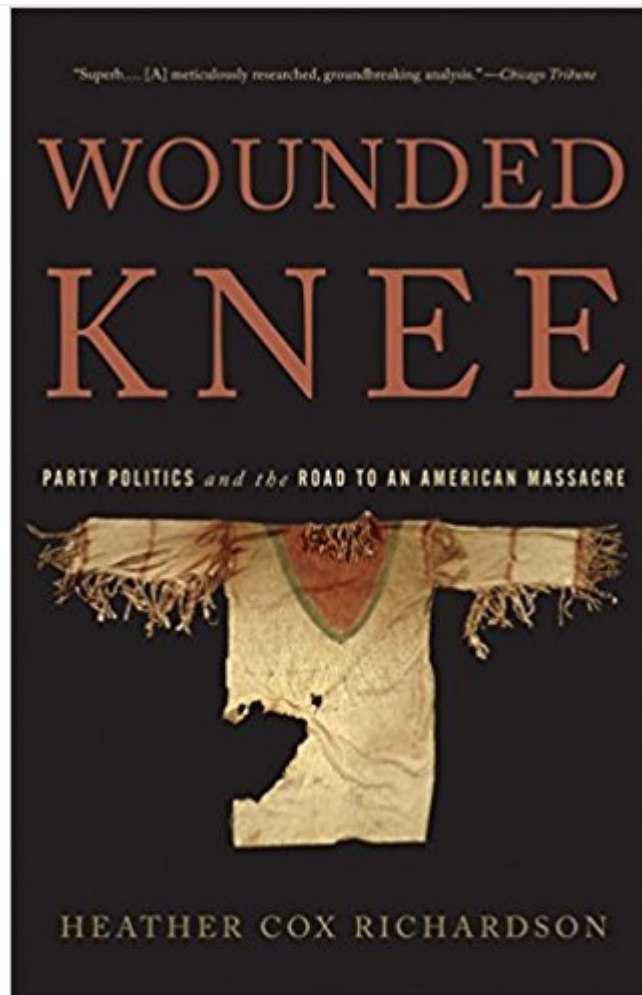


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Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre



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Reviewed Work(s)

Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre. By Heather Cox Richardson (New York: Basic Books, 2010). Pp. 363. Cloth, \$28.95. Paper, \$17.99.

On the morning of December 29, 1890, soldiers from the U.S. Seventh Cavalry, the unit made world-famous only fifteen years earlier by its defeat under General George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn, opened fire on a band of Minneconjou and Hunkpapa Sioux whom they had detained and were in the process of disarming. Over the course of several hours, the men of the Seventh indiscriminately killed an estimated 250 people, more than half of whom were women, children and elderly, and crushed the spiritual movement known as the Ghost Dance. The Wounded Knee Massacre unquestionably stands as one of the darkest moments in the relationship between Native Americans and the United States government, yet most scholarship on the subject either limits its scope to the individuals directly involved in the affair and the tactics employed or presents the slaughter as a turning point in a longer history of U.S. aggression towards the native people of the Great Plains.

In a new study, *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre*, Heather Cox Richardson reexamines the years leading up to that tragic morning on the South Dakota plains with a critical eye towards the role played by partisan turbulence in the nation's capital during the late 1880s. Richardson, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, convincingly argues that political maneuvering and opportunism, aided in part by a sensationalist media, was the single most determinative factor in a string of fateful decisions that led to the massacre. According to Richardson, "the fate of the Minneconjous at Wounded Knee was sealed by politicians... [and] the soldiers who pulled the triggers in South Dakota simply delivered the sentence" (18).

This book offers a sweeping history of both late nineteenth-century politics and western expansion. Richardson's account begins in earnest with the post-bellum Republican vision for western economic expansion

that grew increasingly at-odds with traditional Siouan patterns of settlement and subsistence. Eager to avoid a collapse in industrial production after the conclusion of hostilities between the Union and the Confederacy, eastern politicians looked westward to encourage the growth of new markets for big business. The trans-Mississippi expansion of agriculture that had begun mid-century continued as railroads encouraged migration to the Dakota territories and an unusual cycle of wet weather in the 1870s and 1880s convinced many that farming offered an economically viable opportunity on the Great Plains.

Concurrently, the bloated post-war military moved westward to secure the “unsettled” territory against its native occupants. A repetitive cycle of ineffective treaties, unfulfilled promises, and the demise of the great bison herds left many of the Sioux starving, divided politically, and struggling for cultural survival in the face of increased federal pressure to assimilate. Out of this turmoil emerged the much-maligned Ghost Dance religion amongst the people of the plains, exacerbating an ongoing struggle between the Department of War and the Department of the Interior for primacy in determining Indian policy. In late November 1890, federal troops poured into South Dakota to suppress the movement in the largest military mobilization since the Civil War, instilling great unease among the increasingly marginalized and desperate, yet still peaceful, Sioux. The presence of these soldiers rendered a stable but grim situation volatile. By year’s end, the famous Hunkpapa leader Sitting Bull would be killed in his own home and many of his followers, having joined a group of Minneconjou led by Big Foot, would be buried in a mass grave on the frozen South Dakota plains. The remaining Sioux, crushed both militarily and psychologically, resigned themselves to the injurious conditions of reservation life, thus marking a new chapter in their history.

Where Richardson deviates from previous interpretations of Wounded Knee is in her insistence that partisan maneuverings in Washington played the leading role in effecting this course of events. Under pressure from Democratic calls for reform and accusations of corruption, the Republicans’ longstanding dominance in federal politics was growing increasingly tenuous in the years leading up to the massacre. Following the election of 1888, in which Benjamin Harrison won the presidency despite having lost the popular vote, the Republicans faced the real

prospect of losing control of both houses as well as the White House in the next electoral cycle. As a result, the Harrison administration intensified its efforts to deliver the Western vote to the Republican Party by rushing to grant statehood to the Dakotas, bringing economic prosperity to the region, and establishing a loyal party base in the nascent states.

Richardson identifies the 1889 division of the Great Sioux Reservation into six smaller reservations, which opened much of western South Dakota to white settlement, as “a matter of political survival for the Harrison administration” (106). However, this land agreement had disastrous consequences for the Sioux people as it rendered them entirely dependent on annually diminishing government rations and supplies. Starvation and malnourishment quickly became widespread in tribal communities, fostering desperation and heightened tensions across the plains. This situation only worsened as the administration selected inexperienced and incompetent officials to oversee the various newly-created reservations. The spoils-system appointment of these party hacks “would be catastrophic for the Sioux” (16). Primarily chosen for their abilities to secure the votes of nearby communities and to distribute lucrative contracts to local farmers and merchants, these agents served the party’s interests above all else and were indifferent to the suffering of the tribes. Furthermore, the agents’ unfamiliarity with the Sioux caused them to panic at the first indication of unrest on the reservations and to exaggerate the threat posed by the Ghost Dance. According to Richardson, the combination of “the politically appointed agents and starving Sioux sparked a conflagration” (169).

Just as partisan strategizing played a role in the creation of a crisis in South Dakota, it also shaped the administration’s reaction. Richardson speculates that the decision to send in the army was motivated in part by a Republican desire to stimulate the stagnant South Dakotan economy. At the same time in Washington D.C., senators and representatives from around the country weighed in on the plight of the Sioux as Democrats relentlessly criticized Harrison’s Indian policy. As the debate captured headlines and the Republicans attempted to mitigate their own political liability, various officials issued misleading reports to the press in an attempt to vilify the Sioux and justify the administration’s response. A mutually reinforcing cycle of heated rhetoric and sensational journalism

quickly spun the crisis in South Dakota out of control. Pragmatic problem-solving in the West had taken a back seat to partisan showmanship.

The author's interpretive approach is conveyed not only by the sharp analysis contained within the text but also by its very structure. Arranged in chronological chapters, Richardson's narrative dances between the Dakotas and the nation's capital, reinforcing the interconnectedness between the two theatres. Official communiqués and private correspondence, particularly those sent to the Great Plains from Washington D.C. and vice-versa rather than those circulated intra-regionally, provide the author with a great deal of evidence to support her claims and further illuminate the link between national politics and the Dakota crisis. The source materials most prominently employed by Richardson are a number of periodicals from the time; the author juxtaposes a variety of publications with that of one paper, *Frank Leslie's*, widely known as the mouthpiece of the Harrison administration. As the events unfolded in South Dakota, the competing presentations of starkly differing accounts in these newspapers highlight the degree to which Indian policy and the fate of the Sioux had become a subject of partisan bickering.

Some readers may criticize this book's oversimplification of relations between the Sioux and the U.S. government. Labeling particular bands and leaders as "traditionalist" or "progressive" glosses over the complex and dynamic nature of Indian diplomacy; a great deal of scholarship has established that subtle and competing motivations oftentimes guided tribal cooperation with government efforts. Similarly, it is difficult to segregate federal policies and officials into two opposing schools of reformist and military thought. However, the scope of Richardson's study understandably necessitated the elision of some detail, and these particular points do not detract from the overarching argument.

The course of events examined by the author will not be unfamiliar to most scholars; what is noteworthy about this book is its linkage between two previously unconnected threads in American history. The Wounded Knee Massacre has yet to achieve deserved recognition in U.S. collective memory and Richardson dispels any inclination to view it as an aberration by tying the tragedy to broader historical themes. The author challenges scholars to forgo compartmentalization in their work and has

written a book that should interest a wide readership, while her accessible prose and engaging narrative will certainly attract a strong popular audience as well. *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* tells a powerful story with verve and perspective: Richardson's inquisitive look at the events of Wounded Knee clearly illustrates the costly, real-life consequences of a dysfunctional and vitriolic political climate. Hers is a timely message and merits attention.

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