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INDIANS

in unexpected places

"Deloria succeeds brilliantly."—Journal of the West

WOUNDED KNEE, 1890

The massacre at Wounded Knee, that marker of old and new, conquest and resistance, pathos and murderous violence, offered Americans the ultimate example of Indian outbreak. In the early summer of 1889, Lakotas and other Indian people began hearing word of a prophet, Wovoka, who had been given a powerful vision of social change. A new world was coming “like a whirlwind” to destroy the old world. Dead relatives would be there, and the bison would be replenished. A messiah had come to the whites before, some said, but they had killed him. This time, he would come to the Indians. The earth would be turned over and everything started anew. Marked with sacred red paint and a ghost dance taught by Wovoka, Indians could join this new world, but whites would be left behind.¹⁵

First, three Lakotas were sent out to Wovoka’s home in Nevada to investigate. Then, in the winter of 1889–1890, several more made the journey from the various agencies. Good Thunder, Yellow Breast, Short Bull, and Kicking Bear returned to Pine Ridge that spring with the main elements of the Ghost Dance religion. The dancers formed a circle, held hands, and moved in and out around a red-painted tree. For the Lakota religious leader Black Elk and, no doubt, many others, the dance had meaningful resonances with the sacred Sun Dance ceremony, the most important collective ritual in the Lakota year.¹⁶ At the same time, Lakotas had to be wondering whether they had hit rock bottom. The animals were gone, the government rations were late and insufficient, and they were starving to death. In 1889, they had been forced to sign away still more land. The Ghost Dance offered the kind of hope grasped only by the truly desperate, and it did so in familiar forms.

Some Lakotas altered those forms, making the Ghost Dance dovetail even more tightly with their own culture. Short Bull and Kicking Bear introduced “Ghost Shirts.” Decorated with a star and crescent moon and feathers at the shoulders, the shirts were said to be able to stop bullets.¹⁷ While most Lakotas continued to dance the ancestors back to life, some considered making their own contribution to the coming world in the familiar form of violent conflict. Never truly defeated, they refused to see themselves as conquered; refused to accept that war might not be part of their repertoire; refused, in other words, to think that what whites called *outbreak* might not really mean a *war* between nations. But believing in one’s capacity and doing something about it are two different things. The more radical among the Ghost Dancers never won a consen-

sus among the Lakota people about the possibility of violence. Indeed, many Lakotas persisted in seeing the dance as an essentially peaceful activity. Lakotas and local whites alike would later testify to that effect. In the end, however, the lack of consensus concerning the use of violence mattered little. If the Ghost Dancers were not prepared to force a war with the U.S. Army, the army was more than willing to come to them.¹⁸

Though most South Dakota agents did not express much concern over the Ghost Dance, Pine Ridge Agent Daniel Royer was much distressed by what he considered an excess of dancing, possibly warlike. That he—and, later, military and civil authorities—was able to see in Indian dancing imminent violence suggests the degree to which *outbreak* had come to structure white perceptions in the wake of colonial containment. Responding to restrictions on Ghost Dancing, a group of Brule dancers from the Rosebud reservation fled in November to the Badlands midway between their reservation and the Black Hills. At the Standing Rock reservation, Agent James McLaughlin set in motion plans to remove Sitting Bull from the Ghost Dance congregations. (My great-grandfather Philip Deloria, newly arrived as a Native clergyman at Standing Rock, was pressed into service to ride out to Sitting Bull’s home and try to convince the leader to come in to the agency. He failed, as others had failed before him.) On December 15, McLaughlin sent his Indian police to arrest Sitting Bull. A fight ensued, and the holy man and several others died. Sitting Bull’s people fled their homes and made their way south, to Big Foot’s Minneconjou band at the Cheyenne River reservation, and together the groups set out for Pine Ridge, 250 miles to the southwest.

The panicky telegrams sent by Agent Royer (pointedly nicknamed “Young Man Afraid of His Indians”) gave General Nelson Miles the opportunity he needed to mobilize the largest gathering of federal troops since the Civil War (which he was happy to do in order to stake the army’s claim to effective governance of Indian affairs).¹⁹ The Badlands Ghost Dancers had taken refuge at the Stronghold on Cunny Table, a spot largely inaccessible except for a narrow strip of land that dropped away steeply on either side. Troops were deployed throughout the area, and they intercepted the struggling Big Foot band as it came through the Badlands and headed for Pine Ridge. On December 29, the troops of Custer’s old Seventh Cavalry—already muttering darkly about revenge—surrounded Big Foot and his people with Hotchkiss guns and proceeded to disarm them. A shot came, and then the order to fire, and then the guns’ rapid-fire cannon shells, which tore the Lakotas to pieces. As always (as it would

be at Lightning Creek), it was important to suggest that an Indian had fired the first shot, that the massacre was, in some twisted way, defensive.

But Wounded Knee was not simply an awful mistake, a miscalculation at a moment of extraordinary tension. The troops chased fleeing Lakotas for miles across the plains, hunting down and killing, not only men, but women and children, all of them already half starved and exhausted. The official report listed 153 Lakotas dead that day, with 44 wounded. Since there were well over 300 people in the group, it is likely that the number reflects a significant undercount, with some of the wounded making their way off the battlefield to die outside the reach of the grisly census takers.

And, while Wounded Knee proved a truly demoralizing event, Lakotas rallied. Young men rode out from Pine Ridge and attacked the troopers the next day at Drexel Mission. Only the timely (and, no doubt, ironic even then) arrival of black “buffalo soldiers” prevented retaliatory killings. Then, as the wounded streamed into the Pine Ridge agency, the two sides parleyed. General Miles alternated threats and shows of military force with promises and diplomacy; the Lakota leaders insisted alternately that they could not control their young men and that the two sides might be able to come to terms.

The Lakotas had been completely surrounded from the very beginning, so it was appropriate that whites understood the event as an Indian outbreak. The *New York Times*, for example, painted the dead Sitting Bull’s life as a series of outbreaks, all leading up to Wounded Knee. “To prevent a general outbreak,” the paper recalled, Sitting Bull had been ordered to the agency in 1876. “In 1879, he broke out again and commenced depredations upon the settlers.” After his death, the paper insisted that “he never assented to the control of the United States Government over his people, but persistently fought the troops whenever they came his way.”²⁰

As John Coward, a media historian, points out, syndicate news dispatches shared among major city papers helped create familiar “news frames” for the representation of Indian-white violence. Wounded Knee—which required the mobilization of half the available army infantry and cavalry units—captured the nation’s front pages for almost two months. A significant number of those papers adopted the lurid accounts of the *Omaha Bee* reporter Charles Cressey, whose paper generated stories for the Associated Press. Cressey did not hesitate to speculate wildly: “There are about 1,500 arms-bearing male Indians here on the Pine Ridge Agency. It is carefully estimated that only one-third of the number are for peace, and that the remaining 1,000 are anxious for blood. But 1,000 is

but a handful of the force that the troops here anticipate encountering for there are thousands of others . . . who will surely join the Pine Ridge devils.” Similar stories in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York shared similar detail and emphases, though each paper published slightly different variations on the familiar news frames.²¹

The most unexpected of these variations came from the pens of Suzette “Bright Eyes” Tibbles, the daughter of the mixed-blood Omaha leader Joseph La Flesche, and her husband, Thomas Tibbles, an Indian reform advocate. The Tibbleses wrote for the *Omaha World-Herald*, which presented the most critical views of the agency regime and played a lead role in hounding Daniel Royer from his position. They accused the press corps of hanging around the local boardinghouse day after day and then inventing conflicts “out of whole cloth.” Suzette and Thomas Tibbles, on the other hand, chose to live with a Lakota family in order to approximate more closely a Native point of view.²²

Nor were the Tibbleses alone in their criticism. The Santee Sioux physician Dr. Charles Eastman, newly arrived at Pine Ridge, claimed that newsmen were fabricating much of their news. Senator Henry Dawes, invested in protecting his 1887 General Allotment Act, insisted that reporters were poisoning the situation. And South Dakota Senator Richard Pettigrew carped that reporters saw “an outbreak in every breeze, a bloody encounter in every rustling bough.” These critical voices—two of them Native—were part of the cacophony surrounding the event. Out of a cacophony, however, can emerge certain dominant themes—and that which emerged from Wounded Knee tended to emphasize the violence of outbreak. Reporters speculated frequently on the bloody battle the next day might bring. The number of warriors, the flight to the Badlands, the uncertainties surrounding the massacre—often these mirrored and repeated one another, sometimes (thanks to wire service reporting) down to the very same sentences. The military did not hesitate to confirm the possibility of Indian violence, with General Miles suggesting a multitribe conspiracy across the west, a “more comprehensive plot than anything ever inspired by the prophet Tecumseh, or even Pontiac.” Taken together, these utterances helped define expectations on a national scale, and those expectations centered on the idea of outbreak.²³

hood, which were, in turn, attuned to new forms of resistance.

It should probably come as no surprise that dancing and hunting offered particularly loaded points of contest between Indians and administrators, for these activities took Indian people beyond the visible eyes of church and state. They represented mobility and, thus, resonated with the fear of outbreak. If one supplied one's own food—as Charlie Smith and his party had attempted to do—then the ration station ceased to exercise its hold. Likewise, social dances asserted a particularly Indian form of leisure that stood in opposition to the agricultural production insisted on by white society. Religious dances offered an even more visible threat, for they suggested a willful breaking away from the hold of church and civilization. And, when, as in the case of the Ghost Dance, dancing appeared to threaten, not only the church, but also the state, and to do so violently, the idea of an Indian outbreak acquired multiple dangerous meanings—not simply physical and military, but social and cultural as well.

As a white fear and expectation, then, *outbreak* offered a new understanding of violence, one poised to replace the *surround* and the *last stand*.

Outbreak was more rebellion than war, as much social and cultural as military, and intimately concerned with the extent to which Indians had or had not been assimilated or forcibly incorporated into American civil society. It entered minds at the moment when it was clear that the war was over but not yet perfectly clear that all the battles had yet been fought.