

U.S. Considers Revoking Medals of Soldiers Who Murdered 300 Native Americans at Wounded Knee

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Wounded Knee mass grave (Photo/File photo)

BY KAILI BERG |

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THE
COMMUNITY



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This new review comes after years of advocacy and legislative efforts to address the controversial bestowal of the nation's highest military honor for actions that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Native Americans in a single day.

On December 28, 1890, the U.S. Army intercepted a band of Miniconjou Lakota, consisting mainly of women and children, on their way to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The Army intended to disarm the Sioux men, but the situation quickly escalated into chaos and violence. Soldiers opened fire indiscriminately, resulting in the deaths of approximately 300 Native Americans, with women and children comprising more than two-thirds of the fatalities.

Despite the brutality of the massacre, approximately 20 soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions. This decision has been a source of deep pain and anger for Native communities and advocates who argue that the medals glorify an act of violence against unarmed, surrendering people.

Efforts to rescind these medals have gained significant support over the years. The Remove the Stain Act, a bipartisan, bicameral bill aiming to revoke the medals awarded for the Wounded Knee Massacre, was introduced in 2021.

This legislative push has garnered the backing of the South Dakota State Senate, 213 Tribal Nations, and major Tribal associations, including the Coalition of Large Tribes and the National Congress of American Indians.

Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), the first Native American to hold a Cabinet position, has been a leading voice in addressing this historical injustice. During her time in Congress and the Biden Administration, she has consistently advocated for the rescission of the medals, emphasizing the ongoing harm they cause to Native communities.

The Defense Department's review was ordered by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin after consultations with the White House and the Department of the Interior. This action was recommended in the 2022 defense bill, reflecting a push by lawmakers to reassess the awards.

The review will be conducted by a special panel of five experts, who will examine the historical records and documentation of each soldier's actions.

In response to the Department of Defense's announcement of the review, Secretary Haaland issued a statement on July 25, expressing her gratitude for the move.

"The significance of the Wounded Knee Massacre and the historical record put these Medals of Honor in a class of their own: medals that glorify violent actions against unarmed, surrendering people—actions for which Congress itself has felt compelled to officially apologize," Haaland said in the statement. "I believe that allowing the medals to remain in place is a disservice to the brave men and women who served and conduct in combat, to



continue to rest with the legacies of 20 soldiers who participated in this shameful massacre devalues and degrades the Medal of Honor while causing ongoing harm to Native people. That's why now is the time for a meaningful step to 'remove the stain' of these medals.”

As the review progresses, it will be essential for the involved parties to communicate openly and consider the perspectives of the descendants of those who suffered the massacre.

The outcome of this process could serve as a precedent for addressing other historical injustices and ensuring that military honors are awarded appropriately and respectfully.

About The Author

Staff Reporter

Kaili Berg (Aleut) is a member of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Nation, and a shareholder of Koniag, Inc. She is a staff reporter for Native News Online and Tribal Business News. Berg, who is based in Wisconsin, previously reported for the Ho-Chunk Nation newspaper, Hocak Worak. She went to school originally for nursing, but changed her major after finding her passion in communications at Western Technical College in Lacrosse, Wisconsin.

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