

Lesson Plan:
Wounded Knee, 1890: Battle or Massacre?

This lesson will be structured as a role play, with the students enacting an imaginary U.S. Senate investigation of the 1890 event at Wounded Knee. It is designed for use in an 11th grade U.S. History class.

Rationale:

By structuring this lesson as a role play, with a Senate committee hearing testimony, it gives the students an opportunity to recognize different points of view. By allocating several days to this event, it also give them time to discuss and digest major issues such as the nature of American expansionism and its effects on the native people, the role of the U.S. government in securing land for white Americans, and the complicated moral questions that arise when real people are confronted with complex and difficult situations.

Preparation and background:

This lesson assumes previous reading, lectures and documentaries that cover the relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. government from roughly 1800 onward. This should include: an overview of westward expansion; a history of treaties including the 1851 and 1868 Fort Laramie treaties; Indian removal (possibly including a trial of Andrew Jackson for the Cherokee removal); the reservation system and Indian wars on the Great Plains; attempts at assimilation/Americanization and the Dawes Act; and the Ghost Dance movement.

The Scenario:

The students will role play a Select Senate Committee Investigation of the Events at Wounded Knee, to take place in 1891. (Note that I have avoided calling it either a massacre or a battle, allowing for a later discussion of this point.)

The roles will be as follows:

4-6 U.S. Senators (depending on the size of the class), each with a Senate staffer to assist in preparation for the investigation. Each senator/staff team will be provided with a transcript of witness statements in advance, so that they can prepare questions for witnesses. Each senator will be given primary responsibility for one witness, but they will also be expected to ask questions of the other witnesses as well. Attached is a list of the actual members of the U.S. Senate in 1891. Senators will be chosen from this list. It might also be a good idea to provide the students with a basic set of attitudes for each senator, i.e. hard liner à la Sherman, assimilationist à la Dawes, or undecided. After the committee has heard from all the witnesses, the committee will be asked to confer as a group and then deliver a statement to the press (see below) on their conclusions: Was it a battle or a massacre? Who was to blame? Should there be punishments or restitution? Etc.

3-4 witnesses, as follows:

- Major Samuel Whitside, commander of the troops that found Big Foot and took his band to Wounded Knee, an eye witness to the events.
- Joseph Horn Cloud, a 15 year old Lakota, a survivor of Wounded Knee.
- Peter McFarland, the quartermaster at Pine Ridge, also an eyewitness.
- Philip Wells, a mixed-blood Sioux who was an interpreter for the army.

If the class is large enough, each of these witnesses can be paired with a lawyer to help them prepare their testimony. Students will be guided to think about the identity and motivation of each of the witnesses. They will be instructed to begin with a statement, followed by questions from the senators.

The remainder of the class will be assigned as press covering the event. They may each want to choose a paper: Chicago Tribune, New York Times, etc. At the end of the hearings, they will be expected to write an article for their paper on the evidence and the conclusions of the committee.

Materials:

Witness statements will be derived from the materials presented at the NEH Seminar, as provided by the Nebraska State Historical Society (available on the CD), with the exception of Philip Wells, whose testimony is available on the PBS website (see below).

Background material on Wounded Knee was also provided in the seminar and is also on the CD.

Maps and pictures from the CD.

The students may also find additional resources online, but they must check with the teacher and provide copies for the other participants before using them.

Timeline:

At least 1 day for preparation in class.

2-3 days for the role play.

Total: 3-5 days

Aftermath:

The role play will be followed by a discussion of the immediate aftermath, including the death of Sitting Bull, as well as lessons tracing the history through termination/relocation to Wounded Knee II and then on to current issues on the reservations (for instance using the documentary on Whiteclay).

List of Senators, 52nd Congress, 1891

Senators were elected by the state legislatures every two years, with one-third beginning new six year terms with each Congress. Preceding the names in the list below are Senate class numbers, which indicate the cycle of their election. In this Congress, Class 1 meant their term ended with this Congress, requiring reelection in 1892; Class 2 meant their term began in the last Congress, requiring reelection in 1894; and Class 3 meant their term began in this Congress, requiring reelection in 1896.

Alabama

2. John T. Morgan (D)

3. James L. Pugh (D)

Arkansas

3. James K. Jones (D)

2. James H. Berry (D)

California

3. Leland Stanford (R)

1. Charles N. Felton (R)

Colorado

3. Henry M. Teller (R)

2. Edward O. Wolcott (R)

Connecticut

3. Orville H. Platt (R)

1. Joseph R. Hawley (R)

Delaware

1. George Gray (D)

2. Anthony Higgins (R)

Florida

3. Wilkinson Call (D)

1. Samuel Pasco (D)

Georgia

2. Alfred H. Colquitt (D)

3. John B. Gordon (D)

Idaho

2. George L. Shoup (R)

3. Fred T. Dubois (R)

Illinois

2. Shelby M. Cullom (R)

3. John McAuley Palmer (D)

Indiana

3. Daniel W. Voorhees (D)

1. David Turpie (D)

Iowa

3. William B. Allison (R)

2. James F. Wilson (R)

Kansas

Nebraska

2. Charles F. Manderson (R)

1. Algernon S. Paddock (R)

Nevada

3. John P. Jones (R)

1. William M. Stewart (R)

New Hampshire

2. William E. Chandler (R)

3. Jacob H. Gallinger (R)

New Jersey

2. John R. McPherson (D)

1. Rufus Blodgett (D)

New York

1. Frank Hiscock (R)

3. David B. Hill (D)

North Carolina

2. Matt W. Ransom (D)

3. Zebulon B. Vance (D)

North Dakota

1. Lyman R. Casey (R)

3. Henry C. Hansbrough (R)

Ohio

1. John Sherman (R)

3. Calvin S. Brice (D)

Oregon

2. Joseph N. Dolph (R)

3. John H. Mitchell (R)

Pennsylvania

3. J. Donald Cameron (R)

1. Matthew S. Quay (R)

Rhode Island

1. Nelson W. Aldrich (R)

2. Nathan F. Dixon, III (R)

South Carolina

2. Matthew C. Butler (D)

3. John L. M. Irby (D)

South Dakota

2. Preston B. Plumb (R)
Bishop W. Perkins (R)
3. William A. Peffer (P)
Kentucky
3. Joseph C. S. Blackburn (D)
2. John G. Carlisle (D)
William Lindsay (D)
Louisiana
2. Randall L. Gibson (D)
Donelson Caffery (D)
3. Edward D. White (D)
Maine
1. Eugene Hale (R)
2. William P. Frye (R)
Maryland
1. Arthur Pue Gorman (D)
3. Charles H. Gibson (D), installed
November 19, 1891
Massachusetts
1. Henry L. Dawes (R)
2. George F. Hoar (R)
Michigan
1. Francis B. Stockbridge (R)
2. James McMillan (R)
Minnesota
1. Cushman K. Davis (R)
2. William D. Washburn (R)
Mississippi
1. James Z. George (D)
2. Edward C. Walthall (D)
Missouri
1. Francis M. Cockrell (D)
3. George G. Vest (D)
Montana
2. Thomas C. Power (R)
1. Wilbur F. Sanders (R)

2. Richard F. Pettigrew (R)
3. James H. Kyle (P)
Tennessee
2. Isham G. Harris (D)
1. William B. Bate (D)
Texas
2. Richard Coke (D)
1. John H. Reagan (D)
Horace Chilton (D)
Roger Q. Mills (D)
Vermont
1. George F. Edmunds (R)
Redfield Proctor (R)
3. Justin S. Morrill (R)
Virginia
1. John W. Daniel (D)
2. John S. Barbour, Jr. (D)
Eppa Hunton, II (D)
Washington
1. John B. Allen (R)
3. Watson C. Squire (R)
West Virginia
2. John E. Kenna (D)
Johnson N. Camden (D)
1. Charles J. Faulkner (D)
Wisconsin
1. Philetus Sawyer (R)
3. William F. Vilas (D)
Wyoming
2. Joseph M. Carey (R)
1. Francis E. Warren (R)

Eyewitness to a Massacre

Philip Wells was a mixed-blood Sioux who served as an interpreter for the Army. He later recounted what he saw that Monday morning:

"I was interpreting for General Forsyth (*Forsyth was actually a colonel*) just before the battle of Wounded Knee, December 29, 1890. The captured Indians had been ordered to give up their arms, but Big Foot replied that his people had no arms. Forsyth said to me, 'Tell Big Foot he says the Indians have no arms, yet yesterday they were well armed when they surrendered. He is deceiving me. Tell him he need have no fear in giving up his arms, as I wish to treat him kindly.' Big Foot replied, 'They have no guns, except such as you have found.' Forsyth declared, 'You are lying to me in return for my kindness.'

During this time a medicine man, gaudily dressed and fantastically painted, executed the maneuvers of the ghost dance, raising and throwing dust into the air. He exclaimed 'Ha! Ha!' as he did so, meaning he was about to do something terrible, and said, 'I have lived long enough,' meaning he would fight until he died. Turning to the young warriors who were squatted together, he said 'Do not fear, but let your hearts be strong. Many soldiers are about us and have many bullets, but I am assured their bullets cannot penetrate us. The prairie is large, and their bullets will fly over the prairies and will not come toward us. If they do come toward us, they will float away like dust in the air.' I turned to Major Whitside and said, 'That man is making mischief,' and repeated what he had said. Whitside replied, 'Go direct to Colonel Forsyth and tell him about it,' which I did.

Forsyth and I went to the circle of warriors where he told me to tell the medicine man to sit down and keep quiet, but he paid no attention to the order. Forsyth repeated the order. Big Foot's brother-in-law answered, 'He will sit down when he gets around the circle.' When the medicine man came to the end of the circle, he squatted down. A cavalry sergeant exclaimed, 'There goes an Indian with a gun under his blanket!' Forsyth ordered him to take the gun from the Indian, which he did. Whitside then said to me, 'Tell the Indians it is necessary that they be searched one at a time.' The young warriors paid no attention to what I told them. I heard someone on my left exclaim, 'Look out! Look out!' I saw five or six young warriors cast off their blankets and pull guns out from under them and brandish them in the air. One of the warriors shot into the soldiers, who were ordered to fire into the Indians. I looked in the direction of the medicine man. He or some other medicine man approached to within three or four feet of me with a long cheese knife, ground to a sharp point and raised to stab me. He stabbed me during the melee and nearly cut off my nose. I held him off until I could swing my rifle to hit him, which I did. I shot and killed him in self-defense.



Artist Frederic Remington recreated the opening moments of the massacre based on soldiers' recollections

Troop 'K' was drawn up between the tents of the women and children and the main body of the Indians, who had been summoned to deliver their arms. The Indians began firing into 'Troop K' to gain the canyon of Wounded Knee creek. In doing so they exposed their women and children to their own fire. Captain Wallace was killed at this time while standing in front of his troops. A bullet, striking him in the forehead, plowed away the top of his head. I started to pull off my nose, which was hung by the skin, but Lieutenant Guy Preston shouted, 'My God Man! Don't do that! That can be saved.' He then led me away from the scene of the trouble."

Source:

"Massacre At Wounded Knee, 1890," EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (1998).