The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee

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Contents

Introduction

Colonialism, Agency, and Power

The genesis of this book goes back to 1990 when I was asked to teach a course designed to help history majors understand how historians do their work. I decided to assemble primary and secondary sources about a particular event and give students the opportunity to see firsthand how historians use raw materials to construct their accounts. I don't recall exactly how I chose Wounded Knee. The fact that it was the one-hundredth anniversary of this event, in which the U.S. army slaughtered more than three hundred Lakota Sioux on the Pine Ridge Reservation, influenced me, as did the realization that I knew only the bare outlines of what had happened at Wounded Knee and why. As I examined the sources with my students and read the works of historians and anthropologists, I concluded that existing scholarship fails to provide a satisfactory interpretation of the causes of Wounded Knee. My earlier research on politics and the state suggested to me that important issues had been neglected, in particular, the reasons why the United States sent troops to Pine Ridge and three other Plains (western) Sioux[1] reservations several weeks before the massacre, the army's broader goals in undertaking this campaign, and how the campaign's premises made a massacre likely.

Although I began with Wounded Knee and its immediate context primarily in mind, I moved steadily backward in time. To explain Wounded Knee, I needed to understand the Ghost Dance, a movement that originated in the teachings of a Paiute prophet (Wovoka) in the late 1880s and spread to many tribes in the American West. It became especially important to consider the movement's reception by the Plains Sioux and to analyze critically the army's and many subsequent scholars' contention that military force was necessary to suppress the Sioux Ghost Dance. The claim was that the Sioux

[1] In this book, I use the terms *Plains* and *western Sioux* to refer to Sioux people living near or west of the Missouri River. This includes Tetons (Lakota speakers) as well as Yanktons and Yanktonais, who speak the Dakota dialect. For a full discussion of nomenclature, see Chapter 1. The three other reservations were Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, and Rosebud.

ghost dancers had distorted an originally pacific teaching into one of hostility toward whites, yet there were reasons to think this was merely a pretext to justify military action. As I began to think more about the Sioux Ghost Dance, I also realized the need for a better understanding of the conditions in which it emerged. This led me to develop a more complete picture of the economic, social, and political history of the early reservation period beginning in 1877, when the Sioux gave up military resistance to U.S. expansion. As I tried to write that history, however, I could see that many of the conflicts of the late 1870s and 1880s were grounded in an earlier history of relations between the Plains Sioux and the U.S. government. I eventually decided that the logical place for the book to begin was in 1804. That was the year when Lewis and Clark came to western Sioux country, demanding cooperation with the U.S. government and threatening dire consequences if the Sioux refused to comply. Although this book retains its original purpose of explaining Wounded Knee, it does so as part of a more general analysis of Sioux–U.S. interactions in the nineteenth century.

Many of the subjects in the following pages are familiar. It is not as though the Sioux are an obscure tribe that can complain about the lack of scholarly interest in their history. In fact, it could easily be argued that the *last* thing Sioux people need is yet another book about them. Despite the vast literature on the western Sioux, my intention is to offer a new, and I hope useful, perspective on their history by analyzing it through the lens of colonialism.

A colony, in its original meaning from Greek and Roman experience, is a group of people sent to settle a new place while retaining ties to their old country. Colonies are not necessarily in a subordinate relationship to a metropole, although they may come to feel themselves to be and even to sever their formal political relationship with their progenitor, as happened with the American colonies. The expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century also involved the establishment of new colonies that were organized into territories and then states. The process of establishing new colonies has often been described as colonization.

In contrast to colonization, the term *colonialism* makes explicit the fact that expansion almost always involves conquest, displacement, and rule over foreign groups. Colonialism is closely related to imperialism, often confusingly so. Usually, however, imperialism is seen as a process that leads to colonialism, as for example, in the case of Britain's establishment of a trading empire, which eventually led to formal political rule over indigenous people in south Asia and parts of Africa. The problems of definition are complicated by the historical multiplicity of types of imperialism and colonialism.[2]

[2] A currently authoritative definition of imperialism and colonialism is provided by Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 9, who makes a distinction between imperialism as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" and colonialism, "almost always a consequence of imperialism,"

Although Americans have often been reluctant to acknowledge imperialism and colonialism in their history, the expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century clearly involved both, insofar as it entailed the conquest of and eventual rule over Native people.[3] Chapter 1 of this book will offer some observations about the particular characteristics of U.S. imperialism and colonialism.

One of my purposes in using the term colonialism is to name it as a fact of nineteenth-century U.S. history, but I also want to use it as an analytical tool. At one time, histories of colonialism were written mostly from the top down and described a unilateral process by which an imperial power established complete domination over subject peoples. The colonized were acted upon. In recent decades, however, scholars in various parts of the world have paid much greater attention to the process of colonialism from the vantage point of colonized people and have revealed myriad ways in which colonized peoples have resisted, contested, and adapted to colonial regimes.[4] Consistent with this general perspective, this book treats U.S. colonialism as a dynamic and contested process, in other words, a *political* process in the broadest sense of the term.

Thinking of colonialism in these terms allows scholars of Native American history to build on important insights yielded by the past generation of research in their field, while at the same time recalling important themes that

as the "implanting of settlements on distant territory" (also quoted in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* [London, 1998], 46). The problem with this definition, however, is that colonialism usually entails the eventual establishment of rule over groups already present in that distant territory. A better set of definitions, including a distinction between colonization and colonialism, is provided in D. K. Fieldhouse, *Colonialism, 1870–1945: An Introduction* (New York, 1981), 1–8. For an important critical discussion that emphasizes the variability of forms of colonialism and the importance of understanding them locally, see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton, 1994).

[3] Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, 1993), 17, observes that "United States expansionism is often treated as an entirely separate phenomenon from European colonialism of the nineteenth century."

[4] One of the most influential sites for work of this sort was in the early phases of the Subaltern Studies project. See Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99 (December 1994): 1475–90. Examples from other historiographies include Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (Ringwood, Australia, 1982); Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979* (New Haven, 1985); J. B. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Berkeley, 1982); Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985). For the importance of attention to agency and Native perspectives within a framework of North American colonialism, see Duane Champagne, "A Multidimensional Theory of Colonialism: The Native North American Experience," *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 3 (1996): 9.

have been forgotten or neglected. In the past twenty years the main keywords of the "new Indian history" and the overlapping field of ethnohistory have been words like *agency, encounter, survival, exchange, negotiation*, and *middle ground*. Work emphasizing these themes has revealed the shortcomings of an earlier historiography that portrayed Indians as no more than victims of European domination and gave little attention to the voices of Native people.[5] The new history has rightly insisted that Indians were historical agents with unique perspectives requiring interpretation through careful attention to specific cultural contexts. In so doing, however, the current generation of scholarship, taken as a whole, has deemphasized questions of power, ideology, and the state.[6] One result of this situation is that much of the recent

[5] For a sampling of works that use these keywords or similar concepts see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991); James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York, 1992); Nancy Shoemaker, ed., *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (New York, 1995); Peter Iverson, *"We Are Still Here": American Indians in the Twentieth Century* (Wheeling, Ill., 1998). Influential earlier works that arguably emphasized power at the expense of agency include Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York, 1971); Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York, 1975). Useful discussions of the new Indian history and ethnohistory are Shepard Krech III, "The State of Ethnohistory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20 (1991): 345–75; Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Rethinking American Indian History* (Albuquerque, 1997); Richard White, "Using the Past: History and Native American Studies," in *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Russell Thornton (Madison, 1998), 217–43. Useful discussions of Native American historiography more broadly include R. David Edmunds, "Native Americans, New Voices: American Indian History, 1895–1995," *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995): 717–40; and Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890–1990* (Berkeley, 1997); and for writing about Native Americans before World War II, see Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 98–140. Though new Indian historians and ethnohistorians have seldom drawn on postcolonial theory and most would resist its critical interrogation of the epistemological bases for writing history and its related move to discourse and representation, postcolonial theory's attention to agency, subaltern voices, cultural difference, and, to a lesser extent, hybridity, suggest broader intellectual affinities. On postcolonial theory, see Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, 1997); Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London, 1997).

[6] My argument here is not that the new Indian history and ethnohistory completely ignore such questions, only that they are often eclipsed by more prominent themes. Nor is it difficult to find numerous examples of works that emphasize themes like conquest, colonialism, and genocide, many of which are attentive to questions of indigenous perspectives and persistence. For a few examples, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, 1987); Thomas Biolsi, *Organizing the Lakota: The Political Economy of the New Deal on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations* (Tucson, 1992); Melissa Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889–1920* (Lincoln, 1994); Jean M. O'Brien, *Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650–1790* (Cambridge, 1997).

literature tends to minimize the vast imbalance of power between Native peoples and Europeans. Another is that scholars who are sympathetic to Indians' positions and perspectives have largely been uninterested in critically analyzing the ideologies, policies, and on-the-ground actions associated with the United States' conquest of and establishment of colonial rule over Indian people. They have ceded this ground to military and policy historians, who are disciplinarily inclined to privilege the perspectives of government officials and other non-Indian observers.[7]

Of all the insights from the past generation of scholarship, none is more important than the persistence of Native peoples and ways of life. It is no longer possible to think of the "closing of the frontier" in the late nineteenth century as signifying "the last days of the Sioux nation."[8] Like Native people throughout the Americas, the Plains Sioux have survived. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind the general observation that people do not make history "under circumstances chosen by themselves."[9] We also need to be reminded that survival is not the same as freedom. Rather than choosing between a narrative of agency and persistence on the one hand and power, domination, and genocide on the other, my goal has been to write a history that combines these elements and explores their relations. To do this, I have searched for a variety of Sioux voices and tried to interpret them within a changing and diverse cultural context. I have also shown how Sioux individuals made choices – often very different choices – and in so doing actively helped shape the course of events rather than merely being acted upon or responding according to a predetermined cultural script. At the same time, however, there were considerable constraints on indigenous choices. It is important to go beyond merely noting the existence of these constraints to explore how the United States' commitment to an expansionist ideology of manifest destiny, mediated by sometimes contradictory policies and by the decisions of government officials and other European Americans, operated in particular situations.

These observations may convey some idea of what I intend to accomplish by analyzing colonialism as a political process, but to make this more concrete, it may be useful to provide an overview of three interrelated areas of political activity described in this book. The first involves politics among the colonizers. Most middle- and upper-class white Americans shared a similar ideological perspective about the United States' divinely appointed destiny

[7] Again, there are exceptions. See Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln, 1984); Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, 1991), 85–118.

[8] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 1–38; Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven, 1963).

[9] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow, 1934), 13.

as a continental empire and imagined a future in which Indian people would "disappear" (through extermination or assimilation). However, when it came to formulating policies and implementing them in specific situations, U.S. officials and influential citizens had a range of often conflicting ideas and interests. Groups and individuals formed uneasy alliances and frequently clashed. Some of the tensions and conflicts within the U.S. polity can be traced to contradictions within the development of capitalism in North America. Others were related to divisions within the state. Still others stemmed from different responses to the moral dilemmas facing a predominantly Christian nation engaged in an imperial project that required dispossession and threatened extermination. Most European Americans took for granted that the world's peoples could be divided into "races," with the "white race" above all others, although the implications of this belief varied considerably in practice.[10]

A second area of politics emerged when Plains Sioux people interacted with U.S. officials and citizens. Most of these interactions occurred in Sioux country, though some took place when Sioux leaders traveled to Washington and other eastern places. In these encounters, the colonizers and those being subjected to colonization met flesh and blood, face to face. Sometimes the two sides clashed in war, at other times violence erupted from negotiations, but most of the interactions I describe in this book involved nonviolent contests over specific issues. On what terms would trade occur? Under what conditions would militants make peace? Would the Sioux sign a particular treaty, and if so, at what cost? Once the Sioux had been conquered and were living on reservations, a myriad of new issues arose. How would government rations be distributed? Would children be sent to boarding schools? Would U.S. officials try to stop all religious ceremonies or just some? Would the Sioux have to give up more of their land, and if so, could they minimize the loss? Although these discussions were often nonviolent, the Sioux and the government did not enter them on equal terms. Sioux leaders were sometimes able to exercise leverage in negotiations, often by exploiting contradictions among the colonizers. But they were always in a defensive position and subject to U.S. coercion.[11]

[10] For useful formulations of the contradictory character of colonialism in general, see John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992), 183; Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1992), 7; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, 1995), 15. Recent work on the state, such as Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, 1994), that challenges the coherence and unity of state projects is also relevant here.

[11] Works in Plains history that illuminate politics at this level include Loretta Fowler, *Arapahoe Politics: 1851–1978: Symbols in Crises of Authority* (Lincoln, 1982); Morris W. Foster, *Being Comanche: A Social History of an American Indian Community* (Tucson, 1991); Frederick E.

The third aspect of colonial politics was among the Sioux themselves. The growth of U.S. power during the nineteenth century placed unprecedented stresses on Sioux political structures. Although the Sioux made constructive adaptations to new conditions, they also suffered an increase in destructive factionalism as the vise tightened. In writing about Sioux factionalism, most historians have reproduced the categories, if not the precise language, that U.S. officials used at the time, speaking of "progressives" versus "nonprogressives" (or "hostiles"), with the large majority favoring the former over the latter.[12] Rather than taking sides between two rigidly constructed positions, however, it is more productive to realize that Sioux leaders adopted a *range* of strategies based on reasoned assessments of changing conditions and possibilities. Sioux leaders were not always locked into polar antagonisms. Rather, they adjusted their tactics in light of new circumstances and were responsive to changing opinion among their people. Leaders cooperated among themselves on some initiatives and engaged in the tough political work of mending fences and building unity. Indeed, by focusing too much on factionalism it is possible to fail to appreciate the extent to which Sioux leaders' strategies had a common goal. Obviously, Indians who took up arms against U.S. expansion and who, during the reservation period, used tactics like direct refusal and withdrawal were engaged in resistance to U.S. domination. Yet tactics that involved "accommodation," such as selective cooperation, were also intended to limit or deflect the destructive impact of U.S. policies. Although the consent they entailed may have facilitated certain kinds of hegemony, these tactics, too, involved resistance. As Beatrice Medicine writes of Native responses to colonialism generally, both "confrontation" and "conciliatory acts" were "adaptive strategies to resist total assimilation into a dominant social system and a loss of cultural integrity."[13]

Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805–1935* (Cambridge, 1995).

[12] For works that take the side of "progressives," see George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (Norman, 1937); George E. Hyde, *Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brulé Sioux* (Norman, 1961); James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln, 1965); Catherine Price, *The Oglala People, 1841–1879: A Political History* (Lincoln, 1996); Robert M. Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York, 1993). A good example of a work that takes the other side is Mari Sandoz, *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (Lincoln, 1942).

[13] Bea Medicine, "Native American Resistance to Integration: Contemporary Confrontations and Religious Revitalization," *Plains Anthropologist* 26 (November 1981): 277. For criticisms of an excessive emphasis on factionalism, see Loretta Fowler, *Shared Symbols, Contested Meanings: Gros Ventre Culture and History, 1778–1984* (Ithaca, 1987), 4–8; Thomas W. Kavanagh, *Comanche Political History: An Ethnohistorical Perspective, 1706–1875* (Lincoln, 1996), xii; Duane Champagne, *American Indian Societies: Strategies and Conditions of Political and Cultural Survival* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 4. Rebecca Kugel, *To Be The Main Leaders of Our People: A History of Minnesota Ojibwe Politics, 1825–1898* (East Lansing, 1998), offers a useful corrective to the conventional wisdom that factionalism was largely negative.

Unfortunately, although Sioux leaders shared similar long-term objectives, their disputes became bitter and sometimes turned violent.

Although these three levels of politics can be seen throughout this book, the dynamics of imperialism and colonialism changed over time. Part 1 of this book, "Conquest," begins with the first few decades of the nineteenth century, a period when the Sioux had few interactions with the U.S. government. Their main experience of European Americans was through the fur trade. Although trade promoted limited economic dependency, introduced alcohol into some communities, and placed pressure on bison populations, it also facilitated the acquisition of material goods, including guns and ammunition. These resources helped make it possible for Sioux people to expand their territory at the expense of other tribes. Later, they would support military resistance against the United States. In the long term, the fur trade probably had its greatest impact through its contribution to subsequent phases of American capitalist expansion. The Plains Sioux began to experience these new phases in the 1840s and 1850s, when settlers traveling to Oregon and California invaded their lands, and in the 1860s and 1870s, when their own territory became valuable for mineral wealth. It was at this point that the U.S. government began to exercise power over the Sioux. At first, the Sioux had substantial leverage. In 1868 they were able to force the government to negotiate a treaty that in some ways inscribed Sioux military victories. However, this treaty aggravated already developing divisions between treaty and nontreaty Sioux and contained provisions that eventually led to U.S. control over the Sioux on reservations. In the 1870s, U.S. military power combined with a growing scarcity of game led to the final conquest of Sioux militants and their allies, and the theft of the Black Hills. The first part of the book ends in 1877 with the killing of Crazy Horse, an event that marked the end of Sioux warfare and ushered in a new phase of colonial management.

After 1877, as described in Part 2, "Colonialism," U.S. power manifested itself primarily through reservation agencies administered by the Indian Office (the predecessor to the Bureau of Indian Affairs). Although civilian agents continued to rely on the threat of military force, their primary weapons were economic leverage and new institutions (schools, police, courts). The stated purpose of U.S. policy was assimilation. Although many officials and missionaries were undoubtedly sincere when they professed a desire to rescue savages for civilization, assimilation functioned in the larger scheme of things as a rationale for the dispossession of Indian lands and the destruction of diversity in the name of national homogeneity. In practice, Christian and secular ideas about the common humanity of all peoples were overwhelmed by the corollary belief that existing Indian ways of life were heathen and primitive. The result was a form of management that was at best paternalistic and often simply racist. Remarkably, as the Sioux began living on reservations in the late 1870s, many Sioux leaders genuinely thought they might be able to work out a relationship with the United States that would

allow them to preserve some of their land and ways of life, while adjusting to new conditions and demands. By the late 1880s, however, as the United States relentlessly cracked down on Sioux ways of life and demanded further cessions of land, these hopes began to seem elusive.

Part 3, "Anticolonialism and the State," focuses on the emergence of the Ghost Dance and the events that led to Wounded Knee. Under the increasingly oppressive conditions of the late 1880s, a minority of the Plains Sioux embraced Wovoka's prophesies of a cataclysmic event that would either remove European Americans from the western hemisphere or destroy them altogether and usher in a new world. Game would be restored and deceased ancestors returned to life. At most reservations in the western United States where ghost dancing emerged, the Indian Office's civilian agents decided to use "normal" methods to manage the movement, but some agents in charge of the western Sioux reservations were unable to maintain control. Their failures opened the door to a massive military operation, designed in part to demonstrate the continued relevance of the western army. In mid-November 1890, when the army invaded Sioux country, U.S. officials did not deliberately plan a massacre, but their reliance on overwhelming military power to intimidate and coerce eventually had exactly that result.

Wounded Knee was the single most devastating event in Plains Sioux history, but it did not destroy the Sioux nation. In the conclusion to this book I briefly explore some of the actions Sioux people have taken in the twentieth century to deal with Wounded Knee's agonizing legacy. In this way, the book ends where it began, one hundred years after the massacre as Sioux people tried to reckon with its trauma and all that it continues to represent.