Westward expansion has been a feature of American history from its very beginnings. Never was that expansion more rapid—one might almost say frenzied—than in the quarter-century after the Civil War. It encountered many obstacles, some natural, some human. One of the human obstacles was the presence of Native Americans, defending their lands and ways of life against the inroads of whites.

Whites dealt with the problem with the same basic strategy they had used from the early 1600s on: get the Native Americans out of the way, peacefully if possible, with violence if necessary, but in any case do not allow them to block the path of "progress." In the late 1800s this strategy resulted in a series of confrontations, often violent, ending in the confinement of the remaining populations of Native Americans to reservations in those areas that whites had no interest in. While not all whites agreed with General Philip Sheridan when he reportedly said, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," and while some contemporaries protested against what they saw as the injustices being done to Native Americans, resistance to the policy of removing them from the path of white advance was never effective.

The following selection deals with only one of the many tribes of the trans-Mississippi West, the Sioux. Their culture and history differ in some ways from those of other tribes, but their experiences on reservations are broadly similar. For one thing, they all had to deal with the Indian agents who served as the link between them and the United States government. Some of them, like James McLaughlin and Valentine McGillycuddy, were sincerely devoted to doing the best job they could, but others were political hacks who were often corrupt or incompetent, or both. A more important shared feature of the reservation experience is that it altered or even destroyed traditional Native American ways of life.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota, sported a festive air as the United States District Court opened on April 23, 1891. The streets teemed with townspeople, farmers, rough-hewn frontiersmen, and reporters from eastern newspapers come to cover the trial of a bewildered Sioux youth of twenty-two named Plenty Horses. He stood charged with the murder of an army officer during the recent Ghost Dance troubles on the Pine Ridge Reservation. His acquittal on the grounds that he acted as a combatant during a state of war made legal history... But the trial also set the stage for a scene somberly symbolic of what had happened to the Indians of the American West in the short span of a decade.

On the edge of town an imaginative entrepreneur had built a corral and succeeded in assembling a herd of seventeen buffalo. The eastern visitors and, for that
matter, the local residents themselves came to gawk at the shaggy, lumbering animals. Most had never seen one in the flesh. Among the viewers was a delegation of Sioux brought from Pine Ridge Agency to testify in the trial. The sight of the buffalo gave such joy to the Indians that they cavorted about like excited children. Broken Arm and He Dog even climbed into the pen and tried to hug the animals, only to be thrown roughly aside by a surly shake of the head. They then, as a reporter described it, "scampered about, although at the risk of their lives, and in general made so free with the animals that the latter looked around as though dazed at the proceedings."

Scarcely twenty-five years earlier perhaps as many as thirteen million buffalo darkened the Great Plains. They provided the Plains Indians with food and almost every other material want and contributed vitally to the shape of their political and social institutions and spiritual beliefs. They made possible the nomadic way of life that had endured for more than a century. In 1867-68 the Union Pacific Railroad divided the buffalo into two great herds, northern and southern. In 1871 an eastern tannery hit upon buffalo hides as a source of commercial leather. By the hundreds "hide hunters" spread over the Plains, slaughtering the buffalo at the rate of three million a year. By 1878 the southern herd had been obliterated. By 1883 a scientific expedition could find only two hundred buffalo in all the West.

For the Plains Indians, the disappearance of the buffalo was a shattering cultural catastrophe, and it had another portentous consequence: it left no alternative to the reservation. Now a breakout from the reservation no longer held the hope of old that food could be found and pursuing bluecoats eluded or fought off. For the first time the reservation actually offered a testing ground for the government's civilization program. In other parts of the West, too, outside the buffalo ranges, Indians confronted a similar reality. Game and other resources that supported a roving life of freedom—not least of these resources open land itself—shrank as swiftly as the country filled up with white settlers.

"All our people now were settling down in square gray houses, scattered here and there across this hungry land," recalled the holy man Black Elk of the Teton Sioux Reservation in the 1880s, "and around them the Wasichus had drawn a line to keep them in. . . . The people were in despair. . . . Hunger was among us often now, for much of what the Great Father in Washington sent us must have been stolen by Wasichus who were crazy to get money. There were many lies, but we could not eat them. The forked tongue made many promises."

Life was every bit as bleak as Black Elk remembered, and it grew bleaker as nostalgia burnished yet more brightly the memory of the old free life that had been lost. It could never be recaptured, for now the line that so disturbed Black Elk truly locked the people in, forcing them to cope with rather than run from the efforts of government agents to destroy all vestiges of the old life. On most of the reservations the story was basically the same, varied only by personality, plot, and tempo. Black Elk's people, the Sioux, offer graphic personification of a process repeated among Indians all over the West.

No matter what the reaction of individuals or factions, the government programs relentlessly chewed up the old ways. . . . The tribal identity, the tribal character, began
to change, abruptly and swiftly, as soon as the Sioux faced the reality of reservation confinement. Almost overnight, a whole way of life had vanished, and thus whole clusters of habits and customs, activities, attitudes, values, and institutions lost relevance and meaning and likewise began to vanish.

Once warfare had consumed much of the men's time and thought and energy. With fidelity to prescribed ritual, they had fashioned and decorated weapons, planned and carried out raids on enemy tribes and invading whites, celebrated success, and mourned failure. War societies united men in common purpose, triumph, tragedy, and loyalty. Warfare opened the way to prestige, honor, wealth, and high rank. Now warfare no longer provided a foundation for this elaborate cultural edifice, and it crumbled.

Once the hunt had given order and organization to the yearly life cycle of band and tribe. The tribal circle, the police societies (Akicitas) that regulated its movement and configuration and saw that the hunt proceeded according to approved custom, the deeply embedded beliefs that formed a spiritual connection between Sioux and buffalo, and the constant preoccupation of women with the preparation of meat and hides and the crafting of clothing, tipis, utensils, and artwork—all ended as the buffalo and the life it supported vanished.

Pathetically, the Sioux tried to preserve a faint taste of the hunt. Like the buffalo of old, steers issued as rations were gunned down by breech-clouted horse-men, after which the women moved in to butcher the carcasses. But a visiting government commission saw this as "a disgrace to our civilization" that could only "perpetuate in a savage breast all the cruel and wicked propensities of his nature," and the Indian Bureau moved to stamp out the practice.

To take the place of the buffalo and the hunt, the agents constantly demanded that the Sioux turn to farming. For the time being, there would be the beef, coffee, sugar, and other rations promised in the treaties. But these would not last forever, and the Indians must learn to till the soil. These Indians had not tilled the soil since drifting out onto the Plains generations before. Labor of this sort demeaned Sioux manhood. As Red Cloud informed [Valentine] McGillycuddy, "the Great Spirit did not make us to work. He made us to hunt and fish." And, he added, not illogically, "the white man owes us a living for the lands he has taken from us." Besides, it required little foresight to see that growing crops would put an end to free rations. And so the Sioux resisted. But as the years passed, more and more moved out from the agencies and scattered over the land, built rude cabins, broke a patch of sod, and planted just enough seed to keep the agent from hounding them... 

The Sioux political system did not collapse as quickly as the economic, but it endured severe stresses that contributed greatly to the cultural breakdown. Some political institutions simply disappeared because the context in which they had existed, the tribal circle, had disappeared. Others persisted but came under vigorous government attack—none more so than the chieftainship.

The war on the chiefs bewildered the Sioux. On the one hand, the agents tore down the chiefs. On the other hand, they did things that built them up. McGillycuddy, for example, "deposed" Red Cloud and declared every man his own chief. Instead of chiefs drawing rations and redistributing them among their people, now every man
might draw rations for his family. Yet when McGillycuddy needed Indian cooperation or acquiescence in some especially unpopular measure, the Oglalas [a branch of the Sioux] observed that he dealt through Red Cloud. In fact, the government provided Red Cloud with a shiny black carriage, built him a frame house more imposing than the agent’s own, and periodically brought him to Washington for a state visit replete with all the ceremony accorded a foreign potentate. As if this were not confusing enough, the government still could not resist manufacturing chiefs. . . . There were so many chiefs, real and counterfeit, strong and weak, that one never knew where authority actually resided—if indeed anywhere.

Theoretically, supreme authority resided in the agent, and with strong agents like [James] Mclaugtrlin and McGillycuddy this was largely true. But agents came and went, and more were weak than strong. During the tenure of weak agents, the established chiefs usually asserted themselves, only to be suppressed when a strong agent inherited the post. Agents enjoyed a number of advantages in the contest for supremacy. For example, rations could be withheld to enforce conformity in a wide range of official demands, such as requiring that children be placed in school or that crops be planted. Another advantage lay in the Indian police force. Police service involved enough attributes of the old life to be popular and to inculcate in the policeman a sense of duty and loyalty to the agent. In the hands of a forceful agent, the police proved highly effective. Finally, the slow but steady dispersal of the people in family groups across the reservation weakened the chieftainship simply because a chief’s hold depended in part on the proximity of families in band groups. By the close of the 1880s the chieftainship still existed, but it had been badly weakened and subjected to such mishandling by whites and Indians alike that a chaos of authority plagued the Sioux.

In the reservation environment the spiritual life the Sioux also eroded. Here, too, the passing of the old ways undermined established beliefs and practices. The vision quest, for example, once marked a boy’s passage to manhood and determined intensely personal and intensely sacred meanings and habits that guided his course through life. Their relevance, however, depended in large part on war and the hunt, and these no longer occupied the Sioux.

The more visible expressions of the Indian spiritual world drew direct government fire when the Indian Bureau issued its "List of Indian Offenses" in 1883. Now a medicine man could be hauled before the Court of Indian Offenses for providing his people with spiritual counsel or for practicing the rituals and incantations of his calling. One by one the old-time shamans died without passing their lore to apprentices.

But the hardest blow came with the ban on the Sun Dance. Once the centerpiece of the social and religious fabric of the Sioux, the Sun Dance provided an annual forum for spiritual communication and comfort. No other institution afforded so pervading a sense of religious security. No other event so strengthened the values and institutions of society. Of all the voids that settled into Sioux life in the early reservation years, this emotional void was the worst.

Missionaries hastened to fill the void. Except at Standing Rock, with its
Catholic agent, Episcopalians led the field, followed closely by Congregationalists and Presbyterians. They contradicted one another in their teachings and forever ridiculed the old Indian ways, but they made progress. They were kind, they conducted rituals that the Sioux liked, and their churches were about the only place where Indians actually experienced the Christian precept that all people, even Indians, stood equal in the eyes of God. But the main explanation for the spread of Christianity lay in the nature of the Indian spiritual belief which did not bar the new from living comfortable next to the old-so long as the Christian holy men did not demand too insistently that the old be cast aside. The Indian spiritual life centered on a quest for personal power. The white man quite visibly possessed power. Therefore, his God might also be petitioned for power along with all the traditional Sioux deities.

Explaining his own religious experience, one of Pine Ridge's staunchest progressives, George Sword, also explained what had happened to many of his people under the influence of missionary teachings:

*When I believed the Oglala Wakan Tanka was right I served him with all my powers. . . . In war with the white people I found their Wakan Tanka the Superior. I then took the name of Sword and have served Wakan Tanka according to the white people's manner with all my power. I became the chief of the United States Indian police and held the office until there was no trouble between the Oglala and the white people. I joined the church and am a deacon in it and shall be until I die. I have done all I was able to do to persuade m people to live according to the teachings of the Christian ministers.*

*I still have my Wasicun [ceremonial pouch containing personal sacred objects] and I am afraid to offend it, because the spirit of an Oglala may go to the spirit land of the Lakota.*

Like Christianity, education elicited ambivalent reactions from the Sioux. On the one hand, they sensed its importance in helping them to cope with the white people in the new world forced upon them. On the other hand, they feared what it would do to the hearts and minds, indeed the Sioux identity, of their children. On both counts, of course, they were right.

The Oglalas and Brules [another branch of the Sioux] had hardly settled at their new agencies in 1879 when Captain Richard H. Pratt descended on them to recruit pupils for his new school at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He left with sixty boys and twenty-four girls-and left behind parents anguished over the parting and fearful for their children's fate in a far-off place peopled only by whites. Spotted Tail visited Carlisle a few months later and had his worst fears confirmed: his own children, locks shorn, Indian garb discarded in favor of tightly buttoned military dress, engaged in chores no Indian had ever done before. After an angry scene with Pratt, he stormed out with his children and thereafter set his influence against Carlisle. Even so, Sioux continued to enroll and receive a rudimentary classroom and industrial education. But then they came home to find themselves almost aliens among their own people and with no place to apply their newly acquired skills and learning. One such Carlisle graduate was Plenty
Horses, the youth arraigned for murder but acquitted in the federal court at Sioux Falls in 1891. To the jurors he explained his motive:

*I am an Indian. Five years I attended Carlisle and was educated in the ways of the white man. . . . I was lonely. I shot the lieutenant so I might make a place for myself among my people. Now I am one of them. I shall be hung and the Indians will bury me as a warrior. They will be proud of me. I am satisfied.*

Day schools and boarding schools proved less repugnant than Carlisle and its sister institutions because the children stayed closer to home. Even so, parents found many of the rules and routines deeply offensive, and they resisted. Agents frequently had to resort to suspension of rations to fill the classrooms. At Standing Rock in 1884, for example, McLaughlin assigned quotas to the various bands and stopped issues until they were met. "But I afterward learned," he later confessed, "that there was not an orphan child over five years of age left in the camps after this 'conscription.' " And so, like the churches, the schools had their effect whether the Sioux resisted or not. By the close of the 1880s, the adults were confused and resentful, and the children, exposed to both white and Indian environments, were torn by conflicting values. . . .

And so the Teton Sioux ended the decade of the 1880s depressed, despairing, and drained of hope for improvement. The old values, the old verities, the old ways, and the old institutions fell irrevocably away. Nothing solid or satisfying took their place. That the people could not help giving up the old, that they could not help sampling or even embracing some of the new, only deepened the malaise. The long and exhausting battle over land, ending in defeat accompanied by a dramatic show of government bad faith- or so it appeared to the Indians- made matters even worse. The winter of 1889-90 brought hunger and perhaps even some starvation, which was in part a consequence of the ration cut. Epidemics of measles, influenza, and whooping cough swept the reservation with fatal effect. Summer drought in 1890 blasted into total ruin such crops as had been planted. Never had the fortunes of the Sioux reached lower ebb. Never had their sense of who they were been more blurred.

Other Indian tribes endured similar though usually less demoralizing stresses during the 1880s. The reservation program tore down the traditional culture without substituting the new at which it aimed. The Dawes Act set in motion a concerted drive for allotment in severalty and the cession of surplus lands. All over the West, Indians closed the decade beset by more or less cultural disintegration and by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Symptomatic of their condition was the fervor with which most greeted the stirring message that came out of the west in 1890, bringing with it the promise of a way out of the morass into which the white people had forced them.

A prophet had appeared among the Paiutes of Nevada. He preached a new religion. It was a religion that offered hope for the Indian race-hope not dependent upon promises of the white men. He held forth a vision of paradise in which all Indians would at last be free of the white burden and reside for eternity in a blissful land, a land without white people, a land inhabited by all the generations of Indians that
had gone before, a land bounteous in game and all the other riches of the natural world, a land free of sickness and want, a land where all peoples dwelt in peace with one another. It was a religion that combined many of the old spiritual beliefs with the new teachings of the Christian missionaries. The injunction to live in peace, for example, drew on Christian dogma. Indeed, the prophet [Wovoka] came to be known as the Messiah, and when pilgrims from reservations all over the West gathered at his brush lodge he showed them scars on his hands where centuries before the whites had nailed him to a cross. But his promise was of an exclusively Indian world, and it could be simply attained by practicing the tenets of his faith and dancing a prescribed "Ghosr Dance." . . .

No Indian agency exhibited a more conspicuous personification of the evils of the spoils system than Pine Ridge. . . . Pine Ridge was recognized as "Pettigrew's Place." Richard F. Pettigrew, senator from the new state of South Dakota, pledged the post to Daniel F. Royer, physician, pharmacist, and local politician of Alpena, South Dakota. Middle-aged, with thinning hair, stringy mustache, and cherubic face, Royer had fallen on bad times and now needed a chance to recoup his finances. Although he wanted to be registrar of the Huron land office, Pettigrew could offer only an Indian agency. But another candidate with good Republican credentials and equal need appeared in the person of Bishop J. Gleason. Not until the middle of 1890 did Pettigrew work out a solution: Royer would get the agency and would at once appoint Gleason his chief clerk. With understandable though not necessarily inaccurate bias, the man fired as chief clerk recalled of Royer and Gleason: They were "broken down small politicians . . . overwhelmingly in debt. They came to the reservation as political adventurers in search of fortunes."

Royer installed himself at Pine Ridge Agency on October 1, 1890, just in time to confront the Ghost Dance. The Sioux pilgrims to Nevada had returned with word of the new Messiah during the previous March, but not until after a summer of cascading afflictions did the Sioux turn seriously to the hope he held forth. Cannily, old Red Cloud steered his usual ambiguous course. If the story were true, he said, "it would spread all over the world." If false, "it would melt like the snow under the hot sun." Little Wound agreed, but he spoke for most of the chiefs in urging the people not to take a chance. "You better learn this dance." He warned, "so if the Messiah does come he will not pass us by."

And they did learn the dance. All over Pine Ridge Reservation, and on the others as well, the people abandoned their cabins and pitched their tipis in the cottonwood groves. Hypnotically, in slow shuffling cadence, they danced around sacred prayer trees. As the intensity and excitement mounted, some fell to the ground, to die and go to heaven and there talk with the Indian Messiah and see the beautiful new world foretold. They came back to describe their experiences and to urge others to dance with a passion that would reveal to them, too, a vision of the promised land.

Unhappily for Royer and the other Sioux agents, the apostles who preached the new religion among the Sioux, chief among them Short Bull and Kicking Bear, added a feature that formed no part of Wovoka's message. The prophet taught nonviolence, even in thought. The millennium would occur through divine instrumentality; Indians
need only follow the rituals and precepts of the new religion. But among the Sioux the travail and resentment of recent events allowed the priests to twist Wovoka's pacifistic doctrine. Now they suggested that the time of deliverance might be advanced by direct action, and that the people should not fear such a drastic course because the special "Ghost Shirt" worn by the dancers would turn the white man's bullets. With this assurance, the Sioux in contrast to the faithful on other reservations throughout the West, grew increasingly turbulent and defiant.

Whether a steadier agent could have contained the trouble at Pine Ridge can never be known. Suggestively, McLaughlin succeeded at Standing Rock. And McGillycuddy had weathered crises as bad. But Royer, one of the worst specimens ever produced by the spoils system, was weak, excitable, and easily panicked, so much so that the Sioux named him "Young-Man-Afraid-of-Indians." He quickly made himself a target of contempt and ridicule, and he proved utterly wanting in any ability to stem the drift to anarchy. Repeatedly he ordered the dancers to stop dancing and return to their cabins, but they simply laughed at him. Repeatedly he bombarded his superiors with frantic appeals for soldiers. At last, in late November 1890, he could no longer be denied, for the Pine Ridge Sioux and a sizable infusion from Rosebud had got so far out of hand as to threaten the lives of agency personnel and spread fear of massacre among settlers outside the reservation. . . .

Big Foot and his Miniconjou band lived on the south side of the Cheyenne River about ten miles below its forks. They belonged to the Cheyenne River Reservation, but the land agreement of 1889 had left them outside its boundaries. A leading non-progressive, Big Foot had warmly embraced the Ghost Dance and thus had got his name on the list of troublemakers who should be arrested. Actually, his ardor for the new religion had cooled considerably, and his reputation as a peacemaker had elicited an invitation from Red Cloud and other "friendlies" at Pine Ridge to come down and help end the troubles there. When Big Foot and his people started south,. . . [Major] General [Nelson] Miles and everyone else assumed they were headed for the Stronghold to cast their lot with the dancers.

Goaded by a furious Miles, military units combed the frozen plains looking for Big Foot. They failed chiefly because Big Foot was not aiming for the Stronghold but for Pine Ridge. At last, on December 28, a squadron of the Seventh Cavalry found the fugitives. Big Foot, prostrated in a wagon with pneumonia, agreed with the officer in charge to accompany the soldiers to their camp. It lay in the valley of Wounded Knee Creek about twenty miles east of Pine Ridge Agency. That night the rest of the Seventh Cavalry rode out to Wounded Knee, and Colonel James W. Forsyth took command. Daybreak of December 29, gray with threatening storm, revealed Big Foot's tipis, sheltering some 350 people, closely surrounded by five hundred cavalrymen and commanded from a nearby hilltop by four small-caliber Hotchkiss cannon. It was not a reassuring sight.

No one on either side that morning had any thought of a fight. Certainly not the Indians, as the army later charged; they were outnumbered, surrounded, poorly armed, and had their women and children present. Certainly not the soldiers; they clearly saw
their advantages, and so unconcerned was Colonel Forsyth that he failed to dispose his units so that their fire would not endanger one another. But Forsyth had orders to disarm Big Foot's people, and taking an Indian's gun from him always unleashed emotions that could override logic. That, not an outbreak of treacherous Indians or a massacre plotted by brutal soldiers, is what happened at Wounded Knee.

As the search progressed, powerful tensions rose on both sides. A medicine man pranced about inciting the men to fight; their Ghost Shirts would protect them, he said. Nervous troopers fingered their carbine triggers. One seized a deaf man and grasped his rifle. It went off. The chanting priest threw a handful of dirt into the air. A knot of Indians dropped their blankets and leveled Winchester repeaters at a rank of soldiers. Both sides fired at once, and the fight that neither side intended or expected burst upon them.

In a murderous melee at close range, soldiers and Indians shot, stabbed, and clubbed one another. Weakly, Big Foot rose from his pallet to watch. A volley killed him and most of the headmen lined up behind him. Abruptly the two sides separated, and from the hill the artillery went into action. Exploding shells flattened the Sioux tipis and filled the air with deadly shrapnel. In less than an hour most of the fighting had ended, leaving the battlefield a horror of carnage. Nearly two-thirds of Big Foot's band had been cut down, at least 150 dead and 50 wounded, and perhaps more who were never reported. The army lost 25 dead and 39 wounded... Wounded Knee was the last major armed encounter between Indians and whites in North America. A few scattered clashes occurred later, but Wounded Knee was the last of great consequence. Even so, neither Wounded Knee nor the Ghost Dance "outbreak" that formed its backdrop deserves to be viewed as an episode in the Indian Wars of the United States. More fittingly, warfare ended in 1886 at Skeleton Canyon, Arizona, with the collapse of the last armed resistance to the reservation system. Instead of armed challenge to the reservation, the Ghost Dance was a desperate bid for divine salvation where all else had failed. Among the Sioux it assumed a militant form, but still it need not have ended in violence save for an incompetent Indian agent and a tragic accident born of mutual distrust, misunderstanding, and fear.

Rather, both in fact and in symbol, Wounded Knee assumes a larger significance, for it marks the passing of the Indian frontier. A little more than two years after Wounded Knee, the young historian Frederick Jackson Turner appeared before a convention of the American Historical Association in Chicago. Pointing out that the census of 1890 had failed for the first time to trace a frontier of white settlement in the West, he expounded his provocative interpretation of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." For generations to come the Turner thesis would profoundly influence American historical thought and spark heated controversy among historians. For more than four hundred years, Indian conflicts had flashed across the successive frontiers that Turner postulated. Coincidentally, the last serious conflict occurred in 1890, the very year that he chose as the end of America's frontier era... More plausibly than as a single line that disappeared when whites conquered the wilderness, the Indian frontier may be viewed as zones of ethnic interaction that faded when whites established political domination over the Indians. In this formulation as
well as in Turner's, the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee signal the end of the frontier period. For the Sioux, despite a decade of reservation experience, the loss of their freedom and traditional way of life seemed unthinkable until the bullets of the Seventh Cavalry penetrated their Ghost Shirts and shattered the dream held out by the Indian Messiah. After Wounded Knee, the Sioux resignedly submitted to the reservation system and thus implicitly surrendered the last vestiges of sovereignty to the invader. In varying degree, although no other Wounded Knees dramatized the surrender, the same thing happened on reservations all over the West. Indians embraced the Ghost Dance and the last hope of salvation it offered. When the miracles failed to occur, the reality of their political subordination could no longer be denied or ignored. Thus on December 29, 1890, the Indian frontier of the American West vanished in the smoke of Hotchkiss shells bursting over the valley of Wounded Knee Creek.