

THE CONFLICT AT THE WASHITA RIVER READING

Section 1

The engagement between the U.S. Army and Chief Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne was in the making for many years. Since the 1840s, white settlers were steadily moving west, encroaching on Native American land, resulting in increased conflict over land and resources between the Plains tribes and white settlers.

In an effort to decrease hostilities and open up more land for white settlement, the U.S. government sought ways to separate the groups by removing tribes, including the Cheyenne, from their homelands. One such method was a reservation policy that required the traditionally nomadic Plains tribes to live on small tracts of land assigned by the U.S. government.

In 1867, the Medicine Lodge Treaty between the United States and various Plains tribes assigned the Cheyenne new reservation land that was significantly smaller than the land that had been allocated to the tribe in previous treaties. As part of the agreement, each tribe was to receive clothing, stipends for food and supplies, and access to important hunting territory, as long as the tribe agreed to remain peaceful. Black Kettle, Cheyenne chief and committed peace advocate, agreed to these terms and signed the treaty.

POMS 1:

Section 2

By the spring of 1868, the United States had failed to deliver the supplies and food rations promised in the Medicine Lodge Treaty, and many among the tribes felt they no longer had to honor the terms of the treaties and began leaving their reservations. Many followed and hunted the buffalo outside reservation lines, occasionally raiding white settlements they encountered.

In the winter of 1868, frustrated that the U.S. Army had failed to defeat the Plains warriors by ending the attacks on white settlements and enforcing reservation boundaries, General Philip Sheridan, commander of U.S. forces on the frontier, prepared a new strategy - a winter campaign. This new strategy would exploit the tribes' vulnerabilities. Since fighting did not typically take place in the winter, attacks at this time would catch the tribes unprepared and with the horses they relied upon weakened from the lack of available food.

Meanwhile, learning some of his men had participated in continued raids on white settlements, Black Kettle became distressed. He went to Fort Cobb to assure U.S. officials of his commitment to peace. Black Kettle's request to move his camp closer to Fort Cobb for protection was denied, and he was told he must make clear his tribe's peaceful intentions directly to General Sheridan. Unfortunately, while Black Kettle planned to set a meeting, Sheridan's forces were already on the move.

POMS 2:

Section 3

Sheridan chose Lieutenant Colonel George Custer to lead the winter campaign. Following orders, Custer and his 7th Cavalry followed the Washita River until they found the tribes they sought. In the freezing temperatures in the early morning of November 27, 1868, Custer's scouts located the Cheyenne camp housing around 250 villagers as well as hundreds of horses on the banks of the Washita River. Custer split his troops into four columns to surround Black Kettle's encampment, and the 7th Cavalry launched their attack at dawn. The Cheyenne, caught by surprise, were unable to effectively rally much resistance. Within ten minutes, Custer and his troops had the village under control and a victory secured.

As they attempted to escape across the Washita River, Black Kettle and his wife were shot and killed by soldiers. Custer reported that 103 Cheyenne had been killed, including some women and children. 53 Cheyenne women and children were taken as prisoners. Custer lost 20 of his men. Solidifying a U.S. victory and further crippling the Cheyenne, Custer's forces burned the tribe's camp, including their housing, food supply, and belongings. Finally, Custer ordered the Cheyenne's herd of 800 horses to be slaughtered.

POMS 3:

Section 4

While the American Indian Wars would continue for another twenty-two years, the conflict at the Washita River marked the beginning of the end for life as it was known to the Plains tribes. Considering the losses they suffered and the destruction of their property, many of the Cheyenne realized they had little choice but to accept reservation life and with it, the loss of cultural, territorial, and political freedom. Ultimately, the winter campaign was effective, and like the Cheyenne, the majority of the Plains tribes were repressed and persuaded to move to their reservations.

Reactions to the attack were mixed, with some believing it to be an unwarranted massacre of peaceful Native Americans, and that the killing of peace advocate Black Kettle was comparable to murder. Others praised Custer and Sheridan for successfully subduing the Cheyenne and believed that the clear victory of the U.S. Army sent a convincing message to the remaining Plains tribes to abide by the reservation boundaries established by the treaty. Even today, there is debate about whether the attack should be remembered and labeled as a battle or a massacre.

POMS 4:

References

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