

# The wounded knee review essay sample

[Government](#), [Capitalism](#)



The events that took place on December 29, 1890 and carry the name of the Wounded Knee massacre had a major impact on both the immediate reality and on the future developments that demanded the involvement of the Indian population. In order to fully grasp the proportions and scope of the event, it is important to address the reasons and the means that made it possible.

Therefore, this perception cannot be justified but through an in depth look at the historical background that fostered such a turn of events, the practical developments and their subsequent consequences. Furthermore, in tight relation to the long term impact of the 1890 events, the boost in development that influenced all aspects of the American society can be seen as a consequence that could only have taken effect in the conditions created by the Wounded Knee massacre. Finally, one element that justifies the evolution of events is Turner's "frontier thesis" that explained the role that the conquest of the Wild West played in the American evolutionary equation.

The historical background must be put in relation to the developments that occurred throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in what was then a young American nation. At that time, America had already faced a War of independence from the British, a struggle to find a proper equilibrium among the governing forces at state and federal level, and a Civil War that had opposed and thus divided the members of the nation. Consequently, the time had arrived for a peaceful boost in economic development and for building what would later be called "the American dream".

As Jenkins explains in his analysis of American history, once the Civil War ended, the white colonists, throughout the period from 1865 to 1880 began penetrating even more systematic the limits of the Lakota/Sioux territory, as it had been agreed upon by a treaty signed in 1851[1]. Despite the recommendation of President Jackson in front of the Congress suggesting “the propriety of setting apart an ample district west of the Mississippi...to be guaranteed to the Indian tribes, as long as they shall occupy it”, this, Dee Brown notices, only proved to “add to the long list of broken promises made to the eastern Indians”[2]

The agreements that followed the treaty only ensured an easier access to the gold rich lands from North and South Dakota for the white people. Even the attitude of moderate Indian leaders admitted that the right to chose a retaliatory action was one that existed only in theory, as their only practical choice was that “between violent opposition or peaceful annihilation”, both actions leading to the same dramatic result for the Indian population.

Another element that shaped the background and facilitated the superior position of the whites was the 1872 Northern Pacific Railroad combined with the economic crisis of 1873, which augmented the signs of desperation among the western settlers who became indifferent to any moral obstacles in their way to reaching personal prosperity. The critical point was 1874 when gold was discovered in South Dakota and miners invaded the area, thus legitimizing their future conflicts with the Indians. Little Big Horn represented, in Jenkins’ view, “a traumatic event for the public opinion as the nation was celebrating its centenary”[3].

On a similar idea that of the increasingly tough control and arbitrary nature of authority exercised over the Indians, Weinberg asserted that, “ even before 1871, federal laws and court decisions severely weakened the treaties...decisions were favorable to the federal government which was given the right to collect taxes on the sale of tobacco raised on the Cherokee reservation even though such production was approved by the treaty...their (the Indians) sole refuge- the reservation system- afforded them less and less protection than ever”[4].

As history is proven to be a science which can be justified through facts of certain relativity and subjectivity, the present case may find one of its arguments in the rooted belief of the white population in the moral superiority of its race. This can be traced back to the times of Columbus who, as Brown argues, “ being a righteous European was convinced the people should be made to work, sow, and do all that is necessary and to adopt our ways”. The author concludes that throughout the next centuries, the conquerors tried to enforce their will on the indigenes.

William Tecumseh Sherman, Jenkins also explains, even considered the confrontation between the two sides as an imminent extinction of the Indian population; therefore he underwent destructive actions against the numerous herds of buffalos which were of crucial importance for the stability of the Indian culture. It was considered, by Sherman and his deputy, Philip Sheridan, that the strong connection between the animals and the Indians would prove to be fatal, and the extinction of the former would entail the destruction of the latter.

These conditions all led to a massive build up in tension which was fueled by the ancestral differences in culture that so often constituted the decisive rift in the American Indian relations. The ultimate element that was crucial for the defining of the wider context of the Wounded Knee events was the 1889 belief of the Indians in a future disappearance of the white oppressors. The Indians considered that as soon as the whites were eliminated from their lands, the buffalos would return in even larger numbers. This end would be served by the Ghost Dance Religion, which alienated them even more from the natural state of things. This in turn attracted the relentlessness of the armies stationed at the borders of the reservations.

All these considered the tragic events that occurred on December 29, 1890 were in fact a natural consequence and a pending emergence of violence. A sum of misinterpretations along with the rising tensions and pressures led to the loss of at least 180 deaths from the Indian side and 25 lives from the whites' camp. Numerous eye witnesses had been cited in order to better understand the confusing acts that triggered the massacre. Depicting the disarmament of Big Foot's band, General Nelson Miles who later considered "the whole affair as most unjustifiable and worthy of the severest condemnation", gave a rather accurate description of the process: "while this was being done a detachment of soldiers was sent into the camp to search for any arms remaining there, and it was reported that their rudeness frightened the women and children.

It is also reported that a remark was made by some one of the soldiers that "when we get the arms away from them we can do as we please with them,"

indicating that they were to be destroyed. Some of the Indians could understand English. This and other things alarmed the Indians and scuffle occurred between one warrior who had rifle in his hand and two soldiers. The rifle was discharged and a massacre occurred, not only the warriors but the sick Chief Big Foot, and a large number of women and children who tried to escape by running and scattering over the prairie were hunted down and killed”[5]. He would further condemn the actions taken by the army, especially by Colonel Forsyth.

Philip Wells, a mixed-blood Sioux who served as an interpreter for the Army, had described what he had witnessed from a different perspective: “ I saw five or six young warriors cast off their blankets and pull guns out from under them and brandish them in the air. One of the warriors shot into the soldiers, who were ordered to fire into the Indians... Troop ‘ K’ was drawn up between the tents of the women and children and the main body of the Indians, who had been summoned to deliver their arms. The Indians began firing into ‘ Troop K’ to gain the canyon of Wounded Knee creek. In doing so they exposed their women and children to their own fire.”[6]

The immediate and most visible consequences can be convincingly resumed by one image depicted by Josephy: “ In the smoke and agony of the Massacre at Wounded Knee, on that morning of December 29, 1890, there died the last tortured hope of freedom among the Indian nation in North America. It was the end of a long story of dreams and drama and courage, one that had involved many different peoples of hundreds of Indian nations”[7].

The general view on the events is that the massacre from Wounded Knee was indeed a turning point in the American history. Many scholars including Brown himself, agreed on the idea that the slaughter of Sioux prisoners at Wounded Knee was the final confrontation which put an end to the Indian Wars. Yet, in a rather subjective manner, Robert Utley gives it a more symbolic meaning: “ the Sioux nation died there.

Before Wounded Knee, despite ten years of reservation life, the Sioux had never really accepted the reality of their conquest by the United States Army, they still harbored illusions that the day of liberation would come... after Wounded Knee, even though only a tiny fraction of the Sioux nation met death, the reality of the conquest descended upon the entire nation with such overwhelming force that it shattered all illusions”. In defining the impact of the confrontation upon the Indians, the author distinguishes among two elements: a military victory and a psychological one. He adds that “ it was the latter that destroyed them as a nation and left emotional scars that persist today”[8].

Independent of the recollections of what may be more or less objective sources, the historic reality showed a sudden change in the equilibrium of forces in the region. Long term developments are justified by economic results that dramatically modified the profile of the West.

As Jenkins presents the effects of the exploitation of the new acquired lands, he points out to the large economies that had replaced the basic occupations of the Indians: “ some of the newest territories evolved in successful economies, such as the ranches, while the north- western parts developed a

large lumber industry". Cities and towns soon found a new road for emancipation and affirmation in competition to the old developed Atlantic coast. Weinberg points out that " in the Pacific Northwest, shortly after 1900, the industry grew rapidly...the West became exemplary magnet for eastern and foreign capital"[9].

The academic response and the explanation for this development was offered by Frederick Jackson Turner who, back in 1893, issued the " frontier thesis" which dealt with the significance of the frontier in Western history and which could in large parts explain numerous aspects of American culture and life. He asserted that " the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development."

He used his line of thought to explain the development of the American society which, in his opinion, " begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on with the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader... the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farm communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with the city and the factory system."[10]

Despite the resounding effect it had at the time, it is now seen as quite controversial, seeing that, it is still up for debate whether the western frontier was actually delimited in 1890, especially considering future clashes that would occur in the " Wild West" throughout the next century.



Turner's thesis notwithstanding, it is fair to say that the Wounded Knee massacre, amid the tragic human consequences, contributed to the psychological closure of a turbulent chapter in the American history, and thus contributed to the further delimitation of the American culture, and to the integration of a region that would later decisively impact the political equilibrium.

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[1]Philip Jenkins, *A history of the United States* (New York: Palgrave, 1997), 82-84.

[2]Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* , (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1991), 1-2.

[3] Jenkins, *A history of the United States* , 150.

[4] Meyer Weinberg, *A Short History of American Capitalism* , (Chicago: New History Press, 2003), pp. 25

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