

Accounts of the Battle of Wounded Knee – Primary Source Analysis

Black Elk – Account of the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890)

There were a number of long-standing issues at the reservation at Wounded Knee that contributed to the tension there prior to the massacre. In the bad crop years of 1889 and 1890, the U.S. government failed to provide the full amount of food, agricultural implements and seeds, clothing, and supplies mandated by its treaty with the Indians. Black Elk, a young man in 1890, describes the tragedy at Wounded Knee in this excerpt from his autobiography, “Black Elk Speaks.”

There was much shooting down yonder, and there were many cries, and we could see calvarymen scattered over the hills ahead of us. Calvarymen were riding along the gulch and shooting into it, where the women and children were running away and trying to hide in the gullies and the stunted pines. ...

We followed down along the dry gulch, and what we saw was terrible. Dead and wounded women and children were scattered along there and where they had been trying to run away. The soldiers had followed along the gulch, as they ran, and murdered them in there. Sometimes they were in heaps along the gulch, as they ran, and murdered them in there. Sometimes they were in heaps because they had huddled together, and some were scattered all along. Sometimes bunches of them had been killed and torn to pieces where the wagon guns hit them. I saw a little baby trying to suck its mother, but she was bloody and dead. ...

When I saw this I wished that I had died too, but I was not sorry for the women and children. It was better for them to be happy in the other world, and I wanted to be there too. But before I went there I wanted to have revenge. I thought there might be a day, and we should have revenge.

President Benjamin Harrison – Report on the Wounded Knee Massacre and the Decrease in Indian Land Acreage (1891)

The following is an excerpt from President Harrison’s annual message, delivered December 9, 1891, in which he describes the Wounded Knee Massacre and the progress of the program to decrease Native American land acreage.

The outbreak among the Sioux which occurred in December last is as to its causes and incidents full reported upon by the War Department and the Department of the Interior. ... That these Indians had some just complaints ... is probably true; but the Sioux tribes are naturally warlike and turbulent, and their warriors were excited by their medicine men and chiefs, who preached the coming of an Indian messiah who was to give them power to destroy their enemies. ...

In view of the alarm that prevailed among the white settlers near the reservation and of the fatal consequences that would have resulted from an Indian incursion, I placed at the disposal of General Miles, commanding the Division of the Missouri, all such forces as we thought by him to be required. He is entitled to the credit of having given thorough protection to the settlers and of bringing the hostiles into subjection with the least possible loss of life. ...

Since March 4, 1889, about 23,000,000 acres have been separated from Indian reservations and added to the public domain for the use of those who desire to secure free homes under our beneficent laws.

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1. What were some of the atrocities that Black Elk described?
 2. How does Black Elk’s description of the events differ from President Harrison’s account?
 3. In what ways did President Harrison justify the Battle of Wounded Knee?
 4. At the end of his account, Black Elk vows for revenge; was Black Elk ever able to get revenge for the events at Wounded Knee? What is the historical significance of the Battle of Wounded Knee to the Indian Wars?