

Wounded Knee

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Wounded Knee, located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwestern South Dakota, was the site of two conflicts between North American Indians and representatives of the U.S. government. An 1890 massacre left some 150 Native Americans dead, in what was the final clash between federal troops and the Sioux. In 1973, members of the American Indian Movement occupied Wounded Knee for 71 days to protest conditions on the reservation.

Wounded Knee: Ghost Dance and Sitting Bull

Throughout 1890, the U.S. government worried about the increasing influence at Pine Ridge of the Ghost Dance spiritual movement, which taught that Indians had been defeated and confined to reservations because they had angered the gods by abandoning their traditional customs. Many Sioux believed that if they practiced the Ghost Dance and rejected the ways of the white man, the gods would create the world anew and destroy all non-believers, including non-Indians. On December 15, 1890, reservation police tried to arrest [Sitting Bull](#), the famous Sioux chief, who they mistakenly believed was a Ghost Dancer, and killed him in the process, increasing the tensions at Pine Ridge.

Wounded Knee: Conflict breaks out

On December 29, the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry surrounded a band of Ghost Dancers under Big Foot, a Lakota Sioux chief, near Wounded Knee Creek and demanded they surrender their weapons. As that was happening, a fight broke out between an Indian and a U.S. soldier and a shot was fired, although it's unclear from which side. A brutal massacre followed, in which it's estimated 150 Indians were killed (some historians put this number at twice as high), nearly half of them women and children. The cavalry lost 25 men.

The conflict at Wounded Knee was originally referred to as a battle, but in reality it was a tragic and avoidable massacre. Surrounded by heavily armed troops, it's unlikely that Big Foot's band would have intentionally started a fight. Some historians speculate that the soldiers of the 7th Cavalry were deliberately taking revenge for the regiment's defeat at Little Bighorn in 1876. Whatever the motives, the massacre ended the Ghost Dance movement and was the last major confrontation in America's deadly war against the Plains Indians.

Wounded Knee: American Indian activists organize

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in 1968 in an effort to stop police harassment of Indians in the Minneapolis area. Borrowing some tactics from the anti-war student demonstrators of the era, AIM soon gained national notoriety for its flamboyant protests. However, many mainstream Indian leaders denounced the youth-dominated group as too radical.

In 1972, a faction of AIM members led by Dennis Banks and Leonard Peltier sought to close the divide by making alliances with traditional tribal elders on reservations. They had their greatest success on the Pine Ridge Reservation in [South Dakota](#), after a group of young

whites murdered a Sioux named Yellow Thunder. Although Yellow Thunder's attackers only received six-year prison sentences, this was widely seen as a victory by the local Sioux accustomed to unfair treatment by the often racist Anglo judicial system. AIM's highly visible publicity campaign on the case was given considerable credit for the verdict, winning the organization a great deal of respect on the reservation.

Wounded Knee: Siege begins

AIM's growing prestige and influence, however, threatened the conservative Sioux tribal chairman, Dick Wilson. When Wilson learned of a planned AIM protest against his administration at Pine Ridge, he retreated to tribal headquarters where he was under the protection of federal marshals and Bureau of Indian Affairs police. Rather than confront the police in Pine Ridge, some 200 AIM members and their supporters decided to occupy the symbolically significant hamlet of Wounded Knee, site of the 1890 massacre. Wilson, with the backing of the federal government, responded by besieging Wounded Knee.

During the 71 days of the siege, which began on February 27, 1973, federal officers and AIM members exchanged gunfire almost nightly. Hundreds of arrests were made, and two Native Americans were killed and a federal marshal was permanently paralyzed by a bullet wound. The leaders of AIM finally surrendered on May 8 after a negotiated settlement was reached. In a subsequent trial, the judge ordered their acquittal because of evidence that the [FBI](#) had manipulated key witnesses. AIM emerged victorious and succeeded in shining a national spotlight on the problems of modern Native Americans.

Wounded Knee: Trouble continues at Pine Ridge

The troubles at Wounded Knee were not over after the siege. A virtual civil war broke out between the opposing Indian factions on the Pine Ridge reservation, and a series of beatings, shootings and murders left more than 100 Indians dead. When two FBI agents were killed in a 1975 gunfight, the agency raided the reservation and arrested AIM leader Leonard Peltier for the crime. The FBI crackdown coupled with AIM's own excesses ended its influence at Pine Ridge. In 1977, Peltier was convicted of killing the two FBI agents and sentenced to life in prison. To this day, Peltier's supporters continue to maintain his innocence and seek a presidential pardon for him.

