

THE MASSACRE OF A MOVEMENT: THE 1973 FEDERAL SIEGE AT WOUNDED KNEE AND ITS SOCIOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

by

Joseph Roberson-Kitzman

The beat of a drum is heard softly in the background as a ruckus begins with a single shot that quickly becomes two, three, four, until there are too many to count. Children run and women try to cover their infants from the shots and debris. Young men without weapons fall dead into the mass of bodies that are not fit to walk this Earth. The dead will forever live within the ground as the toll rises to unbearable numbers in an event the Sioux nation would never forget. The Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 would live on in the memory of all Native Americans and would become alive again for their warriors.

The death of a Native American had begun a stir of public discontent over the charges brought by the government. “Wesley Bad Heart Bull was found dying in front of Bill’s Bar with a knife stuck in his chest. (Darald) Schmitz had stabbed him seven times.”¹ January 20, 1973 would start the events that would eventually lead to the seventy-one day standoff at Wounded Knee where two Native Americans would be killed by the United States government and one federal agent would lose the use of his legs. The siege would become front page news all over the world as a group of militant Lakota would hold a town against the government at an ancient massacre site.

The site itself was not a pristine location to fight what was expected from the Native side to be a war. Wounded Knee was in the midst of hills on all sides. It was the low ground. The FBI knew it had the advantage logistically from the outset. Speaking to Pedro Bissonette, Vern Long, president of the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, and Russell Means,

Joseph Roberson-Kitzman is a graduating senior at Dickinson State University. He presented this paper at the Mid-America Conference on History in Lawrence, Kansas in 2005. He is currently undecided on graduate school.

the FBI official emphatically stated, "Who do you think you are? You're in a fish bowl. Don't you understand? We can wipe you out!"² The imminent threat of death hung over these few Native Americans, but why did they make their stand and what was its ultimate result?

The nature of distrust between the Native Americans at Wounded Knee and federal agents was set long before the beginning of the siege. A history of warfare and broken treaties took on a twentieth century feel as events began to escalate. First came the capture of Alcatraz Island, an action "reclaiming federal land in the name of Native Nations."³ It would remain occupied for nineteen months, ending in 1969. Next, was the March of Broken Treaties, which ended with BIA headquarters being overrun on November 2, 1972. The climax of the movement was the Siege at Wounded Knee. This event began at the tiny hamlet of Wounded Knee, and was delivered to the front door of houses nationwide, with even a stop at the Oscars. The work of Native American civil rights workers would be heard and their soapbox would be the burial site of a massacre that had claimed their ancestors.

Headlines stated that "Armed Indians Seize Wounded Knee, Hold Hostages."⁴ The news broke and the nation knew that ten to twelve hostages were being held in a small town in South Dakota. The Native Americans pledged that there would be no harm to the hostages. Although they were free to go the next day, the hostages did not leave their homes on their own accord. The Lakota made demands ranging from the upholding of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, meeting with officials from the White House about Native treatment, creating a presidential treaty commission, removing Dicky Wilson from the Oglala tribal council, investigating Dicky Wilson, and recognizing the traditional Oglala government.

But to understand the siege we must first understand what their demands meant. To understand these demands, we must look at the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which stated:

No treaty for the cession of any portion or part of the reservation herein described which may be held in common, shall be of any validity or force as against the said Indians unless executed and signed by at least three-fourths of all the adult male Indians occupying or interested in the same, and no cession by the tribe shall

be understood or construed in such manner as to deprive, without his consent, any individual member of the tribe of his rights to any tract of land selected by him as provided in Article VI of this treaty.⁵

This article gave the Lakota control of all land that was originally given to them in 1868, which included the Black Hills, later the site of Mount Rushmore Monument. They had solid evidence to back up the ownership of the national park and Mount Rushmore, but clearly this would not be what was worth dying over. The treaty stated that Natives would be able to claim damages from the federal government from actions of non-Natives in violation of treaty terms. The leader of the American Indian Movement (AIM) felt that this was not happening for their people.

These Native Americans felt strongly that they could change the world for their people. They gave the government a simple choice: it could negotiate, or it could attack and kill men, women, and children.⁶ At the same time the Oglala began to revive their native religions and moved forward with spirituality at Wounded Knee. “After five days we heard that the government had imposed an ultimatum: by the following evening we were to lay down our weapons and surrender.”⁷ With very little ammunition to fight the American government, they looked for spiritual guidance and began to pray. “In the afternoon word was sent that we were to leave at least one man in each bunker while the rest of the warriors were to gather in a tipi set up directly under the hill where the mass grave was located. Leonard Crow Dog, the medicine man, was going to do a sweat lodge and paint the faces of the warriors for battle, for death if need be.”⁸ The process of cleansing and prayer soothed these men, many of them Vietnam veterans, and they began to get ready for a second massacre at Wounded Knee by praying on the mass graves of their forefathers who had been killed by the same government that looked at them now. The issues were real; the need for change was real; the ultimatum was not.

By this point the government had gone through one cease-fire and now on March 8, 1973 began a second cease-fire after two injuries were reported at Wounded Knee. The two injuries were healed by Crow Dog using traditional Indian medicine. He used a combination of herbs to put in the wound. Milo Goings, who was shot in the knee, said that, “he didn’t feel a thing.”⁹ The old medicine man was performing surgery out of the Catholic

Church at Wounded Knee, just as it would have been performed two hundred years prior.

On March 9 the government worked on the finishing touches of a pact to end the eleven day occupation, which centered on evacuating the nonresidents of Wounded Knee. They would announce that they had, “reached an agreement in principle.”¹⁰ The government thought that they had found the resolution to the standoff. The only thing that was left was terms on the manner of dispersement. The next day the government would remove its roadblocks and slowly it seemed as though things were being resolved. But on March 11, another round of firing began, leaving United States Marshal Lloyd Grimm injured.

During all this the Natives were attempting to direct the terms of the government by calling on the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868 and the Iroquois League as proof of Oglala sovereignty. They believed that they were a nation unto themselves and called for the government to treat them as one. On March 11, 1973 they called for a change in how the negotiations were to be handled, the terms to be decided upon this change. During the day, the government tried to send in officials to check mail boxes at the post office in the trading post to see if they had been burglarized. The Native Americans took this as a ludicrous mission from the FBI to infiltrate their camp under false pretenses, and tensions continued to mount between both armed forces. The agents were supposedly checking for fraudulent mail in an area that hadn't been receiving mail since the siege began. The government quickly moved to restore the armed ring around Wounded Knee as the Native Americans within the camp stated that any attempt by the government to enter the camp would be treated as an act of war and dealt with accordingly.”¹¹

These actions marked a major change in the mood of the situation as individual actions on both sides began to intensify. The federal forces, armed with M-16s and covered with flak-jackets, took assigned positions around Wounded Knee, supported by armored personnel carriers.¹² These forces, which were estimated at around three hundred, covered the mostly unarmed four hundred within Wounded Knee. The occupiers were not afraid of the superior forces as they continued to send FBI officials away at gunpoint to keep their camp from being infiltrated. The federal officials restationed their roadblocks to monitor the roads. This, however, would not

keep the supporters out. Although the roadblocks were an inconvenience to the Native Americans of the surrounding area, they were able to slip in and out of the camp at will, despite the government's use of flares, which had commonly been used in Vietnam, as well. As Woody Kipp sneaked into the camp, he began to see how life would be as a Vietcong:

Suddenly a popping sound punctuated the night. I was shocked - I *knew* that sound. I had heard it every night for twenty months in Vietnam as the security forces defended the air base at Da Nang, unleashing flares to light up the Vietnamese night to see if Victor Charlie was coming through the concertina wire. In that moment in the ravine, I realized the United States military was looking for *me* with those flares. *I was the gook now.*¹³

In that moment a veteran of the military felt his beliefs and protest had made him the enemy of the United States. Was this the feeling of the United States? Did armed action need to take place at Wounded Knee? Were the four hundred occupants of the nation with their meager arms really dangerous and were their demands for an overthrow in the tribal government and an investigation into affairs in the Oglala nation worth the government taking aim at its own citizens, at its own veterans of foreign wars?

The armed action against the government had already injured one federal agent and would result in others being injured and even killed to stop this siege. The protest of armed citizens, who felt unprotected by the government, was met with heavy federal resistance. But the government was not the only entity that felt threatened. "The Pine Ridge Tribal council, moving to re-establish its authority over the reservation, adopted tonight a resolution to all non-Oglala Sioux who have come to the area to support militant Indians occupying Wounded Knee."¹⁴ Dicky Wilson had declared war on those he considered outsiders, saying that "he would remove them whether the government liked it or not."¹⁵ These threats from Wilson were heard within the camp and those inside knew this meant that the Goon squad would try to take action.¹⁶

The next day during the middle of a South Dakota snowstorm the government officially loosened up its blockade. This relaxation came during a storm that made traveling nearly impossible.¹⁷ This storm offered little

movement for those inside or outside the camp, but it gave the government time to recall its aide to meet with officials in Washington, D.C. They hoped that after the storm they would find a way to end the siege. The Sioux tribal council followed suit to remove what they could see as obstacles from their path by adopting on March 16 "A resolution by the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council calling for nonresidents - and specifically members of the National Council of Churches - to be expelled from the Pine Ridge Reservation."¹⁸ The council was apparently angry that white ministers had come to work as mediators between the government and those occupying Wounded Knee.

The return of government officials on March 17th also led to a new proposal. Reverend John Adams, of the Council of Churches, presented this proposal to Banks in front of one of the roadblocks. The negotiations went well and the issue was left to be discussed within the camp at Wounded Knee. The next day the Oglala made public their rejection of the offer by burning the government's proposal. The AIM leadership came with a counterproposal that demanded "a meeting with a special Presidential emissary to negotiate on the basis of 19th century treaties."¹⁹ The insurgents wanted to be able to put their case in front of the eyes of the President. At the same time a group of Oglala outside of Wounded Knee worked to overthrow the Wilson administration legally.²⁰

Wilson remained confident in his strength throughout the entire insurgency. He would neither back the Native Americans within Wounded Knee nor would he make concessions to appease the government. The tribal president would be in the middle of the affairs standing on his own side. If there was a chance to prove that he was trying to help the people of the land, he had it. The manner in which he ran the affair, though, was suspect. From time to time he would issue public statements calling the insurgents communists, white, black, and false Indians. He seemingly would impede the process of meetings by ordering the mediators to leave his reservation. At all points it seems that Richard (Dicky) Wilson did what was best for Richard (Dicky) Wilson, which on its own should have sparked a federal investigation.

On March 23, black militant Angela Davis was turned back in her effort to visit Wounded Knee, and she was quickly removed from the Pine Ridge Reservation by the BIA police. Her mere presence showed that it was not only a Native American affair that was happening within the tiny town, but

also one that civil rights leaders were taking notice of and wishing to contribute to.²¹ Soon after, Marlon Brando refused the Academy Award for Best Actor—a coveted prize within the motion picture community—and had Shasheen Littlefeather speak on Indian rights.²² The nation was following the events and seeing what would be done to aid the Native American people. The siege had become national news and bright lights were being shined on the movement.

On March 25, the insurgents received more help in their occupation, this time legally as Judge Andrew W. Bogue ordered “the guards around Wounded Knee to allow daily caravans of food to be taken into the tiny hamlet being held by dissident Indians.”²³ The government’s policy was not to have these people driven out of Wounded Knee by starvation or disease. The authorities wanted the intellectual ideas that put them in this situation to be the reason they left. It would take until March 30 for the government to change its position. Kent Frizzell, the government’s chief negotiator, would say, “My inclination is not to spoon feed those who are illegally occupying Wounded Knee.”²⁴ So for five days, the natives inside the camp would have food run to them in caravans driven by lawyers under orders of the court; yet, the men, women, and children were short on food until the end of the siege.

On March 26, after several days of fierce fire fights between the natives and the government, U.S. Marshall Lloyd Grimm was critically shot. He survived but was paralyzed. As the gunfire increased over the next week, so did efforts to speak with the Native Americans inside the village.

The confrontation looked as though it was ending when on April 5 the government and the Native Americans came to an agreement whereby “...representatives of the Oglala Sioux tribe are to meet in Washington with a Presidential Assistant, Leonard Garment, at 9 am, est, Saturday. There they are to have preliminary talks aimed at setting up a Presidential commission to examine Sioux treaty rights.”²⁵ Means was to go to Washington, D.C. and was to have conversations with Garment. He would then make a telephone call and those at Wounded Knee would surrender. This never happened. Means went to Washington; 9 a.m. came, but Garment did not. Then the government would not allow the meeting until after the call was made. Means would not go along with the government plans. When the meetings were canceled, Means said, “I haven’t any faith

or trust in the United States government, and I speak for everyone in Wounded Knee.”²⁶ So the highly anticipated surrender would wait. After this debacle, the militants rejected the agreement made and the siege continued.

In the meantime, set against an atmosphere that resembled a war zone, life continued at Wounded Knee. On April 11, 72-year-old Josette Wahwassuck acted as chief midwife for Mary Ellen Moore as she gave birth to a newborn baby that she named Pedro.²⁷ The next day Nogeeshik Aquash and Annie May Pictou were married in a traditional Native American ceremony.

The fatal shooting of Frank Clearwater happened five days later. He was air rushed “to the St. John-McNamara Hospital in Rapid City.”²⁸ The massive head wound left him severely injured. It took over an hour for those inside Wounded Knee to get to Clearwater and when they did, they could not help him. They contacted the government outside, which insisted that they bring Clearwater out under a white flag so that he could be airlifted. They did not want to bring a helicopter into Wounded Knee. Frank Clearwater never regained consciousness and died eight days later. Morning Star Clearwater, Frank’s wife, was assured that she would be able to be at her husband’s side, “but upon her arrival at Pine Ridge she was arrested, dragged weeping from her critically injured husband and thrown into the overly crowded tribal police jail where the visibly pregnant woman had to sleep on the cement floor.”²⁹ She later requested that her husband have a traditional warrior burial at Wounded Knee. Wilson denied this request.

Frank Clearwater’s death was not the last at Wounded Knee—Buddy Lamont was killed on April 27. He was buried at Wounded Knee as he was an Oglala Sioux by birth. His plaque reads, “TWO THOUSAND CAME HERE TO WOUNDED KNEE AND ONE STAYED BEHIND.”³⁰ His death marked the end of hopes for Dennis Banks and with it an end to Wounded Knee. It would be at this time that the leadership would begin to lose hope. Tired, hungry, and losing loved ones, they began to feel pressure to end the siege. The insurgents would last only eleven more days and many of the leaders fled to avoid arrest. The few days between the end of the resistance and the funeral were spent in legal battles over the burial of the dead and over preparations.

The leadership within Wounded Knee escaped on the final night of the

siege. They feared what would happen to them if detained by BIA police or the federal government. Later, they would give themselves up to officials, but instances of government misconduct would keep these revolutionaries from imprisonment.

President Nixon promised a group of five White House representatives to close the affair and work with the Native Americans to help alleviate the problems that were found within the Pine Ridge Reservation. There is no monument at Wounded Knee, other than that to Buddy Lamont. The government was liable for the damage done by excessive shots at homes and the community would not be rebuilt.

The Native Americans never received a commission to investigate treaties nor did direct negotiations ever occur. The Oglala national government was never put into place and there has been no prosecution of Richard Wilson. So it would seem that this confrontation on face value did nothing to help the cause of the Oglala Sioux. Yet, the story of the confrontation gave the Native Americans a worldwide voice, one that can benefit future generations if their story continues to be told. The civil rights struggle of the 1960s and 1970s was not only a fight for the African American, the homosexual, or the female, but also this small population of Native Americans.

NOTES

The lack of governmental evidence is apparent in the reading of the citations of this paper, but was due to the lack of forthwith cooperation by the government on both the state and federal levels to supply primary source documents. The loss is regrettable, but firsthand accounts and the openness of the participants in documents from other sources proved to be most helpful in the writing of this paper.

1. Dennis Banks with Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 150.
2. "Russell Means on the Siege of Wounded Knee," 3, *Rolling Stone The Seventies* eds., Ashley Kahn, Holly George-Warner, and Shawn Dahl (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1998). Reprinted at http://www.russellmeans.com/read_01.html.
3. Larua Waterman Wittstick and Elaine J. Salinas, "A Brief History of the American Indian Movement," at the *American Indian Movement* homepage, <http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/history.html>.
4. "Armed Indian Seize Wounded Knee, Hold Hostage," *New York Times*, 1 March 1973, 1.
5. Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) Art. XII, at <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/>

resources/archives/four/ftlaram.htm.

6. Banks, 168.

7. Woody Kipp, *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee: The Trail of a Blackfeet Activist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 128.

8. *Ibid.*, 129.

9. Banks, 177.

10. Douglas E. Kneeland, "Accord Reported at Wounded Knee: Justice Official Says Pact Hinges on the Departure of Nonresident Indians," *New York Times*, 10 March 1973, 65.

11. Bill Kovach, "F.B.I. Agent as Indians Warm U.S.," *New York Times*, 12 March 1973, 65.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Kipp, 126.

14. Bill Kovach, "Indian Council Acts to Oust Outsiders," *New York Times*, 14 March 1973, 32.

15. *Ibid.*

16. The Goon squad was the local name for the muscle that Wilson hired to keep his reservation running smoothly. He would pay for hired muscle to take whatever action would be needed to keep dissenters from raising a voice.

17. Clyde Dollar, interview with non-identified woman (Foxfire Tape @3), 1973, in Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

18. John Kifner, "Wounded Knee Dissidents Move To Oust Leader of Tribal Council," *New York Times*, 20 March 1973, 14.

19. Kifner, 33.

20. *Ibid.* Wilson stated, "This is what they should have been doing all along." He then said that he would like to see them change the government structure if need be. He also stated that he would run unless the change structure would be communistic.

21. "Angela Davis Is Turned Back In Effort To Visit Wounded Knee," *New York Times*, 24 March 1973, 15.

22. Marlon Brando, "The Unfinished Oscar Speech," *New York Times*, 30 March 1973, 39.

23. Martin Waldrun, "Judge Allows Food for Wounded Knee," *New York Times*, 20 March 1973, 26.

24. Martin Waldron, "U.S. Seeks Talks at Wounded Knee," *New York Times*, 30 March 1973, 11.

25. William K. Stevens, "Indians And U.S. Sign Agreement at Wounded Knee," *New York Times*, 6 April 1973.

26. Denny Walsh, "Talks Postponed at Wounded Knee," *New York Times*, 7 April 1973, 34.

27. Banks, 191.

28. William K. Stevens, "Militant at Wounded Knee is Shot as Fighting Erupts," *New York News*, 18 April 1973, 97.

29. Banks, 201.

30. *Ibid.*, 208.