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Conquest and the State: Why the United States Employed Massive Military Force to Suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance

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On November 17, 1890, General Nelson A. Miles, acting under the authority of President Benjamin Harrison to take “such steps as may be necessary” to suppress an anticipated “outbreak” of Lakota Ghost Dancers, ordered troops to the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota. Over the next two weeks, soldiers from as far away as California were summoned, as the largest concentration of U.S. troops since the Civil War surrounded these and two other Lakota reservations—Standing Rock and Cheyenne River.¹ The eventual consequence of this massive mobilization of armed force was the infamous massacre at Wounded Knee Creek on December 29.

In order to understand the causes of the massacre, it is essential to understand why the U.S. government sent troops to suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance in the first place. The scholarly literature on the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee offers two lines of explanation for this decision. The first points to the

1. Benjamin Harrison to Secretary of War, Nov. 13, 1890, Reports and Correspondence Relating to the Army Investigations of the Battle at Wounded Knee and to the Sioux Campaign of 1890-1891, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s-1917, RG 94, National Archives, microfilm (hereafter cited as RG 94, NA); Asst. Adjutant Genl. to Commanding General, Department Platte, Nov. 17, 1890, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA. On the mobilization of troops over the next few weeks, see R. Eli Paul, “Your Country is Surrounded,” in Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carters, eds., *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln, 1991), 29-31.

initiative of reservation agents who became alarmed at the Ghost Dance and called for military intervention.² The second emphasizes the alarm of white settlers, perhaps inflamed by newspapers, and their demands for military intervention. In the standard scholarly account of these events, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, Robert Utley combines these two explanations in the following synthesis: Although Wovoka, the Paiute prophet who originated the Ghost Dance, taught a “doctrine” of peace toward white people, the Lakotas “perverted” this teaching into a “militant crusade against the white man.” As a result, whites became alarmed. Military and civilian authorities posted on or near the Lakota reservations dispatched reports of Lakota unrest to officials in Washington. Fearing that Indians were about to go to war, settlers panicked, abandoned their homesteads, and sought refuge in the small towns of the Dakotas and Nebraska. There they deluged governors, senators, and executive officials with petitions, telegrams, and resolutions calling for military protection. Newspapers inflamed these sentiments by reporting lurid rumors; they, too, called for military action against the Lakota Ghost Dancers. In the face of such widespread and escalating demands for troops, appeals which were largely based on legitimate apprehensions of an “outbreak,” President Harrison had little choice but to order troops.³

There is much in this account that is questionable. Ethnohis-

2. James C. Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Washington, D.C., 1896; reprint, Lincoln, 1991), 849–850; Alice B. Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization* (Ft. Worth, 1989), 19.

3. Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven, 1963), 87, 109–111 (quotation, p. 87). Utley’s book continues to have wide currency as the authoritative account of the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee. See, for example, L. G. Moses, *The Indian Man: A Biography of James Mooney* (Urbana, 1984), 53; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (2 vols., Lincoln, 1984), II, 727; Joseph G. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, 1987), 317; Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman, 1993), 72; Robert Wooster, *Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Army* (Lincoln, 1993), 176–178; Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills/White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (New York, 1991), 114, 464. Robert Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York, 1993), 287, reiterates the interpretation in *Last Days* in stating that the “dances assumed an increasingly militant and alarming aspect” at various agencies and that “hysteria swept the white communities of Nebraska and North and South Dakota as citizens warned of an Indian uprising and appealed for government arms and military intervention.”

torians have persuasively challenged the thesis that the Lakotas fundamentally altered Wovoka's teaching.⁴ Furthermore, as this article will demonstrate, there are significant problems with the thesis that alarmed settlers and/or agents were the primary initiators of military intervention. In order to understand fully why the United States employed massive military force to suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance, we need to consider the state and its internal dynamics.

One of the major themes of the "new western history" is the importance of the federal government in the American West. In the area of late nineteenth-century Indian policy, Richard White, for example, focuses on the efforts of the Office of Indian Affairs to establish professional management of reservations as a means of promoting assimilation. While centralization had the support of influential interest groups, most notably eastern "humanitarians," White's account suggests that it was driven in large measure by an inherent bureaucratic imperative for opportunistic growth. White's perspective points to the need to recognize the interests of federal agencies in considering a specific historical question, such as why the U.S. government sent troops to suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance. However, White's narrative of a modernizing bureaucracy leaves little room for understanding why, in the midst of successful efforts at centralization, the U.S. Army sent troops against the Lakotas. In this instance, the specific course of conquest may have been shaped not by a strong state but by a relatively weak state with divided interests.⁵

4. Raymond J. DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," *Pacific Historical Review*, LI (1982), 385–406. See also Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., Trudy Thomas, and Jeanne Eder, *Wounded Knee: Lest We Forget*, with an introductory essay by George P. Horse Capture (Cody, Wyo., 1990), 37.

5. Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman, 1991), 108–117. In appropriately focusing attention on the power of the federal government in the West, the "new western history" shows affinity with the concerns of analysts of American political development to "bring the state back in." See Theda Skocpol, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). But new western historians tend to portray the state in rather simplistic terms as a monolithic, all-powerful force. Such a view is quite explicit in Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York, 1985), and is also evident in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987) and in White, *"It's Your Misfortune."* More persuasive accounts of the state, such as Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The*

To date, historians have simply accepted the army's own representation of itself as dutifully responding to demands made by others—the Lakotas posed a serious threat, settlers and agents became alarmed and appealed for protection, the President called upon the Secretary of War, and the army responded in the way the U.S. Army always does, by doing its duty. Yet, like any governmental institution, the army had specific interests and objectives. To understand military intervention, then, it is necessary to examine the army's own interests in the affair, and these interests need to be understood in relation to those of the Indian Bureau. From this state-centered perspective, it will be possible to see why, when the President called for their services in mid-November, western army officers saw Lakota country as a land of opportunity.

* * *

My analysis begins by considering the argument that settlers played an important role in initiating military intervention. It is important to notice at the outset that historians have provided no evidence for this proposition.⁶ Furthermore, an examination of five newspapers from North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska reveals a complete absence of settler alarm or settler demands for military intervention in the months of September, October, and early November.

From September through mid-November the *Rapid City Journal* of Rapid City, South Dakota, contained only one item about the Ghost Dance. This was a report of late September that a "Calamity Jane correspondent is running wild again at Pierre,"

Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920 (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), suggest the importance of considering internal contradictions among state agencies, conflicts between agencies at various levels of government, and the general limits of state capacities, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

6. Utley, *Last Days*, 109. Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees* (New York, 1975; reprint, Lincoln, 1981), 110-113, emphasizes settler unrest but fails to notice that his evidence of settlers panicking is from newspaper reports after the troops were called in. Elmo Scott Watson, "The Last Indian War, 1890-91—A Study of Newspaper Jingoism," *Journalism Quarterly*, XX (1943), 207-208, also argues, without evidence, that "rumor-mongers" who sent their "scare stories back East" were an important factor in the decision to send troops. My argument that neither settlers nor the press played any role in the army's intervention, however, does not invalidate Watson's critique of the press's sensationalist reporting once the military campaign was underway.

spreading rumors about Indians “looking for the coming Christ” and “keeping up big dances in honor of the coming event.” The *Journal*, however, thought that this correspondent should be “quickly taken in and a little horse sense injected into him.” Not until its November 16 issue, which was published after U.S. officials had authorized military intervention, did the *Journal* report on any perceived threat from Indians, and on this occasion it quoted a correspondent in Washington, D.C., on recent “apprehensions at the Interior department of serious trouble with the Indians at the Pine Ridge and Standing Rock agencies.”⁷ Clearly, settlers had not instigated military intervention.

The *Black Hills Daily Times* at Deadwood, South Dakota, also had little to say about any threat from the Ghost Dancers. The only mention of Indian “trouble” during September or October was a brief notice that Indians at the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock reservations had been pulling up survey stakes on the two reservations’ western borders. In early and mid-November the *Times* reported on the Ghost Dance, but none of the reports indicated settler alarm. Once the troops had been summoned, however, the *Times* changed its tone. On November 21 the paper argued that military intervention was necessary and compared the Ghost Dancers to the “anarchists of Chicago,” who, although they had been a “mere handfull [*sic*] under the leadership of fanatics, believed themselves able to revolutionize that city and the nation. Why, then, should not the Indian, aroused by the fervor of a religious idea, and a sense of wrong, given by nature to savagery and butchery, be just as capable of an attempt at the destruction of life and property as those anarchists?”⁸

If any newspaper was in a position to detect settler alarm it would have been the *Chadron Democrat*, located at Chadron, Nebraska, about fifty miles from Pine Ridge Agency, where Ghost

7. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, Sept. 25 and Nov. 16, 1890.

8. *Black Hills Daily Times* (Deadwood), Sept. 26 and Nov. 2, 9, 15, 21, 1890. The *Times*, a Republican paper, devoted much of its editorial space in later 1890 to warnings about the supposed dangers of the South Dakota Farmers’ Alliance. The paper, then, was willing to employ alarmist rhetoric, but its expressions of fear about the Ghost Dance were activated by the coming of troops and not vice versa. The tendency of the metropolitan press to establish a similar rhetorical link between Indians and labor radicals in the 1870s has been analyzed in Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (Middletown, Conn., 1986), 480–489.

Dancers were supposedly the strongest.⁹ In September and October the only item in the *Chadron Democrat* suggesting any fear of an Indian uprising was in the September 18 issue under the headline "An Indian Outbreak." However, its dateline was Boise City, Idaho, and the story contained rumors about Nez Percé "warriors in war paint." A week later, under the headline "Pine Ridge Agency," the *Democrat* reported various routine events at the agency—photographers from Rushville, Nebraska, had arrived—and added that "The new dance among the Indians is said to be worth going many miles to see." This was probably a reference to the Ghost Dance. Obviously, however, it indicated little concern. Not until November 20 did the *Democrat* have anything more to say about the Ghost Dance. At this point, with Troops F, I, and K of the 9th Cavalry having just passed through Chadron on their way from Ft. Robinson to Pine Ridge, the *Democrat* now reported that troops were necessary since the "leaders of the new religion" had "grown insolent and defy the authority of the agent."¹⁰

Settlers near the Standing Rock agency also failed to make appeals for military protection in the period under consideration. In late September the *Mandan Pioneer* of Mandan, North Dakota, took notice of the "Sioux Millennium," but reported that despite the Indians' belief that the coming "Messiah" would "cover the earth with another great stratum of soil some thirty feet deep, covering up everybody but faithful, good Indians," a white man who had just been on the Standing Rock reservation reported that "he was well treated, and that there is no hostility among the Indians, they seeming to think that the utter destruction of the whites will be accomplished entirely through Divine mediation." One month later the *Pioneer* observed that for the past "four weeks Sitting Bull has been inciting the Sioux Indians...to an uprising," but the *Pioneer* downplayed this possibility. The first mention of any alarmed settlers was in late November when the *Pioneer* reported on a meeting of the citizens of Sims held on November 22, five days after troops had been dispatched. This report noted that people from the countryside

9. Utley, *Last Days*, 91–94, 104.

10. *Chadron Democrat*, Sept. 18 and 25, and Nov. 20, 1890.

surrounding Sims were coming to town, and it listed the officers of the recently formed "Sims Home Guard."¹¹

The *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, located at Bismarck, North Dakota, also reported in late October on rumors that Sitting Bull was planning an uprising, but it did so only to discount them as fabrications of the "eastern press." According to the *Tribune*, those who really knew Indians (the *Tribune* counted itself among them) realized that the only Indians who paid Sitting Bull any attention were his "dozen or less fellow coffee coolers" and that the vast majority of Indians ignored him. The *Tribune's* ridicule of Sitting Bull, although ethnocentric, did not indicate local fear; in the weeks prior to military intervention, the paper contained nothing indicating that settlers were alarmed and clamoring for troops.¹²

As this analysis indicates, newspapers provide little evidence that settlers were alarmed prior to military intervention. One might argue that the newspapers were biased against reporting alarmed settlers and demands for military protection because they thought that such reports would discourage the prospects for regional growth. After all, to talk about alarmed settlers might encourage others to flee the region; worse yet, it might discourage new settlement and investment. However, by this logic the newspapers would have tried to suppress reports of settler panic after the troops arrived. In fact, the newspapers did report that settlers were alarmed and demanding military protection at this point, although they generally tried to minimize the actual threat of an "uprising."

An examination of correspondence received by two state executives, Governor John M. Thayer of Nebraska and Governor Arthur C. Mellette of South Dakota, confirms the fact that settlers did not petition governmental authorities until after the decision had been made to mobilize a substantial portion of the

11. *Mandan Pioneer*, Sept. 26, Oct. 31, and Nov. 28, 1890.

12. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1890. As in the case of the other newspapers, it was not until after U.S. officials announced that the situation warranted military action that the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* reported on settlers panicking, and even then it mocked the fears of whites at the neighboring town of Mandan where wild stories were apparently racing through the town by the hour. *Tribune*, Nov. 18 and 19, 1890.

U.S. Army. Neither Thayer's nor Mellette's papers contain a single petition or expression of alarm dated any earlier than November 20. After that date, however, there are a number of such documents. This suggests that petitions sent to either governor in September and October (when the offices of these men were supposedly being flooded by such documents) would surely have found their way into the surviving historical record. Almost certainly the reason that no such documents exist is that they were never produced, and the reason they were not produced is that settlers were not alarmed about the Lakota Ghost Dance—that is, not until the coming of the soldiers gave them reason to become aroused and fearful.¹³

If settlers were not demanding troops, did the agents play the primary role in initiating military intervention? To answer this question, let us consider the reports of the agents at the four major Lakota reservations—Standing Rock, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, and Pine Ridge. Of the four agents, James McLaughlin was by far the most experienced, having been at Standing Rock for nine years, since 1881. In mid-October 1890, McLaughlin reported to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs that there was “considerable excitement and some disaffection existing among certain Indians of this Agency at the present time.” Yet he took pains to stress that he did not “apprehend any immediate uprising or serious outcome.” McLaughlin recommended that sometime during the winter Sitting Bull, “the high priest and apostle of this latest Indian absurdity” and “chief mischief maker at this agency,” be removed from the reservation and imprisoned, but he did not call for troops. On November 15, even as military mobilization was about to begin, McLaughlin reported that the “excitement” was in fact “subsiding” and that, although Sitting Bull should be arrested sometime before the spring, it was unnecessary to move immediately.¹⁴

13. The earliest letters expressing alarm about an Indian “uprising” in these collections are George H. Bowring to Gov. John M. Thayer, Nov. 20, 1890, box 6, Governor John M. Thayer Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln; A. H. Burns to Gov. A. C. Mellette, Nov. 22, 1890, box 8, Arthur C. Mellette Papers, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre.

14. James McLaughlin to Commissioner of Indian Affairs (hereafter cited as CIA), Oct. 17 and Nov. 15, 1890, Major James McLaughlin Papers, microfilm, Assumption College, Richardton, N.D. A substantial portion of the Oct. 17, 1890, letter is reprinted in Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1891 (Wash-

At Cheyenne River, agent Perain P. Palmer advised on October 29 that the “best means of preventing an outbreak” would be to arrest one of the Ghost Dance leaders, Hump, whom Palmer characterized as “the most dangerous character on this agency,” and remove him from the reservation. On November 4, Palmer reported that the “craze is not spreading to any extent now.” He repeated his recommendation for the removal of Hump and suggested that a similar strategy of removing key leaders would work at the other agencies. Two days later, Palmer suggested the desirability of having “a small detachment of Troops sent here to show these Hostile Indians that the Department is watching their actions and will punish all offenders,” but this was far from a call for the massive invasion which was about to occur.

On November 10, Palmer reported that the Ghost Dance was “increasing rather than diminishing,” that “hopes of checking [the] spread of the craze by persuasive means and good counsel” had failed, and that the Indians were determined to dance regardless of the agent’s wishes. Three days earlier Palmer had sent Indian police to a Ghost Dance camp on Cherry Creek, but the dancers would not allow the police near them. Furthermore, Palmer had heard reports that Sitting Bull’s band was “preparing for an outbreak.” Still, Palmer did not request that troops be sent, although he did recommend that the Indians be disarmed.¹⁵

At Rosebud, E. B. Reynolds assumed the position of temporary agent in late October. Before this, Reynolds had already formed a strong opinion about the Ghost Dance. In August, while on a special assignment, he had joined a party led by Pine Ridge agent Hugh Gallagher and several Indian police, which attempted to assert U.S. authority over an encampment of Ghost Dancers on White Clay Creek. The Ghost Dancers learned of the party’s arrival and took up arms in a defensive position. Although Gallagher acted in a confrontational manner, thus risking the

ington, D.C., 1891), 328–330. Although McLaughlin did not explicitly oppose military intervention, he wrote in his autobiography that as talk of military intervention grew in November 1890 he had “feared military interference with the Indians...because I was convinced that a military demonstration would precipitate a collision and bloodshed.” James McLaughlin, *My Friend the Indian* (Boston, 1910; reprint, Lincoln, 1989), 201.

15. Perain P. Palmer to CIA, Oct. 29, and Nov. 4, 6 and 10, 1890, Special Case 188, Record Group 75, National Archives, microfilm (hereafter cited as RG 75, NA).

possibility of provoking a violent response, the result was a stand-off. From this episode Reynolds concluded that the Ghost Dance needed to be stopped, as it had “the effect of binding [the Indians] to the customs of their ancestors from which the Government is spending large sums of money to wean them away.” This could “only be done by the military unless the cold weather accomplishes this end.”

When Reynolds assumed charge at Rosebud in late October, he quickly concluded that the Ghost Dancers there were in a “state of insubordination.” Reynolds reported on November 2 that the Indians had been trading horses for arms and ammunition and that they had recently moved the date of the coming of the new world forward from spring to December, sure signs that an “outbreak” was “imminent.” Reynolds advised that “a sufficient force of troops” be sent.¹⁶

The strongest demands for military intervention came from Pine Ridge Agency, where Daniel F. Royer, a physician with absolutely no experience, had assumed the position of agent in early October as a reward for his political services to the South Dakota Republican party. Almost immediately, Royer began advising the Office of Indian Affairs that troops would be necessary to quiet the Ghost Dance, and as the weeks went by, his requests for troops grew more urgent. By November 15 Royer was near hysteria and dispatched this oft-quoted telegram: “Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy. I have fully informed you that employees and government property at this agency have no protection, and are at the mercy of these dancers. Why delay by further investigation. We need protection and we need it now.”¹⁷

The army’s own investigation, conducted by General Thomas H. Ruger, confirmed the situation described in these reports. While at Standing Rock and Cheyenne River in early November, Ruger had concluded that there was “not likely to be any outbreak,” at least during the winter, and he had ordered a modest reinforcement of the troops at Ft. Bennett as a sufficient

16. E. B. Reynolds to CIA, Sept. 25 and Nov. 2, 1890, Special Case 188, RG 75, NA.

17. D. F. Royer to Acting CIA, Oct. 12 and 30, 1890, D. F. Royer to CIA, Nov. 8, 11, and 15, 1890, Special Case 188, RG 75.

precaution. At Pine Ridge, however, where Ruger filed his report on November 15, Royer had just telegraphed the news that “Indians are crazy with excitement over the ghost dance,” and Ruger himself recommended that “force strong enough to overawe the Pine Ridge Indians be sent.”¹⁸

By this time, Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs R. V. Belt had already concluded that it would be necessary to send troops to Pine Ridge. On November 13 Belt informed Acting Secretary of the Interior George Chandler that the situation at Pine Ridge was “very critical.” Since an “outbreak may occur at any time,” it “does not seem to me to be safe to [any] longer withhold troops from the agency.” Chandler in turn forwarded Belt’s letter to President Harrison repeating Belt’s assessment of the situation at Pine Ridge and his request that troops be sent to that agency. On the same day, Harrison authorized military action.¹⁹

This summary of the information upon which officials in Washington acted makes clear that there was serious trouble only at one agency—Pine Ridge. Agent Reynolds at Rosebud had reported difficulties, but it was unclear how serious these were, and in any case, officials in Washington with decision-making authority focused almost exclusively on Pine Ridge in calling for troops.²⁰

We might at this point propose the following explanation for military intervention: that the army sent troops in response to requests from Indian Bureau officials who feared an outbreak at Pine Ridge. This conclusion would confirm the first line of analysis outlined at the beginning of this essay. However, this

18. Ruger’s report can be found in Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1891* (Washington, D.C., 1891), 190–191.

19. Acting CIA to Secretary of the Interior, Nov. 13, 1890, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA; Acting Secretary of the Interior to the President, Nov. 13, 1890 (two letters), Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

20. Utey, *Last Days*, 110–112, cites Ruger’s conclusions that things were under control at Standing Rock and Cheyenne River, and in a crucial passage arguing that troops were necessary, he singles out Pine Ridge as the only reservation where white lives were in obvious danger. However, the potential significance of this evidence—that the basis for military intervention may have been restricted solely to problems at a single reservation and that these problems were the result of one agent’s inexperience rather than of any serious threat—is largely obscured by Utey’s general interpretive statements regarding widespread settler unrest and the overall alarming character of reports from the field.

explanation would be incomplete, as it fails to explain two considerations.

First, it does not explain why civilian officials in the Indian Bureau and the Department of the Interior would advocate a military solution to a problem under their jurisdiction. In theory at least, they had other options. Given Royer's obvious incompetence, the Indian Bureau could easily have replaced him in early or even mid-November with a more experienced civilian agent, or Indian Bureau officials could have advocated replacing him temporarily with an army officer, a common enough course of action. Second, any explanation that sees the army as merely responding to a request fails to consider how the army itself read unfolding events in view of its own interests. To understand fully why military intervention occurred and why it took the massive form that it did requires consideration of the army's own agenda.

It is well known that the late nineteenth-century army had definite views about the management of Indian affairs. Until 1849, Indian affairs had been under the War Department at which time they were transferred to the newly created Department of the Interior. The army had gladly given up what it regarded as an onerous burden. However, in the late 1860s and 1870s, years of escalating conflict between the U.S. and Native American tribes, the army moved to regain control over Indian affairs, arguing that it was far better equipped than the Indian Bureau to administer Indian reservations.

In arguing for a transfer of responsibility, the army advanced two related propositions. The first was that the condition of most Indian tribes required a system of military control. Since un-subjugated Indian tribes still retained their warlike traditions, the army contended, they would respond only to force and to the threat of force. Indeed, because Indians were (or had recently been) warriors, they understood and respected army officers far more than they did civilian agents. Civilian authorities could manage tribes once they had become "civilized," but until then it would be necessary to have military agents, because only they could exercise the "firm hand" necessary to guide the transition from a pastoral to an agricultural society. The army's second proposition was that army officers generally were far more capable of efficient and just governance of Indian reservations than

civilian agents. Whether Indian agents were appointed upon the recommendation of religious denominations, as they were under President Ulysses Grant's "peace policy," or whether they secured their posts through patronage-dispensing politicians, the result was the same: most civilian agents were at best ignorant and inexperienced and at worst ignorant, inexperienced, and corrupt. In contrast, so the army maintained, its officers, having spent long periods of time in the West, really knew Indians. Their professional training made them more capable of honest and efficient administration. Of course, the Indian Bureau responded to these arguments by contending that transfer would only increase the likelihood of war and hold back efforts toward civilization.²¹

In the end, the Indian Bureau won the battle, but it was a close call. A bill for transfer stood a good chance of passing in 1870, but in January the army slaughtered nearly two hundred Piegans, mostly women and children suffering from smallpox, and the arguments for military control suddenly seemed less credible. From 1876 to 1879 the army renewed efforts to win transfer, but Interior Secretary Carl Schurz's initiation of a series of Indian Bureau reforms, along with Secretary of War William Belknap's impeachment for malfeasance, undermined the army's contention that it was more capable of resisting fraud and corruption than the Indian Bureau. According to most historians, the transfer issue was dead by 1880.²²

In the 1880s most military theorists began to argue that the army needed to make the transition from a western, Indian-fighting army to a more modern force. Recognizing that the "Indian question is fast being settled so far as requiring a military force," proponents of a more professional army sought expanded opportunities in areas like preparation for foreign war and build-

21. Francis Paul Prucha, *Great Father*, I, 551-557; Donald J. D'Elia, "The Argument over Civilian or Military Indian Control, 1865-1880," *The Historian*, XXIV (1962), 207-225; Sherry L. Smith, *The View from Officers' Row: Army Perceptions of Western Indians* (Tucson, 1990), 93-98; Nelson A. Miles, "The Indian Problem," *North American Review*, CXXVIII (1879), 304-314.

22. Prucha, *Great Father*, I, 549-560; Loring Benson Priest, *Uncle Sam's Stepchildren: The Reformation of United States Indian Policy, 1865-1887* (New Brunswick, 1942), 17-21; Robert Winston Mardock, *The Reformers and the American Indian* (Columbia, Mo., 1971), 71, 166; D'Elia, "Argument over Control," 223; Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln, 1984), 43.

ing seacoast fortifications.²³ But, while theorists looked toward the future, the army continued to have significant commitments in the West, and officers with western experience expected this to continue. In 1884, for example, General Philip Sheridan acknowledged that the “Indian question, so far as hard fighting is concerned, is now practically eliminated from military considerations,” but the encouragement of settlement in “sparsely settled sections” would require the “services of the military in the West...for many years to come.”²⁴ Similarly, in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* retired General George B. McClellan took notice of the recent “horrors committed by Geronimo and his Apaches” and observed that such “outbreaks” would continue “until the entire control of Indian affairs is vested in the army.”²⁵

Officers stationed in the West did not rush to endorse McClellan's position—some may have regarded it as undesirable, others as politically unfeasible—but western officers continued to warn that a substantial military presence would be needed to deter Indian revolts. General Thomas H. Ruger, commander of the Department of the Dakota, warned in 1887 of the inadvisability of reducing the number of troops in the West. The threat of Indian “hostility” would remain for years; moreover, any “outbreak” would be even worse now than ever before because more whites were living near reservations and could be killed. Similarly, General Nelson Miles warned in 1889 that for many years, Indians will “have to be under military surveillance,” and he urged that this role be undertaken by a modernized western army. In contrast to the traditional western army, in which troops

23. August V. Kautz, “Our National Military System,” *Century*, XXXVI (1888), 935; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Upton and the Army* (Baton Rouge, 1964), 106–107; Russell Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (New York, 1962), 140–141; Skowronek, *New American State*, 111; Jerry M. Cooper, “The Army's Search for a Mission, 1865–1890,” in Kenneth J. Hagan and William R. Roberts, eds., *Against All Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Westport, Conn., 1988), 182–183.

24. Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1884* (Washington, D.C., 1884), 47. For a detailed discussion of the army's activities in the area of Indian affairs in the 1880s, see Henry George Waltmann, “The Interior, War Department and Indian Policy, 1865–1887” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1962), 336–360.

25. George B. McClellan, “The Military and the Army,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, LXXII (1886), 296.

were stationed at numerous small outposts, the military's updated mission would allow troops to be concentrated in larger garrisons. These would be much more comfortable and would take advantage of new, efficient forms of transportation to undertake police actions as necessary. According to Miles, this system would be much more economical than the old system and would favor improved discipline and instruction.²⁶ Since most military theorists were arguing that the western Indian-fighting army was outdated, Miles's vision of an updated western army was an attempt to define a continued place for a western army within the army's overall commitment to modernization.

Having considered the history of the army's relations with the Indian Bureau and the western army's ongoing efforts to redefine its role during a period of more general transition, we can now make some informed observations about how western army officers read the emergence of the Ghost Dance in the fall of 1890. Western army officers had not forgotten the battle with the Indian Bureau over transfer. Although they had muted their criticism of the Indian Bureau in recent years, they nonetheless firmly believed that they were far better equipped to deal with Indians than most civilian agents. They may have respected an experienced agent like McLaughlin, who by all accounts ruled Standing Rock with an iron fist, but as for Royer at Pine Ridge, they probably had only contempt for a man whose appointment was irrefutable evidence of the Indian Bureau's inability to free itself from political influence. As for the Ghost Dance, it confirmed the predictions of western army officers that Indians would continue to resist the reservation system and that the U.S. required a substantial military force to support the project of assimilation and to protect settlers.

The key figure in shaping the army's response to the Ghost Dance was General Miles, who assumed command of the Division of the Missouri in September 1890.²⁷ As noted earlier, Miles had been a strong advocate of transfer in the late 1870s, and he had recently been active in arguing for a modernized western army with a continued role in policing reservations. A man dominated

26. Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1887* (Washington, D.C., 1887), 137-138; Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1889* (Washington, D.C., 1889), 172.

27. Wooster, *Miles*, 175.

by “ambition and the pursuit of power,”²⁸ Miles was not the kind of man to consider a situation without regard for his own interests or those of the institutions he served.

Upon taking charge of the Division of the Missouri, Miles was immediately faced with a situation that seemed to demonstrate yet again the failure of a civilian system of managing reservations. While travelling to his new Chicago headquarters in early September, he stopped at Fort Keogh, Montana, where he was apprised of the “distressed condition” of the Northern Cheyennes: “their suffering for want of food [and] their being compelled to kill cattle belonging to the white people to sustain life.”²⁹

For the past several months, the Tongue River reservation had been in a state of unrest. In April, Agent Robert L. Upshaw had called for military assistance. Major Henry Carroll arrived from Fort Custer and held a series of councils with Cheyenne leaders from which he concluded that Cheyenne discontent was the result of Upshaw’s lack of “firm and judicious management abilities.” Carroll advised that Upshaw be dismissed.³⁰ When Miles came through in early September, he immediately dispatched a telegram requesting emergency provisions for the Cheyennes, in which he contrasted their situation ten years earlier when they had been largely self-supporting to their present circumstances in which they were on the “verge of starvation.” Miles attributed the deteriorating condition of the Northern Cheyennes to the failure of civilian control.³¹

Miles continued to devote substantial attention to the plight of the Northern Cheyennes. Although most Northern Cheyennes were living at Tongue River, about 400 of them resided among the Oglala Lakotas at Pine Ridge. All of the Northern Cheyennes had been demanding the transfer of the Pine Ridge Cheyennes to Tongue River, and, in August 1890, when the United States finally agreed to create the Northern Cheyenne Commission to negotiate unification of the two groups, Miles was appointed to chair this commission.³² Accordingly, Miles went to Tongue River

28. *Ibid.*, 269.

29. Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1891*, 132

30. Orlan J. Svingen, *The Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation* (Niwot, Colo., 1993), 79–81 (quotation, p. 81).

31. Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1891*, 132–133.

32. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation*, 87.

in early October and then proceeded to Pine Ridge to talk with the Cheyennes there.

While at Pine Ridge, Miles learned for the first time about Agent Royer's failed efforts to stop ghost dancing on the reservation and of Royer's belief that troops were needed to restore order and prevent an outbreak. To find out more about the Ghost Dance, Miles talked with several Oglala leaders. One of these, Red Cloud, informed Miles that if the dance is "true" the people would "go on with their dance, and it will go all over the world before it stops; on the other hand, if it is false, and there is nothing in it, it will go away like the snow under the hot sun." Miles responded that he had "no objection to the dancing, and they can dance until they get tired. I know there is nothing in it, and as Red Cloud said, it will in time disappear as the snow before the heat of the sun." In the meantime, he urged Red Cloud and Little Wound "not to allow this frenzy or fanaticism to carry your people too far. It might bring them into trouble." Based on his conversation with these and other leaders, Miles sought to calm the agitated Royer by assuring him that the Ghost Dance would eventually subside.³³

It was at this point, just as Miles was leaving Pine Ridge, that President Harrison ordered the army to conduct an investigation of the Ghost Dance. Since Miles remained occupied with the work of the Northern Cheyenne Commission, General Ruger was assigned to undertake this investigation. As noted earlier, Ruger reported on November 15 that there was no danger of an outbreak at Standing Rock or Cheyenne River, although the situation at Pine Ridge did warrant military intervention.

Miles himself had little to say about the Ghost Dance during the first two weeks of November, and it is difficult to know what he was thinking during these two weeks. We can be sure of two things, however. First, he did not believe that the situation required immediate action. In a telegram of November 14 to General John M. Schofield, commanding general of the army, Miles took note of Ruger's finding that there was no "probability of an

33. "Conversation between General Miles and Sioux Indian Chiefs Red Cloud and Little Wound at Pine Ridge Agency, S.D., October 27th, 1890, regarding Ghost Dance," in Nelson A. Miles Papers, box T-4, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.; D. F. Royer to Acting CIA, Oct. 30, 1890, Special Case 188, RG 75, NA.

outbreak" at Standing Rock. Miles further informed Schofield that he would forward his own observations and recommendations sometime after November 20; any action, obviously, could wait until then. Second, we can be sure that Miles had decided on *some* eventual plan of action. In the same telegram he informed Schofield of his late-October meeting with the Pine Ridge Indian leaders. As we have seen, Miles had shown no serious concern about the Ghost Dance while at Pine Ridge, but now he reported to Schofield that many of the Oglala leaders had regarded the "condition as 'serious,'" and as a result of thinking about their assessment Miles's "mind was made up."³⁴ Miles did not say what he intended to recommend, but it is clear that he was now prepared to argue that the situation required action, presumably some form of military intervention.

We will probably never know for certain just what plan Miles had in mind on November 14, for on the same day, Miles received orders to "take such action as...may be necessary...to prevent an outbreak on the part of the Indians which shall endanger the lives and property of the people in the neighboring country, and second to bring to bear upon the disaffected Indians such military force as will compel prompt submission to the authority of the Government."³⁵ It was under the authority of these orders that Miles undertook the most massive mobilization of United States armed force in over two decades.

It is conceivable that Miles was planning to recommend a massive mobilization of military force even before these orders came. Or Miles may have been planning to recommend something along the lines of a limited display of force at Pine Ridge. In either case, Miles's assessment of the situation on the Lakota reservations from late October through November 14 was undoubtedly influenced by his previous experience. He must have seen the Ghost Dance as a clear manifestation of the problems of civilian control and the situation at Pine Ridge as particularly illustrative of these problems. It is also almost certain that Miles did not think the Ghost Dance portended an "outbreak," at least

34. Nelson A. Miles to John M. Schofield, Nov. 14., 1890, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

35. Orders issued by J. M. Schofield, Nov. 14, 1890, in Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

in the immediate future. Although we might well be skeptical of Miles's claim to "know Indians," his long experience fighting them undoubtedly would have led him to conclude that the Lakotas surely would not undertake an armed revolt right before the onset of winter.

As we have seen, in late October and early November, Miles did not regard the Ghost Dance as a serious threat to white lives, and he had been cautious about taking action. However, once he had authority to summon troops, he immediately began to magnify the danger. In a letter to Washington dated November 17, Miles characterized the Division of the Missouri as hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with the situation: against "thirty thousand disaffected Indians, numbering six thousand warriors" there were "not more than fourteen hundred effective mounted soldiers, scattered over a vast area of country." This was hardly a sufficient force to prevent "another Indian war."³⁶ That such a war was imminent justified the massive military buildup which followed over the next two weeks.

It is unlikely that the officials of the Interior Department, who had requested military assistance, imagined anything more than a typical police action involving a limited use of force directed primarily at Pine Ridge. As we have seen, this was the only place they regarded as a real trouble spot. But after they gave *carte blanche* to the army, civilian officials could only watch as Miles summoned troops stationed throughout the western United States. It was an unprecedented display of armed might designed to overawe Indians at all of the Lakota reservations. As the troops came, Indian Bureau and Interior Department officials became alarmed not so much for the Lakota people or even the white settlers, but for themselves. They feared that the troops signified an attack on their control over Indian affairs.

Even before troops started moving, Indian Bureau officials were forced to deny rumors that they had requested that "Indians in South Dakota be transferred to the control of the War Department in view of their inability properly to settle the threatened difficulties there."³⁷ If these rumors sound suspiciously like the

36. Nelson A. Miles to Adj. Genl., Nov. 17, 1890, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

37. *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1890.

work of individuals within the War Department itself, it is with good reason. By November 25 Miles had recommended that the War Department assume full control of the Pine Ridge and Rosebud agencies,³⁸ and in his formal report of November 28, written in response to President Harrison's earlier request for an army investigation, Miles expanded this recommendation to advise that the army assume permanent charge of all the Lakotas as well as the Cheyennes.

Miles began this remarkable document with a predictable indictment of civilian management of the "principal tribes of Indians in the western country." These had been "subjugated at different times by the U.S. Army" and "subsequently been turned over to the charge of the civil agents, who are frequently changed, and often inexperienced." As a result of this period of mismanagement, many western Indian tribes were perfectly capable of and willing to engage in warfare with the United States. Although Indians had been "forced to adopt the ways of the whites," they still longed for the "pleasures, romance and freedom of their former Indian life." Knowing that they are a "doomed race," they "recount their woes and misfortunes, and their hatred of the white race becomes intensified." They pray that "their God may send them some super-natural power to destroy their enemies." At first the teaching of the Ghost Dance had been "one of peace, and that the Indians need only believe and trust in the new Messiah to destroy the whites," but "false prophets" and "disaffected leaders" convinced them that "*deeds* were necessary to show their faith, please the Messiah and hasten his coming." One of the principal "incendiaries" was Sitting Bull; he had sent emissaries to many western tribes—the Assiniboines, Yanktonais, Gros Ventres, Arapahoes, Shoshones, and others—"advising them to obtain arms and ammunition and be prepared to meet the warriors near the Black Hills in the spring." Miles argued that western Indians were well-armed with Winchester rifles, and they were ready to use them. The common theory that "the construction of railways, disappearance of the buffalo, and the scattered settlements over the western country has terminated Indian wars"

38. Miles's recommendation that "in the future the military should have absolute general control" over the South Dakota agencies was apparently contained in a telegram of Nov. 24, which is referred to in Secretary of the Interior to Secretary of War, Nov. 25, 1890, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

was simply untrue. Indians “can now live better upon domestic stock than they could formerly upon the buffalo, and the many horse ranches scattered over the great western country would furnish them re-mounts in almost every valley.” In short: “*There never has been a time when the Indians were as well armed and equipped for war as the present, and in my experience there never has been a time when the equipment of the troops for war was, in comparison to that of the Indians, as limited as at present.*”³⁹

Following this report, Miles moved to make these arguments known to the general public. In a widely publicized newspaper interview of December 2, Miles contended that “the seriousness of the situation has not been exaggerated. The disaffection is more widespread than it has been at any time for years. The conspiracy...is a more comprehensive plot than anything ever inspired by the prophet Tecumseh, or even Pontiac.” Miles further identified the Indian Bureau as the underlying problem: “The Indian agents have persistently cheated the Indians out of their just dues—have robbed them of their rations until, in sheer desperation and goaded on by starvation, they have taken their present stand.”⁴⁰

Miles elaborated upon these themes in an article titled “The Future of the Indian Question,” probably written sometime in early December and published in the January, 1891, issue of *North American Review*. In this article Miles embellished his earlier theory of an impending Indian uprising by developing the notion that the Ghost Dance had been instigated by “emissaries from a certain religious sect or people living on the western slope

39. Nelson A. Miles to Adj. Genl., Nov. 28 and Dec. 11, 1890, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA. Emphasis in original.

40. *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 3 and 6, 1890. Miles's interview originally appeared in the *Washington Evening Star*, Dec. 2, 1890, and was published (at least in part) the next day in major newspapers. See, for example, the *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1890. Miles's interview was the subject of heated discussion in the Senate on Dec. 3. See *Cong. Rec.*, 51 Cong., 2 sess. (1890), 44–48. To some extent, Miles's interview was intended to deflect criticism from an anonymous rival officer who charged in late November that Miles had inflated the danger of the Ghost Dance “to create a scare and pose as the savior of the country,” with the eventual hope of fulfilling his allegedly insatiable presidential ambitions. These charges are treated in Peter R. DeMontravel, “General Nelson A. Miles and the Wounded Knee Controversy,” *Arizona and the West*, XXVIII (1986), 25–26. However, Miles's interview had the broader objective of offering a general justification for the massive military mobilization just completed.

of the Rocky Mountains," undoubtedly a reference to Mormons, who announced that the "real messiah had appeared" and summoned the tribes of the West to tell them that "they were all an oppressed people, that the whites and Indians were all the same, and that the messiah had returned to them." Men like Sitting Bull "took advantage of the condition of the Indians to proclaim this doctrine and spread disaffection among the different tribes." Again, the present "conspiracy" exceeded even that of Pontiac's. Miles concluded by repeating the call for transfer he had made in the same journal in 1879: "those people who have been and are still a terror to the peace and good order of certain States and territories should be placed under some government just and strong enough to control them."⁴¹

Miles's assessment of the situation underwent a dramatic change from late October, when he had assured Agent Royer that the Ghost Dance would soon expire, to late November/early December, when he foresaw the Indian uprising of the century. We could interpret Miles's shift as a result of new information—the Ghost Dance initially appeared to him to be relatively benign, but as he gained more information about it, he realized that the West was on the verge of cataclysm. The problem with this interpretation is that any new information that Miles received during this period would have been along much the same lines as what he already had already gathered. Miles was aware of

41. Nelson A. Miles, "The Future of the Indian Question," *North American Review*, CLII (1891), 1-10 (quotations, pp. 2, 6-7, 10). This article appeared in print at the latest by Jan. 2, 1891, as it was favorably noticed in the *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 3, 1891, and it was probably written sometime during the first two weeks in December. Miles's statement that "emissaries from a certain religious sect or people living on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains" clearly referred to Mormons, since in early November he had expressed his opinion that Mormons were probably the "prime movers" behind the "messiah craze." See Gregory E. Smoak, "The Mormons and the Ghost Dance of 1890," *South Dakota History*, XVI (1986), 269-294; Lawrence G. Coates, "The Mormons and the Ghost Dance," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, XVIII (1985), 89-111. Miles elaborated on his theory of a Mormon conspiracy in his annual report in Secretary of War, *Annual Report*, 1891, 141-142. Miles's identification of a vast conspiracy in 1890 was characteristic of his general proclivity for imagining that grave dangers threatened the Republic. In commanding the troops sent to Chicago to suppress the 1894 Pullman boycott, Miles contended that Chicago, with its half million "foreigners," was ripe for a rebellion on the order of those in Paris in 1790 or 1871. See Louise Carroll Wade, "Hell Hath No Fury Like a General Scorned: Nelson A. Miles, the Pullman Strike, and the Beef Scandal," *Illinois Historical Journal*, LXXIX (1986), 171.

Royer's increasingly frantic appeals, but he had already met Royer and had tried to calm him down.

A more plausible explanation for Miles's shifting assessment of the Ghost Dance is that he needed to justify the massive deployment of forces and to support the western army's claims for a permanently expanded role in Indian affairs. This does not mean that Miles did not believe his own declarations of alarm, only that the opportunity created by the Indian Bureau's loss of control and its call for military assistance encouraged him to develop a compelling rationale for exploiting the situation to maximum advantage.⁴²

At this point it is possible to incorporate an understanding of the army's interests into an explanation for military intervention. As we have seen, the immediate cause of military intervention was Royer's loss of control at Pine Ridge. As observed earlier, this is not a sufficient explanation. The Indian Bureau's decision to call the military rather than employ some other strategy cannot be assumed; it requires explanation. Why did Indian Bureau officials request military assistance rather than replace Royer with a new agent? No direct evidence allows a definite answer to this question, but in view of the historic rivalry between the Indian Bureau and the army, replacing Royer had one obvious liability for Bureau officials. They would have been conceding that the situation at Pine Ridge was the fault of the agent, thus enhancing their vulnerability to criticism (from the army as well as other sources). On the other hand, to call for troops meant that the danger really was as great as Royer contended—that the Ghost Dancers were a serious threat to white lives. Focusing attention on the alleged dangers of the Ghost Dance rather than on the overreactions of an inexperienced agent allowed the Indian Bureau to avoid criticism for making a bad appointment as well as any general scrutiny of its policies.

42. Utley, *Last Days*, 126–127, takes note of Miles's shifting assessment of the Ghost Dance threat and his call for transfer, but he fails to recognize how far Miles had travelled between late October and early December or to incorporate Miles's shifting assessment of the Ghost Dance into his explanation for the military's intervention, treating it instead as incidental. Furthermore, although Utley reproduces the ravings of Agent Royer to very good dramatic effect, he does not quote words with a similar tone written by Miles, preferring instead to summarize these in such a way as to obscure their alarmist character.

There are two other reasons why the incompetence of Royer at Pine Ridge is an insufficient explanation for military intervention. First, it does not explain why the army's campaign against the Lakota Ghost Dancers took the form it did: a *massive* display of force directed against four reservations. Second, it is still quite plausible that the army would eventually have sent troops even if a more capable agent had been in charge at Pine Ridge. Intervention might have occurred at the Indian Bureau's initiative, perhaps in response to Ghost Dance-related disorders that might have emerged later either at Pine Ridge or elsewhere. However, the army may also have become more active in promoting intervention as time went on. The army had not actively sought to send troops in early November, but it appears that by mid-November Miles was probably prepared to recommend some form of military action at some time in the future. As time went on, he probably would have begun to press for such action. We know that he seized the opportunity provided by events as they actually developed to assert the interests of the western army as he and others saw them. We have little reason to doubt that he would have pursued these interests whenever opportunities presented themselves.

These observations lead to a more general point about the broad context in which decision-makers responded to the emergence of a native resistance movement against the reservation system. The point is that the nature of the U.S. state at this particular historical moment favored a military response. This statement may seem to belabor the obvious—after all, did not the United States' project of conquest by its very nature entail military responses to movements of resistance? On the contrary, colonial states can employ a variety of methods to impose authority over subject peoples, and these are historically contingent. At some moments a colonial project might be undertaken, for example, primarily by Christian missionaries. At other times, the army or a civilian administration might be the primary agent of colonialism. Over time the interests and approaches of various colonial agents may coincide but they may just as easily come into conflict. As well, there may be complex internal contradictions within a given colonial institution or set of institutions. As the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff point out, to notice that colonialism was not a "a coherent, monolithic process" is not to

deny the “brute domination suffered by the colonized peoples of the modern world” but to “broaden our analytic compass; to take in moments of incoherence and inchoateness, its internal contortions and complexities.” Thus, in the present instance, to understand the response of the United States to the Lakota Ghost Dance, it is necessary to recognize the internal contradictions within the U.S. colonial state.⁴³

Although responsibility for Indian affairs in the late nineteenth century was officially under the Indian Bureau, U.S. relations with western tribes were in fact articulated through two agencies, the Indian Bureau and the army. The Indian Bureau hoped to undertake its project of promoting assimilation without the need for military assistance. The Indian Bureau recognized the need for military action against “hostile” tribes in the late 1860s through the 1870s, but once the reservation system had been fully established, the Indian Bureau hoped to move as quickly as possible to a situation in which a military presence would not be needed in the West. However, because of the difficulties in imposing order on many reservations in the 1880s, troops remained stationed at various small posts near reservations. They were frequently summoned to undertake police actions. The Indian Bureau had managed to avoid the prospect of transfer, which, as we have seen, was very real through the late 1870s, but they still remained dependent upon military force to back their program of assimilation. Thus, one of the key aspects of U.S. colonialism on the eve of the Ghost Dance was that it was undertaken through a system of divided authority.

It is important to observe, further, that this system of divided authority was not intentional. Reformers in the Indian Bureau who were committed to promoting assimilation sought to root out political corruption. But the Indian Bureau’s continued subservience to political interests weakened the agency, thus making it more difficult for Indian Bureau reformers to establish a pro-

43. John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992), 183. See also Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1992), 7, who observes that “Colonialism was neither monolithic nor unchanging throughout history.... It is tempting but wrong to ascribe either intentionality or systematicity to a congeries of activities and a conjunction of outcomes that, though related and at times coordinated, were usually diffuse, disorganized, and even contradictory.”

fessional system of governing these reservations.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, many Indians would have resisted the imposition of reservation authority in the 1880s in any event, but the weakness of the Indian Bureau probably encouraged resistance by increasing the opportunities for its assertion. Moreover, the fact that many agents were political appointees almost certainly increased the likelihood that acts of resistance would eventually result in military police action, since political agents lacked competence and resources to manage difficult situations on their own. The relative weakness of the Indian Bureau, then, helps explain why the army remained an important force in the West and why, overall, there was a system of divided authority for controlling western Indian reservations.

Yet the western army had not intended this situation either. As we have seen, western army officers would have preferred to have full control over Indian affairs. Instead their role in Indian affairs during the 1880s was limited to general deterrence and occasional police actions. In 1890 the western army remained an important force in the West, but western officers were often frustrated by their role in managing Indian affairs. From their perspective, they were frequently forced to deal with the consequences of the Indian Bureau's ineptness, but they lacked the authority to correct the underlying causes of the endemic problems on western reservations. Even the western army's limited role was being threatened by army reformers who wanted a modernized army with an updated mission.

As this summary indicates, the system of divided authority over Indian affairs that had evolved through the 1870s and 1880s was contingent and unstable. Given the constant tension between the Indian Bureau and the army, it was likely that under the right circumstances the army would press its claims to a military solution of any disorder. Had circumstances been such that compe-

44. Although the Indian Bureau grew dramatically in size during the 1880s, it remained subject to political influences. Thus tendencies to professionalism were constantly being undercut by opportunistic politicians who saw the Bureau as a source of patronage. Prucha, *Great Father*, II, 717–726. Although Skowronek, *New American State*, does not deal with the Indian Bureau, the fact that efforts to reform it were undercut by its remaining a source of political patronage is related to Skowronek's overall characterization of the U.S. state as one in which the strength of "courts and parties" undermined efforts toward building state capacity.

tent agents were in place at all of the Lakota reservations in late 1890 (unlikely given the Indian Bureau's vulnerability to political influences), military intervention would have been less likely. However, even then, the army might well have sent troops eventually. Western officers were ready to see any loss of control as an opportunity to assert their claims, and it is certainly possible that as time went on the agents would have had difficulty suppressing the Ghost Dance on their own, thus allowing the army an opening. In the event, the relative weakness of the Indian Bureau did provide the army with an opportunity. Agent Royer's hysterical telegrams may have triggered the troops, but the nature of the U.S. state created the conditions in which a man such as Royer was in a position to take actions which had the consequences they did.

That responsibility for Indian affairs was divided between a military and a civilian agency helps explain the particular causes of the suppression of the Lakota Ghost Dance by the United States in late 1890. At the same time, this analysis should not be taken to suggest that a system of unified control (either by the army or the Indian Bureau) would have been any less oppressive for the Lakotas or other tribes which had been subjected to the reservation system. Nor should this analysis obscure the larger context in which conquest of the Lakotas and other Indian tribes occurred. U.S. policy toward the Indian peoples within the territory it claimed was shaped by the broader forces of manifest destiny dictating that Native Americans either abandon their own cultures or face annihilation. At times there appeared to be two antagonistic approaches to Indian policy—the army's iron fist and the Indian Bureau's helping hand. However, both approaches were premised on assumptions of the cultural superiority of the dominant society, and, in the end, they complemented one another. At the same time, a system of divided responsibility allowed Americans to evade the fact of conquest, since the inevitable failures of U.S. Indian policy could be attributed to the shortcomings of one of the agents of colonialism rather than as an inherent consequence of manifest destiny.

* * *

This essay has demonstrated that the western army saw the Indian Bureau's loss of control at Pine Ridge as an opportunity to

claim an expanded role in Indian affairs. In the end, however, western officers were unable to realize their goal of transfer. On January 7, 1891, Commanding General Schofield agreed that there should be a military agent with full authority at Pine Ridge, but he turned aside Miles's request for full control at the other agencies. Miles and others continued to agitate for transfer, but without the support of the army's commanding general, the issue was settled.⁴⁵

It is conceivable that western officers would have been able to gain transfer had the Wounded Knee massacre not occurred. Eastern "humanitarians" condemned the massacre,⁴⁶ and it clearly damaged the army's claim of superior managerial capabilities. However, even if the massacre had not occurred and the army had concluded the campaign without bloodshed, it is doubtful that the western army would have been any more successful in pressing for a significantly expanded role in Indian affairs. Most army officials in Washington were opposed to transfer, either because they regarded it as impractical or as a liability to their objective of a fully modernized army, and any hope of transfer would have required their support. The Ghost Dance had presented the western army officers with a temporary opening to assert their claims, but once the danger was over, the western army became marginalized once again.

The main thrust of this essay has been to explain why the U.S. employed massive military force to suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance. The essay began by observing that the answer to this question was essential to an understanding of the causes of the massacre itself. Now that the army's interests in mobilizing troops have been made clear, it is possible in conclusion to provide some new insight into why the massacre occurred.

The directors of the campaign to suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance, Generals Miles, Ruger, and John R. Brooke, intended to

45. John M. Schofield to Nelson A. Miles, Jan. 7, 1891, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA. There remained substantial support for the idea of transfer even after Wounded Knee, particularly in the West, where many whites regarded the massacre as a demonstration of exactly why the army should run Indian affairs. See, e.g., Lewis D. Greene, "The Army and the Indian," *Harper's Weekly*, May 19, 1894, 471.

46. See T. A. Bland, ed., *A Brief History of the Late Military Invasion of the Home of the Sioux* (Washington, D.C., 1891), 9-10.

overawe the Lakota Ghost Dancers with a massive display of force in the hope that they would surrender.⁴⁷ At first the army's plan appeared to be working, as many Ghost Dance leaders did surrender.⁴⁸ But on December 15, the Standing Rock Indian police killed Sitting Bull when he resisted arrest. Army officers began to feel at this point that they were losing control of the situation. Terrified for their lives, Sitting Bull's band fled in different directions. Some went south to join Big Foot's band camped on the Cheyenne River under the watch of Colonel E. V. Sumner and 200 soldiers awaiting reinforcements. Fearing that the numerous soldiers in the area portended their imminent slaughter, Big Foot and his band escaped military surveillance on December 23 and began moving south through the Badlands toward Pine Ridge.

By this time the commanding officers had become frustrated by their inability to bring the campaign to a successful conclusion. Consequently, they desperately wished to assert their authority over Big Foot's band. At first, it seemed plausible that Big Foot intended to join the remaining Ghost Dancers in the Stronghold. But, on December 28 when troops finally intercepted Big Foot and his people near Wounded Knee, it was obvious that they were not on a course for the Stronghold. Only twenty miles from Pine Ridge agency, they were obviously going there to seek protection. Big Foot had pneumonia, his people were hungry and cold, and although some of the men were armed, they were clearly not going to precipitate a fight.⁴⁹ At this point, the officers in charge had two options. They could allow Big Foot's people to continue to Pine Ridge or they could attempt to disarm them. On December 26 General Miles had already given General Brooke directives in the event Big Foot's band was intercepted: "round up the whole body of them, *disarm and keep them all under close guard.*" Based upon these directives,

47. Utley, *Last Days*, 118–121. The following narrative of events is factually consistent with Utley's, although I differ in interpreting them.

48. John R. Brooke to Asst. Adj. Genl., March 2, 1891, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

49. Although Utley, *Last Days*, 187, argues that immediately after Big Foot's escape from Sumner's surveillance Miles plausibly believed that Big Foot was planning to join the remaining Ghost Dancers in a place known as the "Stronghold," Utley does recognize (p. 192) that by December 26 General Brooke had informed Miles that Big Foot was planning to come into Pine Ridge.

Brooke ordered Colonel James Forsyth, commanding officer of the Seventh Cavalry, “to disarm Big Foot’s band, take every precaution to prevent the escape of any; [and] if they fought to destroy them.”⁵⁰

There are different versions of how the firing broke out. According to Utley, the first shot was fired when soldiers tried to take a rifle from Black Coyote. At the same instant Yellow Bird, a “fanatical medicine man,” threw a handful of dirt into the air. At this signal, five or six Indians “threw aside their blankets” and began firing. What followed, according to Utley, was not really a massacre. The soldiers were fighting for their lives, and because they had a hard time distinguishing women and children from men, as the soldiers later claimed, they inadvertently killed many women and children. In Utley’s final analysis, Yellow Bird bears responsibility for the tragedy, since he was the one who had incited the few young men who “lost control of themselves and created an incident.”⁵¹

Dee Brown provides an alternative account in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Brown agrees with Utley that the first shot was fired when soldiers tried to disarm Black Coyote, but he contends that the soldiers rather than the Lakotas opened fire first. Moreover, when the Indians tried to flee, the “big Hotchkiss guns on the hills opened upon them, firing almost a shell a second, raking the Indian camp, shredding the tepees with flying shrapnel, killing men, women, and children.” Utley’s account relies primarily on military sources, but Brown employs Lakota testimony, such as that of Louise Weasel Bear, who recalled that she had been in a massacre: “We tried to run but they shot us like we were a buffalo.”⁵²

50. Testimony of John R. Brooke, Jan. 17, 1891, Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA.

51. Utley, *Last Days*, 210–230 (quotations, pp. 212, 230).

52. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York, 1970), 417. Louise Weasel Bear’s testimony was originally published in James H. McGregor, *The Wounded Knee Massacre from the Viewpoint of the Sioux* (Baltimore, 1940), 111. Those interested in first-hand accounts of the massacre should consult this source, the testimony in Reports and Correspondence, RG 94, NA (this contains mostly military perspectives but also includes some accounts by Lakotas), and the interviews with Indian survivors of the massacre in the Eli S. Ricker Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

The army initially stated that 200 Lakotas were killed. Secretary of War, *Annual Report, 1891*, 150. The number was almost certainly higher, however. Richard E.

My view is that Brown's account is much closer to the truth than Utley's. In this essay, however, my purpose is not to resolve conflicting accounts about what happened on December 29, but to identify the larger circumstances in which it became probable that a massacre would occur. To do this it is necessary to focus on the reason why Miles and Brooke gave Forsyth the orders they did.

Military historians have noticed that Forsyth was acting under orders to disarm Big Foot's followers and to destroy them if they resisted. But the historians have assumed that these orders were necessary without recognizing that military commanders had alternatives or without considering how these orders might have been related to the army's overall objectives. Indeed, the decisions of the officers in charge of the campaign have never been subjected to serious scrutiny.⁵³ This essay has argued that as a general principle the army acted according to its interests. Furthermore, key army officers intended to use the opportunity afforded by the breakdown in Indian Bureau control in mid-November 1890 to demonstrate the army's superior capacity to bring order to Indian reservations. These officers wanted to suppress the Ghost Dance through a display of military force so overwhelming that the dancers would surrender. Although they hoped the threat of force would be enough, they greatly increased the chances of actual violence by choosing this option.

In late December 1890, as the goal of establishing order remained out of reach, army officers grew increasingly frustrated. In their frustration, they became obsessed with Big Foot's band. Big Foot and his people scarcely represented a danger to settlers or anyone else, but their very elusiveness seemed to seriously threaten the realization of the army's plans. The orders to disarm Big Foot's band were reckless and unnecessary, and they drew upon a long history of genocidal impulses and actions. The

Jensen, "Another Look at Wounded Knee" in *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee*, 20, states that a total "in excess of 250 is almost certain"; Brown, *Bury My Heart*, 417, gives a figure of "very nearly" 300; and *Wounded Knee Remembered: A Lakota Times Special*, Jan. 8, 1991, provides a figure of "more than" 300.

53. Utley, *Last Days*, 197; Wooster, *Miles*, 189. Both of these historians limit their attention to the criticisms Miles levelled at Colonel Forsyth for deploying his troops in such a way as to ensure that they would shoot one another and for failing to constrain his men from indiscriminately killing women and children.

orders were also related to the army's objective of demonstrating the superiority of military solutions in order to advance claims to broader authority over Indian affairs. In late 1890, western army officials saw South Dakota as a land of opportunity. In pursuing these opportunities, the western army made Lakota country a place of fear and death.