge, as pushing him and La Flesche to write more sensational stories.²⁰ Their newspaper eventually ordered them home for failing to produce such gripping stories as were filling the pages of their competitors.

Our newspapers had grown indignant with us for not turning in anything interesting about this "great Indian war" all around us. Other dailies had whole columns of thrilling stuff, but our readers, finding not exciting "news from the front," flung their papers down in disgust.²⁰

Only a personal appeal from Gen. Nelson Miles, the division commander at the agency, convinced the World-Herald editors to allow La Flesche and Tibbles to remain at Pine Ridge.²⁰ In an appeal on the Indians' behalf, La Flesche, writing under her Omaha name, Bright Eyes, asked that Gen. Miles' request that military commanders replace Interior Department administrators be acted upon.

"I am the only Indian speaking to the public through the press for the Indians, and I demand in the name of the race and for their welfare that it shall be done," she wrote.¹⁰

Feeding the Fear

“THE TURBULENT REDS, Latest Intelligence from the Scene of the Threatened Outbreak.”⁷

“Squaws Swarming at Pine Ridge, Each One Armed With a Knife.”⁸

“A Vicious Indian, He Makes a Resolute Attempt to Secure a Young Lady’s Scalp.”²²

These were all typical Omaha Daily Bee headlines leading up to the massacre. By comparison, the World-Herald portrayed the troubles on the reservation as caused by government negligence of the Indians and by the lack of adequate food and supplies to the Indians. The newspaper cited the Indian bureau’s decision to cut the Indians’ beef rations by 1 million pounds per year. “Before their rations were cut at all, they were half starved.”²³

“THEY DON’T KNOW THE INJUN, The Heads of the Government Wofully (sic) Ignorant Concerning the Nation’s Ward”²⁴ and “Agent Royer’s Lack of Experience and Nerve Was Responsible for All the Scare That Existed”²⁵ were typical World-Herald headlines that sought to lay the blame squarely on the soldiers of the politically appointed government agents at Pine Ridge. At the same time, the World-Herald also sought to allay fears of settlers and readers with headlines like “AFFAIRS AT PINE RIDGE, A Plain Statement of Facts as They Now Exist at the Agency”²⁵ and “NO RAIDS REPORTED, The Army Knows Nothing of Indian Depredations.”²⁶

According to historian Reilly, newspapers covering the Indian Wars rarely understood the Indians’ perspective. However, they often attempted to defend Indian interests by criticizing the government for failing to live up to its promises to the Indians,

a view that often corresponded with military opinions about civilian administration of the reservations.⁹

As has been shown, however, newspapers' motives for criticizing government officials were likely tainted by their own political viewpoint and allegiances. The World-Herald – a Democratic leaning newspaper prone to criticize the Republican administration of Benjamin Harrison⁹ – proved especially harsh in its criticism of Pine Ridge Agent Daniel F. Royer's decision to request military assistance to quell the Ghost Dance after his own Indian police were rebuffed by armed dancers when they attempted to stop the dancing. Reporter Carl Smith began what would be a long tirade against Royer by quoting former Pine Ridge Agent Valentine T. McGillicuddy, who described Indian agents generally as political appointees who lack experience in dealing with Indians. Asked by Smith what he considered to be the cause of the troubles at Pine Ridge, McGillicuddy responded: "The disorganized condition of the affairs of the agency when Mr. Royer took charge is the foundation, I take it. Together with this was the Messiah craze."²⁴

In a story published three days later, Smith described how, upon first reaching the agency, he had found Royer absent from his post.²⁵ The reporter described finding a clearly frightened and paranoid Royer feverishly writing dispatches to the military in Rushville, several miles from Pine Ridge. Royer, Smith said, told him he feared his dispatches might be intercepted by Indians and that he wouldn't return to the agency until the troops arrived at Rushville to accompany him there.²⁵ Smith said Royer had threatened to have him removed from the agency if he continued writing stories criticizing him. The World-Herald reporter then implied that Royer had mistakenly called

the military to the reservation. Smith wrote that Royer was too quick to discredit any accounts of the situation at Pine Ridge that didn't support his decision to call upon the military.

“After a time it became apparent to me and to every army officer in the post – and most are old Indian fighters – that Mr. Royer was trying to substantiate the fright which had caused him to call upon the troops.”²⁵ Then, Smith offered his assessment of Royer even more plainly: “I do not wish to do anybody up there an injustice, but there is not a circumstance which points to anything but a weak backbone, a vacillating spirit and I may say from my own experience, a principle which would not cause him to hesitate to lie to a white man, to say nothing of an Indian.”²⁵ Royer eventually succeeded in getting the World-Herald to recall Smith. However, in perhaps a further slap at Royer, the newspaper sent in Smith's place two well-known Indian advocates: La Flesche and Tibbles.⁹

Even as the World-Herald criticized government officials for providing adequate supplies to the Indians, other newspapers defended government treatment of Indians and reaction to the Ghost Dance. The Omaha Daily Bee staked its position as defender of the government agents by calling the World-Herald's claim that Royer had abandoned his post at Pine Ridge out of fear “utterly false.” The newspaper's correspondent at Pine Ridge, Charles H. Cressey, went on to explain that Royer had traveled to Rushville to greet Gen. John Rutter Brooke there and provide him with vital information regarding the situation at the agency before the general proceeded to Pine Ridge.⁷ “Agent Royer deserves only the very highest praise for his conduct ever since he has been here and particularly in connection with the trying situation of affairs now on.”⁷

The Omaha Daily Bee wasn't alone in its defense of the embattled agents at Pine Ridge. The Daily Critic in Washington, D.C., reported the contents of a letter from Census Indian Agent Jesse Lee at Pine Ridge read by U.S. Sen. Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts on the Senate floor:

Mr. Dawes expresses his conviction that the Government had substantially fulfilled its entire obligations to those Indians, and he referred to the report in this morning's papers of the parley between General Brooke and the Sioux chiefs, in which the latter made the request to have teams sent to the Bad Lands to bring in "the great quantities of beef" which they had there. This did not show that they were starving.²⁸

Early in its reporting from Pine Ridge, the Omaha Daily Bee made clear its position on the inevitability of conflict between the "redskins" and the military. With no confirmed battles or even skirmishes to write about when he first arrived at the agency, Cressey offered this foreboding description of the situation at Pine Ridge in early December: "The dawn of another day has come and mercifully without bloodshed in our midst."⁷ To the Omaha Daily Bee, peace on the reservation was only the calm before the storm, and Royer's decision to request military assistance was prudent. "The best judgment of those high in command is that the dancers will fight to the death rather than submit."⁷

However, an account by two Omaha citizens who said they had witnessed the Ghost Dance and that was published in the Omaha Daily Bee seemed to contradict the newspaper's position supporting Royer's decision to call upon the military to pacify the Ghost Dancers. The two Omaha men said there was "nothing of a warlike nature" in the Indians' dance and that it appeared to be only "wild religious fanaticism."²⁹ However, according to the two Omaha men, the underlying principles of the dance combined with

the “well known disposition of the Indians” could result in serious trouble if the ghost dancing was allowed to continue, a position that offered further support for Royer’s actions.²⁹

Just beyond the tempestuous confines of Omaha’s journalistic community, the Lincoln Evening News attempted to both calm and alarm its readers, often in the same edition. Under the headline “THE INDIAN SCARE,” a subheadline in the Lincoln Evening News read: “The Reported Battle at Fort Keogh a Fake.”³⁰ The story went on to say: “A dispatch received by The United Press from General Manager Mellen of the Northern Pacific railroad said the report from Missoula, Mont., of fighting between the Indians and soldiers is absolutely without foundation.”³⁰ In the same story, however, the newspaper recounted an unlikely tale told to the newspaper’s correspondent in Pine Ridge by two Indian policemen who said their families had been abducted by hostile Indians and taken to the Badlands. The Indian policemen said the hostile Indians told them: ““Go and tell the soldiers at Pine Ridge agency we are a part of the 1,300 other Rosebud Indians now near Pine Ridge agency, and that from now on we are going to kill every white person we meet, and if the soldiers come we are ready for them.””³⁰

Later coverage by the Lincoln Evening News continued to vacillate between fear-mongering and rumor-dispelling. “A son of a prominent army official is at headquarters and said, ‘It is more of a correspondents’ than an Indian scare,’” said a wire report published in the newspaper.³¹ The newspaper also quoted McGillicuddy as contradicting newspaper reports of unrest at Pine Ridge.³²

Like other newspapers at the time, the Lincoln newspaper described Hunkpapa leader Sitting Bull as one of the chief instigators of the Ghost Dance who was openly

defying the military's efforts to stop the dance. The newspaper also imitated its peers in giving rise to fears of other tribes joining the hostile Sioux encamped in the Badlands. "Gen. Brooke has just received a telegram from Gen. Ruger, warning him that three hundred lodges (about one thousand warriors) of Cheyennes were coming from the Cheyenne agency to join the hostiles near here," the newspaper wrote in a typical report of rumored alliances that never materialized between the Sioux at Pine Ridge and other tribes.³³ An especially inflammatory story claimed that warriors from four Sioux reservations – Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, Lower Brule and Rosebud – were "sweeping across the country, fully armed, toward the bad lands to join the rebel reds now there. This will swell the hostile force to over four thousand."³⁴ This "army of reds" was supposedly committing all manner of depredations as it "stampeded" across the country, destroying cabins and livestock of friendly Indians in their path.³⁴

Death of a Chief

The first significant event for the reporters at Pine Ridge to write about came Dec. 15, 1890, when Indian police acting on orders of the agent at Standing Rock killed Sitting Bull. While most of the Nebraska newspapers relied on wire reports, which offered fairly accurate if rather sparse information about the event, those reporters at Pine Ridge seized on the opportunity to predict hostility on the part of the Sioux there as a result of Sitting Bull's killing in North Dakota.

Having painted Sitting Bull as one of the primary agitators and Ghost Dance supporters, the Nebraska newspapers now predicted an abatement of hostilities at Pine Ridge as a result of his death. "Sitting Bull was able to keep the young bucks excited with the Messiah craze, but now that he is dead Colonel Corbin believes hostilities will soon stop," the Omaha Daily Bee predicted.²⁷ The Lincoln Evening News reassured its readers a general outbreak on the Sioux reservation was unlikely following Sitting Bull's death because the reservation was surrounded by troops. "It is expected that before another sun has set Sitting Bull's celebrated chorus of dancers will be good Indians or prisoners," the newspaper reported, referencing Gen. Phillip Sheridan's infamous phrase, "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead." (His quote later was truncated to the more popular, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian.")³⁵ And while the newspaper predicted a "lively time" once the Indians at Pine Ridge heard about Sitting Bull's death, the Lincoln Evening News also ran a wire story quoting a Sioux man living near Bad River in South Dakota who said the Indians living in that part of the state were glad to hear of Sitting Bull's death.³⁶

Initially, the World-Herald also predicted the old chief's death would not ignite further conflict at Pine Ridge. However, as tensions mounted between the Indians at Pine Ridge and the growing number of cavalry and infantry arriving at the agency and as troubling rumors swirled, La Flesche again tried to calm fears and offer possible solutions: "I think this affair could be more easily settled if Governor (John Milton) Thayer (of Nebraska) would keep off the cowboys and militia, and something could be done to stop the lies that are sent to the papers about fights that never occurred. I am sure that the military are able to cope with the situation."³⁷

The World-Herald's decision to send La Flesche and Tibbles – who had both gained fame 11 years before Wounded Knee for successfully advocating on behalf of Ponca Chief Standing Bear before an Omaha judge who was considering whether to allow the chief to return to his homelands along the Niobrara – led to something unprecedented in the coverage of the Indian Wars: interviews with Indians.⁹ La Flesche and Tibbles even stayed in an Indian family's home upon arriving at Pine Ridge in order to try to more effectively get interviews and intelligence from the Indians.²⁰ That decision provided them the means to dispel baseless rumors about battles and Indian depredations being reported by other newspapers.

Under the headline "WITHOUT FOUNDATION, Rumored Stories Sent From Pine Ridge Are Untrue," Tibbles wrote of such rumors that were being reported in other newspapers shortly after arriving at Pine Ridge. "I understand that long specials have been sent to eastern papers of a most sensational kind. There is not a word of truth in them. There has been no fight and no bloodshed."³⁸ Unfortunately, the two reporters' efforts to quell unease about the problems at Pine Ridge would have little impact on

newspaper coverage and would prove unsuccessful at stopping the coming battle as Big Foot's cold and weary band of Sioux approached the agency and the Seventh Cavalry rode out to meet them.

Reporters on the Frontlines

According to historian Dee Brown, the promise of a return to the old ways through the Ghost Dance was the only reason the angered and grieving Sioux did not rise up against the army after Sitting Bull's death.³⁹ However, the now leaderless Hunkpapas from Standing Rock decided they were no longer safe without Sitting Bull, and many began a long trek south toward Pine Ridge seeking safety with Red Cloud. Nearly 100 of those fleeing Hunkpapas eventually caught up with Big Foot's camp of Miniconjou near Cherry Creek. That same day, the War Department ordered the arrest of Big Foot, a leader the department considered high on its list of "fomenters of disturbance."³⁹

And so the Seventh Cavalry rode out from Pine Ridge to meet Big Foot. With Maj. Samuel Whitside leading them, the Seventh Cavalry caught Big Foot's band on the afternoon of Dec. 28, 1890. That night, the column of cavalry and Indian prisoners made camp at Wounded Knee Creek, and Whitside deployed his soldiers all around the Indians and placed his two Hotchkiss guns on a low hill just north of the Indian camp.⁶ It wasn't long before the Seventh Cavalry's commanding officer, Col. James W. Forsyth, arrived from the agency with the regiment's four remaining troops and two more Hotchkiss guns. He carried with him orders from Gen. Miles that read: "Disarm the Indians. Take every precaution to prevent their escape. If they choose to fight, destroy them."⁶

According to Whitside's count, 350 Indians made up Big Foot's band, including 230 women and children. The soldiers numbered nearly 500. At 7 a.m. Dec. 29, 1890, a trumpeter called the soldiers to order, and Forsyth issued his commands to surround the Indians and begin disarming them.⁶ Around 7:30 a.m., the Indians began to gather around the ailing Big Foot's tent, as Tibbles wandered up to the gun battery on what

would become known as Cemetery Hill and overhead Lt. Harry Hawthorne comment to his commanding officer, Capt. Charles Ilsley: “Isn’t this rather a strange formation of troops, if there should be any trouble?” To which, Ilsley responded: “There’s no possibility of trouble that I can see. Big Foot wants to go to the agency and we’re a guard of honor to escort him in.”²⁰ But Tibbles wrote later that he realized immediately what Hawthorne meant: “If any troop should try to shoot any Indian, it must fire straight in the direction of some other army group stationed in that enclosing square.”²⁰ The lieutenant’s observation would later haunt Forsyth, who endured a court-martial after several of his soldiers died from friendly fire as a result of the ill-planned formations he ordered that morning.⁶

After a brief speech, Forsyth ordered Big Foot’s people to give up their guns, which immediately caused a commotion among the men, who feared the soldiers might take their guns and then shoot them. After conferring with Big Foot, the Indians decided only to hand over two broken and useless guns and keep their good guns.⁶ But Forsyth and Whitside knew the Indians had better guns and insisted they hand them over. After the Indians refused, the officers ordered their men to begin searching the camp. The soldiers found several pristine Winchester repeating rifles on the bodies of women, and as they began confiscating anything that could be considered a weapon, including hunting knives and other utensils, the Indian men grew ever more restless. Finally, a medicine man, Yellow Bird, stretched his arm toward the sky and prayed that his people’s ghost shirts would stop the soldiers’ bullets.⁶ He began dancing and chanting, then threw a fistful of dust into the air before turning to face the Indian men:

Do not be afraid! Let your hearts be strong to meet what is before you! There are lots of soldiers and they have lots of bullets, but the prairie is large and the bullets will not go toward you, but over the large prairies. . . . As you saw me throw up the dust and it floated away, so will the bullets float harmlessly away over the prairie.⁶

What happened next is the subject of much controversy, and it is difficult to criticize journalists or historians for their presentation of the outbreak of violence.

According to historian Smith, a young Indian man named either Black Coyote or Hosi Yanka, which means “deaf,” who was deaf and whom most described later as a troublemaker, stood up, held his Winchester above his head and began shouting that the rifle was his and he would not give it up.⁶ Yellow Bird, meanwhile, continued chanting.

Two sergeants, who had been sneaking up behind Black Coyote (or Hosi Yanka), grabbed him from behind. As they did, the rifle in the youth’s hands pointed skyward and went off. Just then, a half dozen young Indians threw off their blankets and aimed their Winchesters at the soldiers.⁶ A bullet tore through Capt. George Wallace’s head, and another ripped through Big Foot’s skull. An Indian plunged a knife into Father Francis Craft’s back as he attempted to care for the wounded.⁶ Soon, the entire camp disappeared into a cloud of powder smoke as the soldiers fired into the Indians and into other soldiers on the opposite side of the camp, while the Indians retreated into the hills. Until then, their operators unable to see through the fog of gunpowder, the Hotchkiss guns had been silent.⁶ As the Indians began separating themselves from the soldiers, however, the big guns began firing into the Indian camp, where the young men had fled. Lodges caught fire as men, women and children fell. The survivors began running toward a ravine, where they managed to find shelter from the soldiers’ rifles.⁶

According to Smith, up to this point, the battle could hardly be called a massacre, as soldiers and Indians fought for survival in nearly equal measure.⁶ However, as the exploding Hotchkiss shells began raking the surviving Indians in the ravine, it could be argued the soldiers could have retreated to a safe distance and made peace overtures. But as the Indians in the ravine continued firing on the soldiers, the soldiers felt the need to return their fire.⁶ “The result was that both the Indians and the soldiers were caught up in one of those too often repeated tragedies of history wherein each side goes on fighting for the sole reason that the other side is; thus the senseless carnage continued.”⁶

By the time it was over and the Indians’ guns in the ravine fell silent, 37 soldiers, two civilians and 51 Indians lay wounded, and 25 soldiers and at least 170 Indian men, women and children lay dead in the fields and hills.⁶ Just three reporters had witnessed the fighting first-hand: Charles W. Allen of the Chadron Democrat, Cressey of the Omaha Daily Bee and William F. Kelley of the Lincoln State Journal.³ Thinking nothing was likely to happen as Forsyth disarmed Big Foot’s band, Tibbles had left the camp earlier that morning but returned after hearing firing from Wounded Knee as he rode away. Later, he and his fellow journalists raced to Rushville to try to telegraph the first report of the incident.

According to historian Hugh J. Reilly, Cressey beat his colleagues in reporting the events of Dec. 29, 1890. Under the headline “A Bloody Battle” and a subheadline “Details Given by the Bee’s Correspondent – Who Was on the Field of Battle,” Cressey offered few details beyond that a fight had occurred after the Seventh Cavalry had tried to disarm Big Foot’s band.⁴⁰ “Their first volley was almost as one man, so that they must have fired a hundred shots before the soldiers fired one,” he said of the Indians.⁴⁰

Cressey described Wallace as dying after being struck with a tomahawk in the head. He counted as many as 34 soldiers who had been killed but offered no information about the number of dead Indians. The next day, Cressey said 156 Indians had bit the dust, including 40 “squaws.” He counted 24 soldiers among the dead.⁴⁰ In the next day’s edition, Cressey described how the Indian women had been killed after trying to stab the soldiers with knives, while describing the soldiers as “gallant, utterly fearless.” But he also bemoaned the death of Indian children, whom he described as paying as much attention to the slaughter around them as if it were “so much conversation.”⁴¹

The World-Herald took a decidedly different tack in its coverage, portraying it as a massacre rather than a valiant battle. While the paper’s first report of Wounded Knee bore the headline “ALL MURDERED IN A MASS, Big Foot and All His Followers Shot Down Without Regard to Sex,” the actual story very much resembled the Omaha Daily Bee’s account in its praise for the soldiers’ actions and its criticism of the Indians’ “treachery.”⁴² Quoting Secretary of War Redfield Proctor, the World-Herald wrote: “He supposed inasmuch as Big Foot was connected with Sitting Bull’s band it was a case where the Indians wanted revenge for the killing of their friend.”⁴² However, the World-Herald attempted to provide some explanation for the Indians’ actions, describing them as “half starved.”

Yet, in that first story, the World-Herald also engaged in the kind of doomsday prophesying that it had tried to avoid prior to Wounded Knee, predicting a “bloody war” as a result of the slaughter.⁴² Closer to Wounded Knee, the Dawes County Journal in Chadron, Neb., just 30 miles from Pine Ridge, offered its first lengthy report of tensions at the agency with a Jan. 2, 1891, story that blamed Yellow Horse for firing the first shot.

He drew a gun and fired upon the guard stationed over the captured arms, when hundreds of guns cracked and a bloody fight was on. The medicine man was the first to fall, pierced by five bullets. A frenzy seized the troops and with the battle cry of "Remember Custer; remember '76," they fought without quarter.⁴³

As hostility erupted across the reservation following Wounded Knee, the Nebraska newspapers returned to their usual pattern of offering doomsday predictions and blaming either the government, military or Indians for the deaths of soldiers and Indians. La Flesche blamed the slaughter on the government's desire for the Indians' land.

If the white people want their land and must have it, 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.²¹

Tibbles, meanwhile, called upon all Indian bureau employees to resign and be replaced by military officers, as requested by Gen. Miles. "They must know that the whole mass of Indians hate them," he wrote of the Indian bureau employees.⁴⁴ Miles later relieved Col. Forsyth of his command of the Seventh Cavalry, mostly because of his deployment of troops at Wounded Knee, though Forsyth also received plenty of criticism for the murder of women and children. Forsyth was eventually given back command of the Seventh Cavalry after being exonerated during a court-martial that Miles had requested.⁹

Reacting to further deployment of soldiers into the reservation, Tibbles offered a cynical assessment: "It makes my heart sad to see these gallant officers and men ride out to die that contractors may grow rich and a few politicians have an office."⁴⁵ Cressey of the Omaha Daily Bee, on the other hand, offered a spirited defense of Royer, quoting a dispatch sent by the agent to the War Department as saying Royer hated asking for

military assistance, knowing that the presence of soldiers very likely would turn the Indians against him.⁴⁶ Cressey quoted other Indian agents, as well as area business and religious leaders, as supporting Royer's decision to request military assistance. One Presbyterian clergyman, Rev. C.G. Sterling, offered the most contemplative assessment on the subject:

I do not think that an outbreak was imminent, yet it is beyond question that the Indians were growing steadily more sullen and defiant. Altogether, despite some unfortunate results which followed the coming of the troops, I am disposed to believe that we are better off for their coming and that the settlement, which it was plain must soon be had, will now be the more speedily and satisfactorily accomplished.⁴⁶

A senseless tragedy

Like so many historical events that have been elevated into myth, the Wounded Knee Massacre can't be easily boxed and wrapped for future generations with such clear lines between good and evil as the myth has produced.³ Rather, the tragedy is much more complex, its seeds planted within the soil of an ever-expanding democracy hungry for more land and yet also striving to live up to the ideals of its forefathers.

It was a clash precipitated by a press as hungry for news as the nervous and isolated settler was for military security. Almost inevitably, those who told the story of this final confrontation of the Indians Wars became the mouthpieces for this land-hungry, Indian-fearing population of settlers and, eventually, the voices of a nation ashamed and indignant at the slaughter of their country's indigenous people. While they very likely fed the very fear that eventually led to the slaughter at Wounded Knee, the reporters at Pine Ridge also attempted at times to allay growing fears of conflict and tried to find solutions to prevent further bloodshed after the battle was over.

Writing of the massacre many years later, Lakota holy man Black Elk said the slaughter of men, women in children at Wounded Knee had broken his people's sacred hoop:

I did not know how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.⁴⁷

For journalists assigned to cover battlefields today, the needless deaths of so many Native people and the journalists' contribution to that event can offer a lesson for future war coverage. Whether that lesson will take seed remains to be seen.

Chapter III: Wounded Knee 1973

The headline, “South Dakota Trading Post is ‘Captured’” that appeared in the Feb. 28, 1973, Omaha World-Herald offered the readers of Nebraska’s largest newspaper their first indication of trouble at Wounded Knee.⁴⁸ The United Press International story offered 11 paragraphs on the news that would dominate that newspaper and others for the next two months. The story quoted Pine Ridge Indian Reservation police as saying the takeover began because American Indian Movement leader Russell Means was beaten in Pine Ridge. The story also quoted Mrs. Clive Gildersleeve, whose husband managed the trading post at Wounded Knee. She said residents near the trading post were barricaded in their homes. “We’re afraid we might get shot at. There’s been shooting for an hour.”⁴⁸

Across the country, headlines jerked Americans preoccupied with the growing Watergate scandal out of their daily routines in late February 1973 to inform them of a takeover of a tiny hamlet on a forgotten, picturesque corner of South Dakota by militant members of AIM, an organization responsible for violence and similar takeovers of courthouses and federal buildings in preceding months and years. From nearby newspapers like the Omaha World-Herald and the two daily newspapers in Lincoln, Neb., to massive dailies like The New York Times, newspapers published wire service accounts of the siege as well as staff-written stories. They would complement daily coverage of the events with staff editorials and letters to the editor written by sympathizers of AIM and angry non-Indians who were tired of the government allowing lawlessness and destruction of private property.

Like their predecessors of nearly a century before, the hundreds of American and foreign journalists who swarmed onto the Pine Ridge Reservation in March 1973 would

employ stereotypes of the noble savage, but this time their subjects would be wearing cowboy hats and thrusting their rifles into the air in acts of defiance against a government for which they felt only anger because of what they said was willful neglect. Those journalists would describe scenes reminiscent of dime store Western novels where tough, bawdy lawmen rode into lawless towns on horses to exact a ruthless justice on instigators of violence. This time, the bad guys weren't unruly cowboys, a la Billy and brother Ike Clanton, antagonists of the October 1881 shootout at the O.K. Corral, but the federal government itself and a decidedly unlikable plumber-turned-chairman of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, Richard Wilson.

But the press that rode into town in 1973 wasn't the same one that had covered the 1890 massacre. In 1923, the American Society of Newspaper Editors had adopted a code of ethics that included principles of sincerity, truthfulness, accuracy and impartiality.⁹³ They would seek to speak to both sides involved in the conflict, rather than rely on military or government officials to relay information to them as reporters in 1890 often did. Certainly, the reporters of 1973 didn't always live up to the standards they had set for themselves, but their coverage certainly proved far more balanced and comprehensive than the coverage in 1890.

Lured by stunning images and a rich history of bloodstained snow and soil, newspaper reporters, TV news crews and radio reporters jockeyed for position along the federal cordon that grew around Wounded Knee. And they didn't hesitate to draw comparisons between the 1890 massacre and the 1973 siege. "Once again – faced not with the religious fervor of the Ghost Dancers but with the political rage of the Red Power activists – the white establishment reacted with uncertainty and a show of force,"

wrote John Kifner for The New York Times on March 4, 1973, in a story headlined, “The Ghosts Dance Once Again at Wounded Knee.”⁴⁹

Soon, however, the romanticism of Wounded Knee II would wear thin as news companies’ budgets and interests waned with the endless negotiations and lack of access to Wounded Knee. By April 2, The New York Times’ Kifner wrote about the dwindling corps of journalists covering the confrontation. “In the first days of the seizure, hundreds of newsmen raced about here, fighting for the pay phone in the parking lot of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Building or the one in the Crazy Horse Café, the town’s only eatery, sneaking up creekbeds and arroyos past the Government roadblocks or jamming into Federal briefings,” Kifner wrote.⁵⁰ “Now only a handful of reporters is left, making the 27-mile drive each night to a bowling alley in Rushville, Neb., that has the nearest restaurant and where white patrons eye them darkly and make loud remarks about ‘the national press.’”⁵⁰

As the days dragged on with little hope of an end to the conflict, newspaper editorials became increasingly critical of the standoff. “As media theater, and particularly as television fare, the Siege of Wounded Knee has been a producer’s dream,” a World-Herald staff editorial proclaimed on March 10.⁵¹ “It has everything: A picturesque setting in the lonely hill country of the Pine Ridge, where the ghosts of the 1890 massacre can be summoned by the drop of a cliché or the snap of a director’s finger ... the mystique of the Vanishing American ... the heady fragrance of protest ... the spice of violence ...”⁵¹

While the reporters aggressively sought out each day’s news from Wounded Knee, however, they would fail to investigate claims made by both sides of the

increasingly violent struggle. They would report each week about the American Indian Movement's claims that Chairman Wilson had mishandled the tribe's affairs and hired his cronies for positions within tribal government, but they never bothered to actually examine whether Wilson had, in fact, committed these alleged acts.⁵² For the first few days of the siege, they would quote federal authorities as saying the Indian activists possessed an M-60 machine gun capable of wiping out a large group of men. However, reporters failed to ask the activists for the first few days to see the gun, thereby allowing federal authorities to raise the unlikely specter of federal authorities being wiped out by the Indians they had surrounded.⁵³

Journalists also struggled to communicate the often incoherent demands of the Indian instigators, including their demands that Senate committees investigate corruption within the Bureau of Indian Affairs and violation of various treaties signed by Sioux tribes with the federal government. As a result, reporters increasingly described the conflict as essentially a war of personalities between publicity-hungry activists Means and Dennis Banks and power-hungry Chairman Wilson. They described it as a conflict between reservation Indians, like Wilson, and urban Indians, like Means and Banks. A March 8 Associated Press story in the Lincoln Star, headlined "Indian Factional Quarrels Bitter," clearly portrayed the conflict as between Chairman Wilson, whom it described as an angry "plumber, father of six children," while it described AIM leader Russell Means as a "rangy, handsome Sioux who is a rallying point for dissidents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation."⁵⁴ "I'm not going to let them take over this reservation. If they do, it will be over my dead body," Wilson said. He accused Means of only wanting publicity and threatened to overrun Wounded Knee with 1,000 Indians.⁵⁴

Journalistic obsessions would extend beyond the clash of powerful personalities as reporters became preoccupied with describing the weapons employed by both sides and painting vivid scenes of nearly nightly shootouts as the reporters attempted to cover the conflict as they would a war. And they would weigh their stories down with heavy rhetoric employed by both federal agents and Indian activists. “We will either have a re-enactment of the Wounded Knee massacre or they (federal officials) will have to deal with the Oglala Sioux on our terms,” said AIM leader Carter Camp on March 5.⁵⁵

But the papers also would try to ease fears among both Indians and whites through staff editorials and quotes from peace-seeking clergy attempting to stave off an impending slaughter like the one that had claimed so many of the activists’ forefathers. Although voices of the Indian survivors of the 1890 massacre largely were absent from news coverage of that event, newspapers in 1973 quoted the Indian activists under siege by federal authorities almost daily, at least until the government closed access to the village in an attempt to starve the publicity-driven activists of attention.

The newspapers also presented views from prominent Native American political and intellectual leaders who weren’t manning bunkers inside the village, such as author Vine Deloria and Mohawk activist Richard Oakes, as well as prominent Native American advocates such as publishing executive Alvin M. Josephy. Josephy wrote a particularly interesting story for The New York Times that attempted to describe the political changes the Indians at Wounded Knee wanted. “Must the ‘Indian problem’ (really the white man’s problem) go on then, with more human misery and suffering, for another generation?” Josephy wrote.⁵⁶ “It is abundantly clear that it need not. As a first step, the Nixon Administration can – indeed, must – restore the policy of tribal self-determination

as enunciated in the President's message of 1970, halting the diffusion of Indian interests throughout the Government, supporting again the goals of former Commissioner (Louis) Bruce, and establishing accessibility for aggrieved Indians to a decision-making center in the White House." ⁵⁶

The romantic Indian

At first, news reporters seemed infatuated with the crackle of gunfire and the sudden showdown between armed federal lawmen and Native American activists at a village whose blood-soaked roots stained the pages of America's history books. The New York Times especially demonstrated no reluctance to squeeze every ounce of historical analogy out of the confrontation. A March 1 story, headlined "Wounded Knee, S.D., a Symbol of Bitter Past and Future Hope," began with these words: "Wounded Knee, S.D., a cluster of drab buildings on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the southwest corner of the state, was the site of the last armed incident pitting Indians against the United States Government."⁵⁷ But while its coverage at first focused on young, angry Indian activists, the newspaper also expressed a disconnect between the noble savage of old and modern Indians. In a March 2 story, Times reporter Kifner described how Indians lined up outside a Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Pine Ridge, S.D., "their heads shaded from the hot sun by a variety of hats, watched with expressionless faces."⁵⁸ His description of listless Indians certainly didn't match stereotypical images of savage, bloodthirsty Indians.

While certainly not immune to racial and historical stereotyping, newspapers in Nebraska demonstrated a much more rigid, straightforward approach to covering the siege. It's unclear, however, whether Nebraska's three largest newspapers were actively attempting to provide balanced coverage of the violent showdown or whether they simply weren't moved by "windswept prairies" and historical analogies. The Nebraska newspapers certainly demonstrated the same predilection toward covering the daily shootouts between federal authorities and the Indian activists, even going so far as to

offer daily tallies on the number of bullets expended by both sides. “Government officials said Wednesday that federal personnel exchanged about 250 rounds of ammunition Tuesday night with the occupying Indians. No injuries were reported,” World-Herald reporter Al Frisbie wrote in a March 8 story from Wounded Knee.⁵⁹ Mostly, the Nebraska newspapers and The New York Times attempted to quote representatives from both AIM and the federal contingent surrounding them.

The takeover of Wounded Knee was only the most recent in a series of acts of civil disobedience by AIM that had begun Nov. 2, 1972. On that date, the activists took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C., after failing to gain audience with White House representatives. The activists were facing multiple charges stemming from their destruction of the federal building and documents inside even as they drove in a caravan into Wounded Knee in late February.

On Jan. 21, 1973, a Lakota named Wesley Bad Heart Bull, 20, died of stab wounds inflicted by a white man, who was charged with second-degree manslaughter.⁵⁸ In early February, AIM activists demonstrated in Custer, S.D., protesting what they considered to be a light charge for Bad Heart Bull’s killer. They burned a Chamber of Commerce building down, as well as a courthouse. They also damaged a bar and fought locals, as well as authorities, before the National Guard arrived to quell the situation.⁵⁸

Anger among Indians and whites had been simmering for months by the time Indian activists arrived in Wounded Knee. “We’ve tried to talk, talk, talk to your government, and they never listen,” said a young Oglala Sioux man during a press conference held by University of Nebraska students in Lincoln on March 2.⁶⁰ “We have almost decided to stage a war against you. But we’re asking one more time at Wounded

Knee. And if you are willing to talk, we'll talk." However, two of the NU students spoke against the occupation, and one even called the idea of taking over an entire town "bizarre."⁶⁰

Of hostages, images and history

When they arrived at Wounded Knee, American Indian Movement members initially held 11 village residents hostage in an effort to dissuade federal authorities from entering the village. But the status of the 11 village residents became a point of contention as the siege continued. AIM members argued the residents all had decided they wanted to remain in their homes rather than leave, and federal authorities expressed disbelief that the residents weren't being held against their will.

The activists' efforts to convince federal authorities and the public that the 11 residents were no longer hostages tested the young movement's ability to handle the media. Even an interview of the hostages by South Dakota Sen. James Abourezk failed to convince federal authorities. "They say that they've been told that they're free to go out of Wounded Knee if they want to. But they don't want to go because they live there," Abourezk told the World-Herald on March 1.⁶¹ The next day, however, Ralph Erickson, special assistant to the U.S. attorney general, told the newspaper that he wasn't convinced the hostages had been given permission to leave the village. "We may have to rethink the whole thing pretty soon," he said.⁶²

Harper's reporter Terri Schultz later called the hostage situation at Wounded Knee a ploy by the activists to dramatize the situation and entice media coverage of the event.¹¹ In a March 4 story for the Omaha World-Herald, staff writer Al Frisbie quoted one of the "hostages" in Wounded Knee, William Riegert, 81, who said he and the other 10 residents decided to remain in the village to protect their property from federal authorities. "The fact is that we as a group of hostages decided to stay to save AIM and our own property. Had we not, those troops would have come down and killed all of

these people. AIM didn't hold us, it was the military that holds us, the real hostages here were the AIM people," Riegert said.⁶³

Eventually, federal authorities stopped making an issue of the hostages after several were released and confirmed the activists' claims that they had not been held against their will after the first few days of the siege.

But while most news reports in the first days of the siege focused on shootouts and heated rhetoric, some reporters went out of their way to describe scenes that challenged the idea many readers probably had that the entire reservation was a war zone. Frisbie of the World-Herald described a peaceful scene inside Wounded Knee in a March 2 story. "Thursday afternoon the entire Wounded Knee settlement was a picture of tranquility. At the hilltop church, Indians, both young and old, sat on the grass in springlike weather while others prepared meals in the basement and others slept on the pews."⁶¹

Meanwhile, newspapers became increasingly critical of AIM's violent methods. "What has happened again, however, is that AIM's demands, while being dramatized, have gone unresolved," wrote the Lincoln Star in a March 6 staff editorial.⁶⁴ "The stated objectives of the takeover – to force a review of U.S. treaty obligations to the Indians and an exposure of alleged corruption and malfeasance in the Bureau of Indians Affairs – have been lost in the confrontation."⁶⁴ And Indians across the country who had watched AIM's violent methods for the past year – including an alleged cousin of Russell Means – began speaking out against the takeover. The woman, whom the Lincoln Star declined to name in a March 4, 1973, story, said her cousin never did anything to help anyone and his

actions at Wounded Knee were making life difficult for Indians living off the reservation.

⁶⁵ “Now, we are looked on with suspicion,” she said.

Nearer to the siege, Chairman Wilson and his supporters unleashed a barrage of criticism of AIM’s actions. One of his aides even criticized the media for glorifying the troublemakers at Wounded Knee. “Means, Banks, or any of them guys sneeze real loud and they make a story out of it,” he told the Lincoln Star in a March 4 story. ⁶⁵ A March 6, 1973, editorial that appeared in the Evening Journal, “Risk at Wounded Knee,” offered a surprisingly sage critique of AIM’s actions in South Dakota. The editorial urged AIM leaders to give up their siege now that they had gained valuable national exposure for their concerns. The editorial cited visits to Wounded Knee by two U.S. senators, James Abourezk and George McGovern, both of South Dakota, as well as assurances that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee would review treaties with Indians. ⁶⁶ “What more could the Indians accomplish by continuing their occupation of Wounded Knee? Not much, probably, except to alienate more and more officials and citizens,” the staff editorial opined in a particularly prophetic statement. ⁶⁶

The photos published by the newspapers in many ways spoke louder and in a much clearer voice to readers, including a March 4 United Press International photo that appeared in the Lincoln Star that showed two activists riding a riding lawnmower, one waving a rifle and the other carrying a tomahawk. ⁶⁷ Images like this seemed to hearken to Old West stereotypes of bloodthirsty savages on the warpath.

A March 5 photo in the Lincoln Star showed an Indian, Oscar Bear Runner, wearing a parka and headband and holding up a rifle as Indians behind him erected a tipi.

⁶⁸ The photo spoke in no unclear terms of the anger and cultural pride felt by the Indians.

A particularly revealing package of photos and story that appeared in the March 20 Lincoln Evening Journal depicted the lives of ordinary Wounded Knee residents who weren't part of the American Indian Movement. "AIM is a very small minority of the population of Wounded Knee, where for most of the people life goes on hardly disrupted," wrote staff reporter Betty Stevens, one of the only Evening Journal reporters sent to report from the reservation.⁶⁹

Not all the news coverage coming out of Wounded Knee, however, focused on the flash of muzzles and the shaking of fists. Newspaper editorial staffs and reporters also attempted to step back at times to consider the plight of the Indian and offer suggestions on how to improve relations with tribes. They also attempted to serve as intermediaries between non-Indians who understood little about the conflict's historical foundation and the Indians.

"Americans of today need not assume a burden of guilt for what the white man did to the Indians over a period of four centuries, but it is fair enough that they should feel guilty for the squalor in which the remnants of a proud civilization have since been living – from the last armed confrontation in 1890 to this week's exchange of heavy gunfire," The New York Times wrote in a March 2 staff editorial.⁷⁰ "It is not coincidental but deliberately symbolic that both incidents should have occurred in the same hamlet of the Oglala Sioux, as though the intervening 83 years were no more than a lull in the battle." The editorial called on the Bureau of Indian Affairs to grant greater self-governance to tribes. "Where that approach has been tried – notably with the Miccosukee tribe in Florida – the change has promoted peace and the hope of a better life."⁷⁰

Indeed, many newspaper editorial writers and prominent columnists agreed that tribes needed greater control over their own affairs. “The solution is – if both groups dare move toward it – to round out Indian autonomy on the reservations, to stop doing things ‘for’ the Indians and to help them do things for themselves, and also to ease the path of integration for those who want to take it,” wrote New York Post columnist Max Lerner in a March 19 column that appeared in the Lincoln Evening Journal.⁷¹

A March 27 staff editorial in the Evening Journal, “Forked tongue?”, called on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to keep its word and review treaties with Indians to determine whether the federal government had kept its word and, if not, what could be done to meet the demands of those treaties.⁷² “Let us have law and order, say those who disapprove of the Indian protests. What could be more lawful than solemn treaties entered into by our government? What could be more orderly than thoughtful, practical interpretation and implementation of those treaties?”⁷²

Perhaps the most enlightening piece written far from the action at Wounded Knee came from a Native American advocate and author of numerous books about Indians, including the historical anthology “Red Power,” one of the first accounts of the contemporary campaign for Indian rights. Alvin M. Josephy, whose books depicted the struggles of Indians past and present, wrote a lengthy story, “What the Indians want,” for the March 18, 1973, edition of The New York Times. In the story, Josephy attempted to explain why more than 200 angry Indians had charged into a quiet village in South Dakota in order to assert their rights and take a stand against what they considered government corruption, both Indian and non-Indian.

Josephy focused on the political and social roots of current Indian discontent, including the failure of Congress to enact legislation proposed by then President Richard M. Nixon that would have granted tribes greater power to govern themselves.⁵⁶ The subsequent actions of officials within the Department of the Interior, who feared granting tribes greater powers of self-governance would undermine their own power, began to work to undermine the power of those within the department who supported Nixon's efforts, particularly Louis R. Bruce, the commissioner of Indian Affairs, the son of a Mohawk and a Sioux, a man "beloved by most Indians in the country." Under Bruce's leadership, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had been shaken up and "brilliant and dedicated young Indians were brought in to head Bureau activities as policy makers," Josephy wrote.⁵⁶ The BIA's appropriations soared from \$243 million in 1968 to more than \$530 million five years later.

So why did the American Indian Movement enjoy such strong support within traditional tribal communities? Josephy argued the Interior Department, while blossoming under Bruce's leadership, still struggled to overcome hardline department officials who were reluctant to give up control over Indian natural resources. For decades, the interior department served as the arbiter of natural resources on Indian lands and was able to use that power to exercise control over various tribes and their leaders, as well as to grant access to those resources to private interests that the department favored.⁵⁶

"Any move toward self-determination, any restructuring of the Indian Bureau that permitted the Indians to edge closer to decision-making authority over their own affairs (i.e., to get out of control), was something to oppose," Josephy wrote. The "old bureaucrats," in turn, "whipped up fears and jealousies among reservation tribal chairman

against the young Indian ‘militants,’ who, they said, had come to the Bureau from the cities, did not know the problems of the reservations and were instituting policies that would hurt the reservation Indians.”⁵⁶

The bureaucrats’ efforts to influence tribal leaders, as well as members of the Senate and House interior committees, eventually resulted in their gaining authority to strip Bruce of his powers and install a part Indian old-liner like themselves, John O. Crow. Under Crow, the movement toward tribal self-determination came to a screeching halt. However, tribal leaders across the country quickly began protesting the changes and the push against self-determination.⁵⁶ “A partial reversal followed, but the damage was done,” Josephy wrote.

While much of Bruce’s powers were restored, Harrison Loesch, assistant secretary for public land management, one of the most vociferous critics of self-determination, continued to work to undermine Bruce. The result was the inability of tribes to establish systems of government that reflected their cultural views and the continued alienation of many Indian people from their duly elected leaders, whom they often viewed as puppets of Interior Department officials and ever too eager to accommodate outside efforts to exploit tribal resources, Josephy wrote.⁵⁶ He called on the Nixon administration to renew its efforts to grant tribes greater powers of self-governance and Congress to pass legislation that furthers that effort.

Josephy also recommended strict observance by the federal government of Indian treaties and establishing institutional access to the White House by aggrieved Indians. “It must, in addition now, go further by enabling the Indian peoples to attain true political freedom and liberties that will permit them to establish forms of government of their own

choosing.” Josephy, however, didn’t necessarily condone the American Indian Movement’s methods for gaining the ear of federal leaders. “And as they protest and demonstrate with the only method they have to call attention to their plight, the method itself hardens the attitude of the white law-enforcement agencies toward them in a manner that recalls the 19th-century use of troops against their forefathers, and further divides the Indians between the fearful ones, the venal ones and the determined patriots.”

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Few newspapers, however, attempted to understand or explain the activists’ demands to the degree Josephy did. Closer to the action, the Chadron, Neb., newspaper, the Record, published in its March 22 edition a decidedly non-scientific survey of 59 local residents, asking them about their thoughts on the siege. The newspaper found that 85 percent of those surveyed disapproved of AIM’s actions leading up to and since the Wounded Knee takeover. Another 92 percent disapproved of the government’s handling of the siege.⁷³

The newspaper stated its own position in the same edition: “The natives are getting restless. Across the prairie there is a rising rumbling of resentment and rebellion against the continued lawless activities of one small minority element that is threatening the homes, property and even lives of the people of this area. And these activities are being carried out under the very eyes of the authorities whose sworn duty it is to bring all law-breakers to justice.”⁷⁴ The editorial then devolved into rumor and innuendo, as it relayed talk of the Indians taking over other sites, including Fort Robinson, a former Army outpost in western Nebraska where the Lakota warrior Crazy Horse was killed in September 1877 and where a band of imprisoned Cheyenne broke out two years later.

The editorial also spoke of local residents wanting to arm themselves to fight the Indian activists and lamented Wounded Knee's dark past. "It was a regrettable incident, to be sure, a black mark for the U.S. troops that will never be erased. But digging up all those graves on that quiet hillside will never bring back to life Chief Bigfoot and his people or erase this incident. But a continuation of what is going on at Wounded Knee may very likely spark the start of something else that would (be) far more serious and more regrettable than Wounded Knee ever thought of being."⁷⁴

Army of journalists

Compared to the 21 correspondents who covered the 1890 massacre, more than 100 journalists of three media – newspaper, radio and television – followed federal authorities to the reservation and the Indians into Wounded Knee. In a March 4 World-Herald story headlined “Influx of Press Strains Accommodations,” reporter and photographer Richard Janda described how American journalists and journalists from as far away as Germany, England and France had filled all the nearby hotel rooms and had begun sleeping in their cars and rented campers.⁷⁵ Their sheer number was burdening all available resources, most notably public pay phones of which just four or five could be found in Pine Ridge 20 miles away from Wounded Knee, though those phones often failed to work and just ate coins. “By Saturday, newsmen had settled into the daily routine – arrive at Pine Ridge, go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs building, check with Justice Department officials, attend news briefings there and exchange reports, factual or rumored,” he wrote.⁷⁵

Reporters also fought to regain access to Wounded Knee after federal officials closed access to the village. AIM leaders complained that depriving them of press coverage offered federal authorities greater advantage in gaining public approval of their tactics and refused to negotiate toward the end of the siege. “Mr. Means said that the Government had entered a conspiracy with the press to try to paint the Wounded Knee occupiers as black as possible in an effort to turn public opinion against them,” reporter Martin Waldron wrote for The New York Times on April 23.⁷⁶

The government eventually decided to stop providing daily press briefings for two days in early May in order to appease AIM, which requested a government news blackout

as a precondition for the resumption of negotiations, according to a May 4 New York Times story.⁷⁷ However, federal authorities refused to allow the press to contact the activists. “I believe that a policy of quasi-isolation is very useful for us,” said Richard Hellstern, deputy assistant attorney general. “The (Indians) there miss the press more than food.”⁷⁷ To get around the federal blockades, and later checkpoints set up by angry displaced residents of Wounded Knee, reporters sneaked around those blockades to get into the village. A four-man camera crew for the Columbia Broadcasting System even was charged with aiding a civil disorder, a felony, after being caught leaving Wounded Knee in violation of a federal order to stay out of the village and then returning to the village, according to a May 9, 1973, New York Times article.⁷⁸

Journalists found other ways to get information about the situation inside Wounded Knee and negotiations between both sides. Omaha World-Herald reporter Al Frisbie described lying down outside a tipi situated between the village and the federal cordon, where the activists and federal authorities held several negotiations. “You could hear about everything being said inside,” he said in an April 1 column written by the newspaper’s executive editor, Louis Gerdes.⁷⁹ “All you had to do was figure who said what. I got quite a bit of information this way.”

He and reporter Richard Janda described spending 11 days near Wounded Knee and logging 3,853 miles on their car. World-Herald reporter Dave Breeder replaced them, spending 13 days on the reservation and logging 1,690 miles on a rented car.⁷⁹ Frisbie said he understood that both activists and federal authorities had attempted to manipulate the press to gain favorable public opinion. He described watching AIM leader Russell Means direct journalists to various locations in the village. “Okay, press over here,”

Means said, as if filming a production. “There was no question the fellows leading were wise in the handling of media,” Beeder said. “These were not reservation Indians. They all had been exposed to the big cities. . . . They picked a spot of historical significance. It was set up and controlled as well as if Bozell and Jacobs had planned a media survey.”⁷⁹

Beeder also praised Chairman Richard Wilson, whom he said was candid and cool in a tense situation. Janda and Frisbie described getting off the road into Wounded Knee and walking across the prairie around federal roadblocks to get into the village. But once there, the World-Herald journalists said they sometimes felt threatened by younger Indians and a white man who wore fur pelts. “There was this one we called Mountain Man because of the way he dressed and the fur pelts he carried. He kept pounding a huge spike on his shotgun,” Beeder said. “You worried when the leaders weren’t around. The potential for violence was always there.”⁷⁹ Gerdes described the frustration of the World-Herald’s journalists as they struggled to paint a complete picture of the events. “It is frustrating because all the pieces of the story are not visible or obtainable on the spot at the time of confrontation,” he wrote.⁷⁹

The siege finally ended May 9, 1973, after the American Indian Movement received a letter from President Nixon’s counsel, Leonard Garment, which promised that at least five White House representatives would arrive at the reservation within two weeks to discuss the Indians’ grievances.⁷⁸ By the time it was all over, two Indians had died and two federal agents had been seriously wounded, including an Omaha federal marshal who had nearly been paralyzed after being shot in the back. More than 300 people had been arrested either trying to enter the village or trying leave. Nearly 100 activists laid down their arms and surrendered the village. “Gentlemen, the village of

Wounded Knee is clear,” came the voice of William Hall, deputy director of the U.S. marshals, over the radio at 10:19 a.m. May 9.⁷⁸

Journalists attempted to make sense of the 71-day siege. “For many days, except for the danger involved, the seizure was like some strange carnival with hundreds of policemen surrounding the Indians, who staged and then restaged events for television camera crews in their mobile campers,” wrote Andrew H. Malcolm for The New York Times on May 9. “It was, as the Sioux chief Crazy Horse once said, a good day to die. But today no one did.”⁷⁸

Then, as reporters watched, the displaced residents of Wounded Knee returned home and found nearly all of their homes destroyed. The trading post was a mass of burned metal and cinders. Trash, dirty clothes and garbage were scattered everywhere. Many buildings, including a Catholic church, had been defaced by obscene graffiti, and one family’s home had been used as a toilet after electricity and water had been shut off in February. “They said they wouldn’t bother the Oglala people. I don’t know why they did this to us,” a distraught Margaret Red Eagle said.⁸⁰

AIM leaders attempted to lay blame on federal officials for the damage, saying flares shot by authorities had burned several houses and a young girl overturned a kerosene lamp in the trading post, causing the building to burn, after federal agents turned off power. “We were in an all-out war,” said Vernon Bellecourt, national coordinator of AIM. There was “little time for house-keeping,” he told The New York Times for a May 11, 1973, article.⁸¹

In a May 13 article headlined “Seeking the Import of Wounded Knee,” Andrew H. Malcolm of The New York Times lamented the uncertain legacy that the event would

leave future generations of Indians. He quoted AIM attorney Ramon Roubideaux as saying the organization would take over other sites unless the government drastically reformed its treatment of Indians.⁸² Except for a promise to discuss Indians' grievances, the federal government had conceded little to the activists but had spent nearly \$5 million to contain them, Malcolm wrote. "But this weekend here no one could be sure that the second Battle of Wounded Knee was not the first of a new kind of Indian war."⁸²

Reassessing history

Malcolm's words would prove prophetic, though not in the manner he probably expected. The Wounded Knee siege was, in fact, the last major takeover by the American Indian Movement. While takeovers of buildings have become commonplace for Indians across the country attempting to assert their rights, those takeovers typically involve much smaller sites and far fewer activists, and they certainly don't command the kind of worldwide attention that the Wounded Knee takeover did in 1973. For example, a takeover of an elderly care center in Porcupine, S.D., on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in March 2011 by activists protesting what they alleged was substandard care for the Oglala Sioux Tribe's elderly members garnered scant coverage by South Dakota newspapers and virtually no national coverage.

Meanwhile, historians, journalists and Indian leaders continue to debate the siege's legacy. The event's immediate impact appeared to be more killings and political upheaval on the Pine Ridge Reservation as Means and Wilson challenged each other in February 1974 for the tribe's chairmanship. Assaults with deadly weapons at Pine Ridge had increased by 200 percent by the time Harper's Magazine reporter Terri Schultz arrived in late January 1974.⁸³ AIM leader Pedro Bissonette had been shot and killed by reservation police while resisting arrest the prior October. "Since the long siege of last spring, the Indians on the reservation had divided into opposing camps, and each faction had suffered heavy casualties on the behalf of its beliefs," Schultz wrote.⁸³ Wilson eventually won the election by more than 200 votes out of 3,200 cast. A drunken man approached Schultz the next morning after the election. "I'm one of Wilson's goons, and

I'm proud of it, and you people in the press better write about us for once, instead of AIM.”⁸³

As for the press' coverage of the event, many media representatives offered stinging words. In its June 1973 edition, Harper's Magazine blasted journalists from New York (a veiled reference to The New York Times) for contriving to “force the shambles at Wounded Knee into the standard forms of dogmatic melodrama. They figured there was enough pathos in it to warrant a few weeks of news, and they arrived in the Black Hills with the story already marked out into a romantic fiction of the Old West.”⁸⁴ The magazine praised two Chicago newspapers, the Tribune and the Sun-Times, for recognizing the “fraudulence of the Dakota uprising” and describing it with “scornful humor.”⁸⁴ Certainly, The New York Times and other members of the media often lapsed into old habits of becoming infatuated with the Indians' dress, heavy rhetoric and melodramatic actions (i.e., burning a government peace proposal and sending the ashes back in an envelope).

However, compared to their predecessors in the 19th century, newspapers and other media certainly succeeded in offering much more balanced coverage of Wounded Knee II by attempting to and often succeeding in gaining comments from the Indian activists and the Oglala Sioux leaders opposed to them despite federal authorities' efforts to close off the village from the outside world. And whereas only one Native American reporter covered the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890, numerous Indian journalists covered the siege 83 years later, and one Indian editor of a tribal newspaper, Aaron DeSersa, even served as AIM's spokesman and most ardent advocate.

When I began my research into the coverage of the Wounded Knee massacre, I was shocked to find rampant stereotypical and racist references to Indians, as well as a general neglect of Indian perspectives. Indeed, only the Omaha World-Herald – home to the only Indian reporter who covered the Wounded Knee massacre, Suzette La Flesche, and her husband, Thomas H. Tibbles, long a friend to Indians – presented interviews with Indian survivors immediately after the massacre. In terms of the newspapers' coverage leading up to the massacre, I indeed found that coverage to be heavily laden with sensational rumors about alleged Indian attacks on settlers, many of which were later countered by military officers.

As I researched coverage of the Wounded Knee siege, I certainly found some stereotyping by the newspapers I examined, especially regarding the images they presented. While newspapers have always been prone to publish the most startling photos they find, images of gun-wielding Indians seemed to dominate coverage of the event, despite the fact that about half of the siege participants were federal officers trying to prevent Indians from entering or leaving the village. I also found a few quotes from non-Indians, both federal officers and white residents of nearby towns, that reflected racism toward Indians. However, I didn't find any references to savages or noble Indians by reporters. And though I found some evidence of bias toward the Indian activists, I wouldn't say that the majority of the coverage favored either the Indians or the federal authorities.

In many ways, the differences were the result of the evolution of both the media and Native American social and political awareness.

In 1890, newspaper coverage before the massacre painted a portrait of an increasingly desperate situation on and around the Pine Ridge Reservation as the federal Indian agent at the reservation, Dr. D.F. Royer, called upon the military to suppress a feared rebellion by Oglala Lakota taking part in the Ghost Dance. Many Lakota believed the Ghost Dance would lead to the buffalo returning, the white people disappearing from the land and the Lakota being able to live in their traditional ways again.

The Indians gathered in large numbers in the Badlands near the agency to dance and sing, and many non-Indians, especially agent Royer, feared they would attempt to break out of the reservation and attack settlers. Indeed, many newspaper reports quoted nervous settlers near the agency who accused Lakota warriors of attacking their homes and families. Often, military officials later disputed those reports.

Many of those reports cited rumor and hearsay when depicting growing violence on and around the Pine Ridge Reservation. The journalists' sensational reports undoubtedly helped whip up fear and excitement near and far from the reservation. Some historians have even accused newspapers of contributing to the events leading to the Wounded Knee massacre.

After the massacre ended, few newspaper reporters quoted any of the Native American survivors, relying almost solely on accounts from military and government officials. Likely, the fact that few reporters could speak Lakota contributed to the dearth of interviews with Indian survivors. Only one Native American reporter, Suzette La Flesche, an Omaha tribal member, reported from Wounded Knee, and she provided some of the only interviews of Native American survivors that appeared in the media.

The lack of Indian voices both within the news coverage and within the cast of reporters who converged on the reservation presented a very one-sided picture of events at Wounded Knee. Indeed, early reports from the scene depicted the soldiers as having acted heroically and in self-defense. Only days later, after the World-Herald and a few other reporters had interviewed Indian survivors, did stories of soldiers shooting unarmed women and children began appearing in newspapers. By then, however, interest in the event already had likely begun to wane among readers who already had enjoyed the tales of military bravery and Indian deceit and preferred not to learn about atrocities committed by soldiers.

In 1973, newspaper reporters arrived at a much different Wounded Knee. No longer would the inability to speak Lakota hinder their coverage; most, if not all, of the Indian activists at Wounded Knee spoke English. And no longer would the Indians suffer from having their stories left untold because of the lack of Indian reporters. Many reporters for Indian newspapers arrived at Wounded Knee in 1973.

Perhaps most importantly, most of the Indians at Wounded Knee had grown up in urban communities and understood how to use the media to tell their stories. Indeed, many newspaper editorials decried what they considered to be active manipulation of the press by the American Indian Movement. Stories of activists like AIM leader Russell Means herding newspaper, radio and television reporters to various locations inside Wounded Knee to get better photos and videos would rankle many news agencies that began to consider the takeover of Wounded Knee largely a publicity event.

While some of those reporters who arrived at Wounded Knee in 1973 brought with them the same predilection for Old West stereotypes that the reporters of 1890

demonstrated, many others brought a determination to cover the takeover as they would any other story using the tools they had committed themselves to by 1973.¹³ Unlike the press of 1890, which often spoke from a decidedly political slant, the media of 1973 were focused more on objectivity and fairness. Reporters interviewed people from both sides and largely tried to leave their opinions, as well as rumors and innuendo, out of their reports.

Out of a sense of social responsibility and increased diversity within their ranks, the media also had begun paying more attention to those outside the mainstream, including Native Americans.¹³ The greater balance in news coverage certainly provided the Indian activists of 1973 far greater access to public opinion than the survivors of the 1890 massacre had, and that access undoubtedly contributed to the government's willingness to listen to the 1973 group's concerns.

Longtime Native American journalist Lise Balk King offered her thoughts on the 1973 siege's legacy and its impact on the Indian civil rights movement. The event created "pride for Indian people, identity with the larger civil rights movement," she said.⁸⁵ It also garnered much-needed public and media attention for Indian issues, as well as "became a seed for the pan-American Indian political and social identity that unites Indian Country today."

But the siege also resulted in an intense backlash against Indians by white people in South Dakota and surrounding states and led to inter-family and intertribal conflicts within tribal communities over the larger meaning and role of AIM in Native American society.⁸⁵ It also transformed nearly overnight several of the AIM leaders into pop culture celebrities, a fact that troubled many traditional Indian people, and it put many

Indian communities, especially Sioux communities, in the public spotlight for generations to come. “Some people reveled in this new spotlight and new identity,” Balk King said. “Others saw it as destructive of the traditional ways of life – too self-aggrandizing and self-conscious, not humble.”⁸⁵

But Myron Long Soldier, a leader in the Lincoln, Neb., Indian community, said the siege led to a reawakening of Native American identity and civil rights efforts.⁸⁶ “There is a lot more good than bad that came out of it: Indian pride, freedom of religion, language restoration, revitalization of tribal laws and treaties with the government.”⁸⁶

Yet another view of the Wounded Knee siege’s legacy comes from John Carter, senior research historian for the Nebraska State Historical Society and co-author of “Eyewitness at Wounded Knee.” “It was the point where Indian people quit protesting and went and got law degrees. Utterly simplistic, but I think utterly true. Indian folks went on the offensive.”⁸⁷

Tired of seeing their lands and resources stripped from them with little compensation in return, young Native Americans became attorneys in an effort to try to regain through the legal system some of what their people had lost. They were lawyers like Richard Case, a Cheyenne River Sioux tribal member who sued the federal government for stealing his people’s sacred Black Hills of South Dakota.⁹⁴ The government claimed it had purchased the Black Hills through a Congressional act in February 1877, acting on an agreement presented to the Sioux the year before and which 10 percent of the adult male Sioux population had signed under threat of starvation.⁸⁸ In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the government had failed to garner signatures of three-fourths of the adult male Sioux population, as required by the Fort Laramie Treaty

of 1868. The court awarded the Sioux \$105 million for the illegal seizure of their Black Hills, money the Sioux have refused to accept as they consider such acceptance would cement their loss of the Black Hills.⁸⁹ While the court's decision ultimately failed to appease the Sioux, the decision confirmed the tribe's own determination that the federal government had stolen its lands.⁸⁸

Historians Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior offered a similar assessment of Wounded Knee's lasting impact in their seminal book about the American Indian Movement, "Like a Hurricane." They wrote that the Indian activists succeeded in embedding cultural pride in a new generation of Native Americans that blossomed into ongoing efforts by Indian leaders to force fundamental reassessments of what it meant to be Indian, of American history and of tribal communities.⁹⁰

It was a spectacular ride, all the more exciting because no one really knew where they were headed. The fast times had more than their share of brilliant mistakes, misguided strategies, and foolish bravado. It also was a time of hope and idealism when Indians could imagine a university rising from the wreckage of a prison, when a bureaucratic fortress could become a Native American embassy, when a desperately poor and repressive reservation might become a free and independent nation. That a few thousand who fought to bring power and visibility to the most ignored population in the United States failed to win all they dreamed can hardly be surprising. That they came so close is the miracle.⁹⁰

Like the Indians they interviewed and wrote about, the journalists who covered the Wounded Knee massacre and the siege 83 years later certainly made mistakes and stumbled in their efforts to paint a complete and accurate portrait of the historic events of 1890 and 1973. They reported false rumors that fed inherent fears of wild Indians terrorizing settlers and even other Indians. They blissfully depicted grandiose events staged by Indian activists to garner public favor, failing time and again to critically assess the meanings and motives of those events. And they often failed to get both sides of the

story, whether a result of their own fear of Indians or biases against federal authorities or seemingly insurmountable language barriers.

Still, their stories captivated the nation and the world and shone a spotlight into a dark and forgotten corner of one of the country's most proud and neglected reservations and, in doing so, gave Indian people for generations to come hope for better lives for themselves and their own children.

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