Red Cloud's Speech after Wounded Knee

By Chief Red Cloud


Red Cloud (or Maȟpiyá Lúta) (1822-1909) was an important leader of the Oglala Lakota who led a successful campaign against the U.S. Army between 1866 and 1868. The conflict began over white encroachment into territory inhabited by Native American Plains tribes in the Wyoming and Montana territories, and it ended with the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which established the Great Sioux Reservation. Red Cloud and his people settled on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, but he would go on to regret signing the treaty, stating: "They made us many promises, more than I can remember. But they kept but one—They promised to take our land...and they took it." On December 29, 1890, near Wounded Knee Creek on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, U.S. Calvary troops fired on a group of Lakota people, many of them women and children, and killed more than 150 and wounded 51, some of whom died later. As you read, take notes on Chief Red Cloud's reaction to the Wounded Knee Massacre and how he traces back to the cause of this tragedy.

Red Cloud delivers the following speech after the Wounded Knee Massacre in order to shed light on the plight of the Native American peoples living on reservations. Throughout Red Cloud's life, he was a proponent of peace and in this speech he argues that those who were killed at Wounded Knee and involved in the Ghost Dance movement were not proponents of violence against whites.

I will tell you the reason for the trouble. When we first made treaties with the Government, our old life and our old customs were about to end; the game[^1] on which we lived was disappearing; the whites were closing around us, and nothing remained for us but to adopt their way—the Government promised all the means necessary to make our living out of the land, and to instruct us how to do it, and with abundant[^2] food to support us until we could take care of ourselves. We looked forward with hope to the time we could be as independent as whites, and have a voice in the Government.

[^1]: Game (noun): wild mammals or birds hunted for sport or food
[^2]: Abundant (adjective): plentiful

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The army officers could have helped better than anyone else but we were not left to them. An Indian Department\(^3\) was made with a large number of agents and other officials drawing large salaries — then came the beginning of trouble; these men took care of themselves but not of us. It was very hard to deal with the government through them — they could make more for themselves by keeping us back than by helping us forward.

We did not get the means for working for our lands; the few things they gave us did little good.

Our rations\(^4\) began to be reduced; they said we were lazy. That is false. How does any man of sense suppose that so great a number of people could get work at once unless they were once supplied with the means to work and instructors enough to teach them?

Our ponies were taken away from us under the promise that they would be replaced by oxen and large horses; it was long before we saw any, and then we got very few. We tried with the men we had, but on one pretext\(^5\) or another, we were shifted from one place to another, or were told that such a transfer was coming. Great efforts were made to break up our customs, but nothing was done to introduce us to customs of the whites. Everything was done to break up the power of the real chiefs.

Those old men really wished their people to improve, but little men, so-called chiefs were made to act as disturbers and agitators.\(^6\) Spotted Tail\(^7\) wanted the ways of the whites, but an assassin was found to remove him.\(^8\) This was charged to the Indians because an Indian did it, but who set on the Indian?\(^9\) I was abused and slandered,\(^10\) to weaken my influence for good. This was done by men paid by the government to teach us the ways of the whites. I have visited many other tribes and found that the same things were done among them; all was done to discourage\(^11\) us and nothing to encourage us. I saw men paid by the government to help us, all very busy making money for themselves, but doing nothing for us....

The men who counted [the U.S. census]\(^12\) told all around that [we] were feasting and wasting food. Where did he see it? How could we waste what we did not have? We felt we were mocked in our misery; we had no newspaper and no one to speak for us. Our rations were again reduced.

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3. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was founded in 1824 by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Despite being an agency of the U.S. federal government supposedly dedicated to the welfare of Native Americans, it was often run by white men and did little to benefit Native peoples.

4. **Ration** *(noun)*: a particular amount of something (such as gasoline or food) that the government allows you to have when there is not enough of it

5. **Pretext** *(noun)*: a fake reason given to justify a course of action

6. **Agitator** *(noun)*: a person who urges others to protest or rebel

7. Spotted Tail (1823-1881) was a Brulé Lakota tribal chief who declined to participate in Red Cloud's War. He became a statesman and traveled to Washington D.C. to defend the rights of his tribe.

8. Spotted Tail was shot on August 5, 1881, by Crow Dog, a Brulé Lakota subchief, on the Rosebud Indian Reservation. He was tried and convicted in Dakota Territorial court but in 1883, his case was submitted before the Supreme Court in Ex parte Crow Dog. The Supreme Court overturned the conviction, stating that the Dakota Territorial court had no jurisdiction over the Rosebud reservation. This decision would have a lasting impact on future cases of tribal sovereignty.

9. According to historian Dee Brown in his book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, there was talk among Spotted Tail's friends that his death was part of a plot to break up chiefs' power.

10. **Slander** *(verb)*: to make false and damaging statements about someone or something, often to damage their or its reputation

11. **Discourage** *(verb)*: to cause someone to lose confidence or enthusiasm

12. The U.S. census systematically records information about its citizens (or those living in the country)—often about housing, population, agriculture, business, etc. This information is used for federal research purposes and electoral votes.
You who eat three times a day and see your children well and happy around you cannot understand what a starving Indian feels! We were faint with hunger and maddened by despair. We held our dying children and felt their little bodies tremble as their soul went out and left only a dead weight in our hands. They were not very heavy but we were faint and the dead weighed us down. There was no hope on earth. God seemed to have forgotten.

Someone had been talking of the Son of God and said He had come [a reference to the Ghost Dance movement]. The people did not know; they did not care; they snatched at hope; they screamed like crazy people to Him for mercy they caught at the promise they heard he made.

The white men were frightened and called for soldiers. We begged for life and the white men thought we wanted theirs; we heard the soldiers coming. We did not fear. We hoped we could tell them our suffering and could get help. The white men told us the soldiers meant to kill us; we did not believe it but some were frightened and ran away to the Badlands. The soldiers came. They said: “don’t be afraid — we come to make peace not, war.” It was true; they brought us food. But the hunger-crazed who had taken fright at the soldiers’ coming and went to the Badlands could not be induced to return to the horrors of reservation life. They were called Hostiles and the Government sent the army to force them back to their reservation prison.

Red Cloud's Speech after Wounded Knee by Chief Red Cloud is in the public domain.

13. The Ghost Dance was a spiritual movement that swept through much of the Western United States in the late 1800s. According to Northern Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka (also known as Jack Wilson), the dance would reunite the living with the dead, raise spirits of the dead who would fight for them and make the white settlers leave, and bring peace to Native peoples throughout the region. The rapid spread of the Ghost Dance alarmed white Americans, who saw it as a prelude to an attack rather than a spiritual ritual. This fear prompted American police and military officials to seek and arrest major Native American leaders, such as Sitting Bull (who was killed in the attempted arrest). Spotted Elk, also known as “Big Foot,” fled with a band of Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Lakota people to seek shelter with Red Cloud at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Spotted Elk, along with many others, were killed at the resulting Wounded Knee Massacre.

14. The Badlands is a plateau region in the western United States, mainly in southwestern South Dakota and northwestern Nebraska, south of the Black Hills. It derives its name from its harsh, eroded terrain and little vegetation.

15. Reservation (noun): an amount of land set aside for and managed by a Native American tribe under the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs

16. Hostile (adjective): unfriendly; opposed

17. One of the groups sent after them, the 7th Calvary, would cause the Wounded Knee Massacre.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best summarizes the circumstances Chief Red Cloud and his people were facing before they were placed on reservations? [RI.3]
   A. Red Cloud describes his and the Lakota people’s relations with the U.S. government as being far more fearful than it would come to be once they were settled on the reservation.
   B. Red Cloud describes the situation as bleak; with little food and fading traditions, they felt one of their only choices was to agree to reservation life and adopt white American ways.
   C. Red Cloud describes the situation as desperate, but the Plains Indians would persist in their active resistance against white settlement until they left entirely.
   D. Red Cloud describes the circumstances as a time of religious fervor, when the Ghost Dance was sweeping through mid-western and western tribes.

2. How did Red Cloud view the “Indian Department” left in charge of reservation life? [RI.6]
   A. Red Cloud viewed them as corrupt; the department did little to actually help the Native Americans, and instead they lied, discouraged, and filled their own pockets with large salaries.
   B. Red Cloud sympathized; the department did what they could to help but never received the funding supposedly set aside by the U.S. government when they first agreed to live on the reservations.
   C. Red Cloud blamed them for the massacre at Wounded Knee, for if they had provided sufficient funds to the Lakota people then groups would not have fled into the Badlands.
   D. Red Cloud viewed the department as wholly unnecessary; he believed it was in the better interest of his people if they continued their traditional lifestyles on the reservation without interference.

3. Summarize in 3-5 complete sentences the conditions of life on the reservation as depicted by Chief Red Cloud’s speech. Cite evidence from the text to support your answer. [RI.2]
4. **PART A:** Which of the following best describe why the Ghost Dance became so popular in the late 1800s?

   A. The Ghost Dance was a non-violent way for Native Americans to intimidate the U.S. forces without provoking any retaliation.
   B. The Ghost Dance energized the people suffering on the reservation because it quite literally made them forget their fear and hunger.
   C. The Ghost Dance was one of the few traditional dances and spiritual rites that had brought all indigenous peoples together for centuries.
   D. The Ghost Dance was one of the last hopes of many Native Americans living on reservations, and with little other hope many began performing the dance.

5. **PART B:** Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?

   A. “I will tell you the reason for the trouble. When we first made treaties with the Government, our old life and our old customs were about to end....” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “Someone had been talking of the Son of God and said He had come [a reference to the Ghost Dance movement].” (Paragraph 9)
   C. “The people did not know; they did not care; they snatched at hope; they screamed like crazy people to Him for mercy they caught at the promise they heard he made.” (Paragraph 9)
   D. “We begged for life and the white men thought we wanted theirs; we heard the soldiers coming. We did not fear.” (Paragraph 10)
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Discuss Chief Red Cloud's depiction of reservation life. How could such conditions be allowed to happen? In the context of this passage, what is fair? What are the effects of prejudice? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. How does Red Cloud's description of life on the reservation compare with modern-day conditions on Native American reservations? What about the relationship between Native American nations and the United States—how does it compare between then and now? In the context of this passage, how, if at all, has America changed over time? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. Think about Red Cloud's speech and the major points he made in it. What ideas or realizations did he put forth after the Wounded Knee Massacre? In the context of this passage, what can we learn from tragedy? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.