The American Indian Wars were a series of armed conflicts between Native Americans, European colonists, and eventually American settlers. The Wounded Knee Massacre is widely regarded as the final conflict of these extended wars, occurring on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation on December 29, 1890. The massacre was a result of increasing tension and fear between the United States government and the Sioux (The Great Sioux Nation, or Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, consists of Eastern Dakota, Western Dakota, and Lakota tribes). While specific details of the massacre are debated, the events of that day further soured relations between the United States and Native Americans, as well as resulted in excessive loss of life. In the first section of the text, the author provides a brief overview of the Wounded Knee Massacre. In the second part of the text, several individuals share their perspective on the massacre. Their testimony has been organized based on the chronology of the events that took place. As you read, take note of how the different perspectives explored in the text impact your understanding of the Wounded Knee Massacre.

[1] The late nineteenth century marked the nadir of Indian life. Deprived of their homelands, their revolts suppressed, and their way of life besieged, many Plains Indians dreamed of restoring a vanished past, free of hunger, disease, and bitter warfare. Beginning in the 1870s, a religious movement known as the Ghost Dance arose among Indians of the Great Basin, and then spread, in the late 1880s, to the Great Plains. Beginning among the Paiute Indians of Nevada in 1870, the Ghost Dance promised to restore the way of life of their ancestors.

During the late 1880s, the Ghost Dance had great appeal among the Sioux, despairing over the death of a third of their cattle by disease and angry that the federal government had cut their food rations. In 1889, Wovoka, a Paiute holy man from Nevada, had a revelation. If only the Sioux would perform sacred dances and religious rites, then the Great Spirit would return and raise the dead, restore the buffalo to life, and cause a flood that would destroy the whites.

Wearing special Ghost Dance shirts, fabricated from white muslin\(^1\) and decorated with red fringes and painted symbols, dancers would spin in a circle until they became so dizzy that they entered into a trance. White settlers became alarmed: “Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy...We need protection, and we need it now.”

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1. Muslin is a cotton fabric or plain weave.
Fearful that the Ghost Dance would lead to a Sioux uprising, army officials ordered Indian police to arrest the Sioux leader Sitting Bull. When Sitting Bull resisted, he was killed. In the ensuing panic, his followers fled the Sioux reservation. Federal troops tracked down the Indians and took them to a cavalry\(^2\) camp on Wounded Knee Creek. There, on December 29, 1890, one of the most brutal incidents in American history took place. While soldiers disarmed the Sioux, someone fired a gun. The soldiers responded by using machine guns\(^3\) to slaughter at least 146 Indian men, women, and children. Some historians believe the actual number of Indians killed was closer to 300. The Oglala Sioux spiritual leader Black Elk summed up the meaning of Wounded Knee:

> I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there.

General Nelson Miles, who commanded military forces in the area, sought a court martial\(^4\) for the office in charge of the troops at Wounded Knee. Miles described what happened as a “cruel and unjustifiable massacre.”

While serving as the editor and publisher of the Aberdeen, South Dakota Saturday Pioneer, L. Frank Baum, the author of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, wrote an editorial following the death of Sitting Bull. “The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent,” he wrote, “and the best safety of the frontier settlers will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians.”

The Battle of Wounded Knee marked the end of three centuries of bitter warfare between Indians and whites. Indians had been confined to small reservations, where reformers would seek to transform them into Christian farmers. In the future, the Indian struggle to maintain an independent way of life and a separate culture would take place on new kinds of battlefields.

### First Hand Accounts of the Massacre

**Commanding General Nelson A. Miles:** “The difficult Indian problem cannot be solved permanently at this end of the line. It requires the fulfillment of Congress of the treaty obligations which the Indians were entreated and coerced into signing... Congress has been in session now for several weeks, and could in a single hour confirm the treaty and appropriate the funds for its fulfillment; and, unless the officers of the army can give positive assurance that the Government intends to act in good faith with these people, the loyal element will be diminished, and the hostile element increased.”

**Black Elk, Lakota:** “... My people looked pitiful. There was a big drought, and the rivers and creeks seemed to be dying. Nothing would grow that the people had planted, and the Wasichus\(^5\) had been sending less cattle and other food than ever before. The Wasichus had slaughtered all the bison and shut us up in pens. It looked as if we might all starve to death. We could not eat lies, and there was nothing we could do....”

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2. The part of the military force made up of troops that serve on horseback.
3. The government used Gatling guns, which were early hard-cranked forerunners of machine guns.
4. A “court martial” is a judicial court for trying a member of the armed services of offenses against military law. Miles’ pursuit of a court martial ended in a comprehensive Army Court of Inquiry, which is not a formal court-martial. The Court of Inquiry criticized Forsyth for his tactics but did not hold him responsible.
5. This is a term used by the Lakota to describe the first European people, meaning “takes the fat,” or “greedy person.”
L. Frank Baum Editor and Publisher, The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer December 1890: “Sitting Bull, most renowned Sioux of modern history, is dead. He was an Indian with a white man's spirit of hatred and revenge for those who had wronged him and his... With his fall the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them. The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians....”

Commanding General Nelson A. Miles: “I was in command when what is known as the Messiah Craze and threatened uprising of the Indians occurred... During this time the tribe, under Big Foot, moved from their reservation to near Red Cloud Agency in South Dakota under a flag of truce. They numbered over 400 souls. They were intercepted by a command under Lt. Col. Whiteside, who demanded their surrender, which they complied with, and moved that afternoon some two or three miles and camped where they were directed to do, near the camp of the troops.”

Black Elk, Lakota: “It was now near the end of the Moon of Popping Trees and I was 27 years old. (December 1890) We heard that Big Foot was coming down from the Badlands with nearly four hundred people. Some of these were from Sitting Bull's band. They had run away when Sitting Bull was killed, and joined Big Foot on Good River. There were only about a hundred warriors in his band, and all the others were women and children and some old men. They were all starving and freezing, and Big Foot was so sick that they had to bring him along in a pony drag. When they crossed Smoky Earth River, they followed up Medicine Root Creek to its head. Soldiers were over there looking for them. The soldiers had everything and were not freezing and starving. Near Porcupine Butte the soldiers came up to the Big Foots, and they surrendered and went along with the soldiers to Wounded Knee Creek.”

Commanding General Nelson A. Miles: “During the night Colonel Forsyth joined the command with reinforcements of several troops of the 7th Calvary. The next morning he deployed his troops around the camp, placed two pieces of artillery in position, and demanded the surrender of the arms of the warriors. This was complied with by the warriors going out from camp and placing the arms on the ground where they were directed. Chief Big Foot, an old man, sick at the time and unable to walk, was taken out of a wagon and laid on the ground.”

Dewey Beard, Lakota: “… I did not sleep that night – did not lie down till morning – was afraid – could not rest or be quiet or easy. There was great uneasiness among the Indians all night; they were up most of the night – were fearful that they were to be killed....”

Philip F. Wells, Interpreter for General Forsyth: “I was interpreting for General Forsyth... The captured Indians had been ordered to give up their arms, but Big Foot replied that his people had no arms. Forsyth said to me, ‘Tell Big Foot he says the Indians have no arms, yet yesterday they were well armed when they surrendered. He is deceiving me. Tell him he need have no fear in giving up his arms, as I wish to treat him kindly...’ Big Foot replied, ‘They have no guns, except such as you have found. I collected all my guns at the Cheyenne River Agency and turned them in. They were all burned.’ They had about a dozen old-fashioned guns, tied together with strings – not a decent one in the lot....”

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6. A “cur” is an aggressive dog or one that is in poor condition.
7. Short for “lieutenant colonel.”
Joseph Horn Cloud, Lakota: “While this was going on, the same officers said to the Indians, ‘I want you all to stand in a rank before the officers... I want the same number of soldiers to stand in front of the Indians and take the cartridges out of the guns and cock them and aim at their foreheads and pull the triggers. After this you will be free.’ Some of the Indians were getting wild at such talk and some said, ‘Now he sees that we have nothing in our hands, so he talks this way.’ Others said, ‘We are not children to be talked to like this.’ A man cried out: ‘Take courage! Take courage!’ Big Foot spoke up, ‘Yes, take courage. There are too many children and old people.’”

Philip F. Wells, Interpreter for General Forsyth: “During this time a medicine man, gaudily dressed and fantastically painted, executed the maneuvers of the ghost dance, raising and throwing dust into the air. He exclaimed, ‘Ha! Ha! as he did so, meaning he was about to do something terrible, and said, I have lived long enough,’ meaning he would fight until he died. Turning to the young warriors, who were squatted together, he said, ‘Do not fear, but let your hearts be strong. Many soldiers are about us and have many bullets, but I am assured their bullets cannot penetrate us. The prairie is large, and their bullets will fly over the prairies and will not come toward us. If they do come toward us, they will float away like dust in the air.’ Then the young warriors exclaimed, ‘How!’ with great earnestness, meaning they would back the medicine man... Whiteside then said to me, ‘Tell the Indians it is necessary they be searched one at a time.’ The old Indians assented willingly by answering, ‘How!’ and the search began. The young warriors paid no attention to what I told them, but the old men – five or six of them – sitting next to us, passed through the lines and submitted to search.”

Dewey Beard, Lakota: “...Most of the Indians had given up their arms; there were a few standing with their guns, but the soldiers had not been to them. The knives were piled up in the center of the council; some young men had their guns and knives, but they had not been asked yet for them. There was a deaf Indian named Black Coyote who did not want to give up his gun; he did not understand what they were giving up their arms for... The struggle for the gun was short, the muzzle pointed upward toward the east and the gun was discharged. In an instant a volley followed as one shot, and the people began falling....”

Philip F. Wells, Interpreter for General Forsyth: “…I heard someone on my left exclaim, ‘Look out! Look out!’ Turning my head and bringing my arms to port, 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... I heard a shot from the midst of the Indians. As I started to cock my rifle, I looked in the direction of the medicine man. He or some other medicine man approached to within three or four feet of me with a long cheese knife, ground to a sharp point and raised it to stab me. The fight between us prevented my seeing anything else at the time. He stabbed me during the melee and nearly cut off my nose. I held him off until I could swing my rifle to hit him, which I did. I shot and killed him in self-defense and as an act of war as soon as I could gain room to aim my rifle and fire....”

Charles W. Allen, Editor of Chadron Democrat: “…The fighting continued for about half an hour, then was continued in skirmish for another hour. When the smoke cleared away from in front of the tent where it began, there were 45 dead Indians with their impregnable ghost shirts on laying dead on a space of ground about 200 yards in diameter.”

8. **Gaudily (adjective):** brilliantly or excessively showy
9. A “volley” is a number of bullets, arrows, or other projectiles discharged at one time.
10. **Melee (noun):** a confused fight or scuffle
11. “Impregnable” means “unable to be defeated or destroyed.”
Dewey Beard, Lakota: “...I was badly wounded and pretty weak too. While I was lying on my back, I looked down the ravine and saw a lot of women coming up and crying. When I saw these women, girls and little girls and boys coming up, I saw soldiers on both sides of the ravine shoot at them until they had killed every one of them... Going a little further, (I) came upon my mother who was moving slowly, being very badly wounded... When (I) caught up to her, she said, 'My son, pass by me; I am going to fall down now.' As she went up, soldiers on both sides of the ravine shot at her and killed her... (I) heard the Hotchkiss or Gatling guns shooting at them along the bank. Now there went up from these dying people a medley of death songs that would make the hardest heart weep. Each one sings a different death song if he chooses. The death song is expressive of their wish to die. It is also a requiem for the dead. It expresses that the singer is anxious to die too....”

American Horse, Lakota: "There was a woman with an infant in her arms who was killed as she almost touched the flag of truce... A mother was shot down with her infant; the child not knowing what its mother was dead was still nursing... The women as they were fleeing with their babies were killed together, shot right through... and after most all of them had been killed a cry was made that all those who were not killed or wounded should come forth and they would be safe. Little boys... came out of their places of refuge, and as soon as they came in sight a number of soldiers surrounded them and butchered them.”

Thomas H. Tibbles, Omaha World Herald: “Though the active attack lasted perhaps twenty minutes, the firing continued for an hour or two, whenever a soldier saw a sign of life. Indian women and children fled into the ravine to the south, and some of them on up out of it across the prairie, but the soldiers followed them and shot them down mercilessly.”

Corporal Paul H. Weinert (Awarded Medal of Honor for role at Wounded Knee): “They kept yelling at me to come back, and I kept yelling for a cool gun – there were three more on the hill not in use. Bullets were coming like hail from the Indians' Winchesters. The wheels of my gun were bored full of holes and our clothing was marked in several places. Once a cartridge was knocked out of my hand just as I was about to put it in the gun, and it's a wonder the cartridge didn't explode. I kept going in farther, and pretty soon everything was quiet and at the other end of the line.”

Cavalryman: “Slowly, for the sake of the wounded, the long column left the battlefield where the reds were lying as dark spots in the winter night and their sign of peace, the white flag, was moving gently with the wind.”

Black Elk, Lakota: “It was a good winter day when all this happened. The sun was shining. But after the soldiers marched away from their dirty work, a heavy snow began to fall. The wind came up in the night. There was a big blizzard, and it grew very cold. The snow drifted deep in the crooked gulch, and it was one long grave of butchered women and children and babies, who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away.”

12. A gun that as mounted on a light carriage or packed on two mules, intended to accompany an army traveling in rough country.
13. A rapid fire, hand cranked weapon that was the forerunner of the machine gun.
14. A “requiem” is something that resembles a solemn chant.
Commanding General Nelson A. Miles: “...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 was also reported that a remark was made by 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 [a] scuffle occurred between one warrior who had [a] 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.”

Thomas H. Tibbles, Omaha World Herald: “Nothing I have seen in my whole... life ever affected or depressed or haunted me like the scenes I saw that night in that church. One un-wounded old woman... held a baby on her lap... I handed a cup of water to the old woman, telling her to give it to the child, who grabbed it as if parched with thirst. As she swallowed it hurriedly, I saw it gush right out again, a bloodstained stream, through a hole in her neck.” Heartsick, I went to... find the surgeon... For a moment he stood there near the door, looking over the mass of suffering and dying women and children... The silence they kept was so complete that it was oppressive... Then to my amazement I saw that the surgeon, who I knew had served in the Civil War, attending the wounded... from the Wilderness\textsuperscript{15} to Appomattox,\textsuperscript{16} began to grow pale... ‘This is the first time I've seen a lot of women and children shot to pieces,’ he said. ‘I can't stand it’.... Out at Wounded Knee, because a storm set in, followed by a blizzard, the bodies of the slain Indians lay untouched for three days, frozen stiff from where they had fallen. Finally they were buried in a large trench dug on the battlefield itself. On that third day Colonel Colby... saw the blanket of a corpse move... Under the blanket, snuggled up to its dead mother, he found a suckling baby girl.”

Commanding General Nelson A. Miles, Army investigations of Wounded Knee: “I would like to send a delegation to Washington to receive assurance of the higher authority of good intentions of the Government towards them. This will answer a double purpose, namely, satisfy them, bridge over the transition period between war and peace, dispel distrust and hostility, and restore confidence; it will also be a guarantee of peace while they are absent.”

Black Elk, Lakota: “I did not know then 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 along the crooked gulch\textsuperscript{17} 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...”

Source: Personal accounts of Wounded Knee taken from interviews by Eli S. Ricker, Black Elk Speaks as well as reports and testimony relating to the Army investigation of the Battle of Wounded Knee and the Sioux Campaign of 1890-91.


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\item[15.] The Battle of the Wilderness was fought May 5-7, 1864, in the Wilderness of Spotsylvania, Virginia.
\item[16.] One of the last battles of the American Civil War.
\item[17.] A gulch is a narrow ravine or canyon formed by running water.
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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
   A. The exact cause and events of the Wounded Knee Massacre are contingent on who you talk to.
   B. The Wounded Knee Massacre marks the beginning of a turbulent relationship between Native Americans and the United States.
   C. There has never been enough evidence to prove who was at fault in the Wounded Knee Massacre.
   D. The Wounded Knee Massacre was a conflict grounded in religious disagreement.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “If only the Sioux would perform sacred dances and religious rites, then the Great Spirit would return and raise the dead, restore the buffalo to life, and cause a flood that would destroy the whites.” (Paragraph 2)
   B. “The soldiers responded by using machine guns to slaughter at least 146 Indian men, women, and children. Some historians believe the actual number of Indians killed was closer to 300.” (Paragraph 4)
   C. General Nelson Miles, who commanded military forces in the area, sought a court martial for the office in charge of the troops at Wounded Knee. Miles described what happened as a ‘cruel and unjustifiable massacre.’” (Paragraph 6)
   D. “In the future, the Indian struggle to maintain an independent way of life and a separate culture would take place on new kinds of battlefields.” (Paragraph 8)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of “nadir” as it is used in paragraph 1?
   A. Time of transition
   B. Unfair treatment
   C. Complete collapse
   D. Lowest point

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “Deprived of their homelands, their revolts suppressed, and their way of life besieged,” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “many Plains Indians dreamed of restoring a vanished past, free of hunger, disease, and bitter warfare.” (Paragraph 1)
   C. “In 1889, Wovoka, a Paiute holy man from Nevada, had a revelation.” (Paragraph 2)
   D. “then the Great Spirit would return and raise the dead, restore the buffalo to life, and cause a flood that would destroy the whites.” (Paragraph 2)
5. PART A: How does the account of the Wounded Knee Massacre by the interpreter for General Forsyth, Philip F. Wells, compare to Dewey Beard's depiction of that day?
   A. Neither Philip F. Wells or Dewey Beard are sure how the Wounded Knee Massacre escalated so quickly or who is to blame.
   B. Philip F. Wells believes the events of Wounded Knee were self-defense, while Dewey Beard believes that it was a misunderstanding that unnecessarily escalated to a massacre.
   C. Philip F. Wells, while reluctant, agrees with Dewey Beard's opinion that unnecessary force was used that day at Wounded Knee.
   D. Dewey Beard holds his people responsible for the Wounded Knee Massacre, agreeing with Philip F. Wells's assertion that they fired the first shot, even if it was fired due to a misunderstanding.

6. PART B: Which TWO quotes from the text best support the answer to Part A?
   A. “Forsyth said to me, ‘Tell Big Foot he says the Indians have no arms, yet yesterday they were well armed when they surrendered. He is deceiving me. Tell him he need have no fear in giving up his arms, as I wish to treat him kindly...’” (Paragraph 16)
   B. “Ha! Ha! as he did so, meaning he was about to do something terrible, and said, I have lived long enough,’ meaning he would fight until he died.” (Paragraph 18)
   C. “The young warriors paid no attention to what I told them, but the old men – five or six of them – sitting next to us, passed through the lines and submitted to search.” (Paragraph 18)
   D. “The struggle for the gun was short, the muzzle pointed upward toward the east and the gun was discharged. In an instant a volley followed as one shot, and the people began falling...” (Paragraph 19)
   E. “...I heard someone on my left exclaim, ‘Look out! Look out!’ Turning my head and bringing my arms to port, I saw five or six young warriors cast off their blankets and pull guns out from under them and brandish them in the air.” (Paragraph 20)
   F. “As she went up, soldiers on both sides of the ravine shot at her and killed her... (I) heard the Hotchkiss or Gatling guns shooting at them along the bank.” (Paragraph 22)

7. PART A: How did the Ghost Dance contribute to the events leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre?
   A. Provide the Sioux with hope during the Wounded Knee Massacre
   B. Exhibit violence that allowed Americans to condone their attack
   C. Provide the Sioux with a peaceful means of expressing their distress
   D. Frighten American soldiers into pursuing violent action against the Sioux
8. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “Beginning in the 1870s, a religious movement known as the Ghost Dance arose among Indians of the Great Basin,” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “During the late 1880s, the Ghost Dance had great appeal among the Sioux, despairing over the death of a third of their cattle by disease and angry that the federal government had cut their food rations.” (Paragraph 2)
   C. “Wearing special Ghost Dance shirts, fabricated from white muslin and decorated with red fringes and painted symbols, dancers would spin in a circle until they became so dizzy that they entered into a trance.” (Paragraph 3)
   D. “Fearful that the Ghost Dance would lead to a Sioux uprising, army officials ordered Indian police to arrest the Sioux leader Sitting Bull. When Sitting Bull resisted, he was killed.” (Paragraph 4)

9. “Then to my amazement I saw that the surgeon, who I knew had served in the Civil War, attending the wounded... from the Wilderness to Appomattox, began to grow pale...” (Paragraph 29). How does quote contribute to the development of ideas in the text?

10. What is the effect of including a variety of personal accounts on the Wounded Knee Massacre?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How have the United States’ relations with Native Americans evolved? Have they improved? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. In the context of the text, what can we learn from tragedy? Why are personal accounts, such as those included in this article, important to better understand tragic events in history? What do these personal accounts reveal about the Wounded Knee Massacre that we wouldn't know otherwise? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, how do people face death? How did the excessive and unnecessary deaths of the Sioux at Wounded Knee influence the spirit of Native Americans? Did this event push Native Americans to further resists the United States’ control or give into it?

4. After hearing the perspectives of several individuals who were at Wounded Knee, what do you think happened there? Were any of the killings justified?