

## **Reflections on the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee A Two-Part Assignment**

### **Part One:**

One of the most significant events in American history in terms of the confrontation between European-Americans and Native-Americans is the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890.

As we have begun to examine in the various readings, an observer's point of view greatly influences how one describes an event, and that point of view significantly affects how one responds to it on an emotional level. Each observer brings his or her own world view, personal biography, cultural background, social history, and values to the event – each observer sees the event within a particular mental framework and from a specific perspective, one that is both ego- and ethno-centric (remember our concentric circle model). Thus different people can have radically different reactions to what seems to be “the same situation.”

This assignment involves trying to think about the massacre at Wounded Knee from within a particular perspective or mental framework that is not your own. Pick one of the following historical figures. Imagining you are that person, write a letter to a friend or relative right after the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which you describe that event and your reactions to it. Your description and response should be as realistic as possible, based on what we know or can reasonably guess about what information that person plausibly would have had at the time, and what experiences, attitudes, and expectations they presumably brought to the episode. Resist the temptation, as much as possible, to insert your own knowledge and feelings into the account. Try to “be” the person whose perspective you are writing from....

- Chief Big Foot
- Pawnee Woman (wife of one of the men in the Indian encampment)
- Colonel James Forsyth, U.S. Army officer in charge
- Daniel Royer, chief U.S. agent at Pine Ridge
- One of the “Buffalo Soldiers,” the all-black army unit sent to Pine Ridge
- A white enlisted man who joined the Seventh Cavalry after serving in the Army of the Confederacy
- Buffalo Bill Cody,
- Some other specific person, either particular or general, that you will then identify in your writing.

### **Part Two:**

Sitting Bull (*Tatanka Iyotake*), was a highly respected Hunkpapa Sioux Indian chief and holy man. He had participated in the fight at the Little Big Horn in which General George Custer and his Seventh Cavalry was massacred. This following quote of his should give us pause: “There is no meeting ground between the Indian and the White Man. I would rather die as an Indian than live as a White Man.”

Isaiah Berlin, a noted 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, has written that “...values can clash—that is why civilizations are incompatible.... The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me not merely unattainable—that is a truism—but conceptually incoherent.... Some among the Great Goods cannot live together.” (An extended version of this quote appears in the packet among the readings for Nov 23)

In this portrayal of the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee and the Native American perspective regarding Kennewick Man presented earlier, we see some of the differences between two “Great Goods.” The current situation among many, if not most, Native Americans today displays a very disheartening compromise between two cultures. (See “Revolution in Indian Country.”)

As you reflect on these issues today, identify at least several of the values that seem to be in conflict. How would you suggest these divergent values might have been—or perhaps still be—combined in ways that would be more satisfying to all the parties involved?

Puzzle through these questions, writing down your thoughts in a coherent statement.