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Crisis Reports On Wounded Knee

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Shooting broke out at Wounded Knee 12 days after an abortive peace agreement had been signed. Caught in the middle were the Justice Department's conciliators, who had been the peacemakers. The local ranchers and the Indians' attorneys assailed the conciliators from opposite sides of the battleground.

The story behind the confrontation at Wounded Knee is told in the daily crisis reports, intended for official eyes only, from the mediators at the scene.

For several weeks now, on the windy plains of South Dakota, armed Indians and federal agents have been re-enacting the tragedy of Wounded Knee where 83 years ago cavalymen took revenge for the massacre of General George Custer's forces at the Little Big Horn. The soldiers swarmed over a small Sioux village and killed some 200 men, women and children.

Today, Wounded Knee is "bristling with weaponry" and barricaded with "numerous bunkers," declares a crisis report. "Three kinds of roadblocks" are manned by white lawmen, Indian militants and reservation Indians, respectively. The latter are described in one report as tribal chief Richard Wilson's "goon squad." They are, says the report, "his armed supporters who maintain his independent roadblock and who engage in night-time harassment of AIM (militant) units and suspected supporters."

A 13-man team from the Justice Department's Community Relations Service has sought to cool the tensions between the rival factions. Instead, they have drawn verbal fire from both sides.

On the eve of the shooting, a crisis report warned that "ranchers in nearby communities were planning to hold a meeting to 'take things into their own hands.' One intelligence report indicated that about 800 were expected to attend such a meeting. . . ." Thereafter, the mediators were blocked from entering Wounded Knee to palaver with the besieged Indians.

At the same time, the militant attorneys, Mark Lane and Beverly Axelrod, were poisoning the Indians at Wounded Knee against the mediators. Declares a crisis report:

"They have apparently been trying to discredit CRS in Wounded Knee, suggesting that we have been inform-



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ing on AIM and have been delaying the delivery of medical supplies. Just prior to the evening session, Lane and Axelrod, upon entering Wounded Knee, instructed the guard not to permit CRS to enter."

The extremists on both sides, apparently, are less interested in peace than provocation. Far from siding with the government, the mediators have shown surprising sympathy for the Indians and have maintained "vigilance against acts by government personnel which could jeopardize the cease-fire," note the memos from the field.

In one instance, they discovered by chance that U.S. marshals intended to engage in rifle practice minutes before a crucial peace session. The shooting was stopped, thereby "precluding a possible breakdown of the cease-fire and rupture of the negotiations."

Another time, an FBI agent arrested a group of Indian supporters trying to cross into Wounded Knee, then threatened to turn them over to Wilson's goon squad. A memo related that "three of the detainees thereupon escaped from the van and soon reported the incident to the AIM leadership, causing serious reaction requiring urgent response."

One of the Justice Department's own mediators, Hector Flores, encountered "threatening verbal abuse" from one of Wilson's roadblock guards. "The Wilson man had been drinking," notes the report.

Again, trouble was narrowly avoided when a federal officer, "wandering around the DMZ during yesterday's negotiating session, almost walked into an AIM bunker."

The memos tell about the precarious peace that was reached on April 5 when "the peace pipe was smoked." Indians and whites danced together. Indian leaders took a ride in a government helicopter. President Nixon's chief negotiator, Kent Frizzel, rode a pony—"reportedly very well," adds the Justice Department report.

But later that night, the memos reveal, the treaty already had begun to sour. The Indians made a sudden request at 2:30 a.m. that mediators be sent to Wounded Knee. Two conciliators were quickly dispatched, but they

found "no specific problem." They discerned, instead, "a low level of trust on the part of the Wounded Knee leadership of the government security forces and a real fear of aggressive action."

The distrust was mutual; neither the militant Indians nor the government negotiators ever came to trust one another's word. Later the same morning, another meeting "quickly deteriorated" and "adjourned with harsh exchanges." The treaty, signed only a few hours earlier with peace-pipe puffing and dancing, was aborted.

When the Indians proposed another session, it was the government negotiators' turn to be wary. They feared, according to a crisis report, "that they might be taken hostage." At the urging of the mediators, however, the meeting "took place in a van truck on the tepee site amidst a swirling snow storm."

The negotiations, meanwhile, have once again gone full circle. The Indians and the government, according to the memos, had finally reached a "detailed agreement on the arms disposition process and other vital matters" two weeks ago. Insurgent leaders Russell Means and Leonard Crow Dog were then barred from returning to Wounded Knee. So, at this writing, the Indians remain armed and the roadblocks are still up.