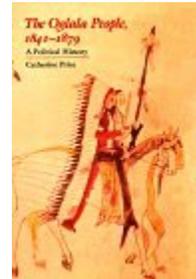


# H-Net Reviews

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Catherine Price. *The Oglala People, 1841-1879: A Political History*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. xiv + 234 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3710-0.

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## Plains Indians: Politics and Survival

In *The Oglala People, 1841-1879: A Political History*, Catherine Price brings light to the political strategies of the Oglala leaders during their struggle to retain their political customs and autonomy in the face of the U.S. government's acculturation efforts. In examining Lakota concepts of decision-making authority, she highlights the fluid political relationship among the several forms of Oglala leadership, and she demonstrates the numerous opinions regarding Lakota political relations with American officials as well as with other Lakota bands and subtribes. Furthermore, she illuminates the Oglala concept of chieftainship and thereby reassesses Red Cloud's political status, roles, and objectives, invalidating the image sustained by historians George Hyde in *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux* and James Olson in *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem*. She most eloquently points out that Red Cloud was erroneously regarded as the archetypal Sioux leader, despite the presence of other influential persons such as Man Afraid of His Horse, Red Dog, Blue Horse, and Little Wound. As her sources, Price cites extensive archival materials, ethnographic and historical works, and transcribed interviews with Oglala elders from 1896 through the 1930s.

For her study of the nineteenth-century Oglala, Price has selected the time frame of 1841-1879 instead of 1841-1890, breaking with many scholars—including Robert Utley in *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*—who claim that 1890, the year of the Wounded Knee Massacre, was the year in which Lakota lifeways were ultimately destroyed. Price asserts that her time frame reflects an Oglala perspective: 1841 saw grave political upheaval among the

Oglala after the murder of Bull Bear, an influential leader and holy man; 1877 witnessed the killing of Crazy Horse at Fort Robinson. Thus, major trauma hit earlier.

To set the stage for her study, Price first describes in precise detail the organization of Oglala society, namely, the sacred hoop and its ordering principle based on kinship relationships and obligations which fostered harmony and cooperation among the Oglala. She presents the three models of pre-reservation political organization—the *tiyospaye*, multiband, and ceremonial—and delineates important differences between the American politicians, who often sought monetary rewards and strove to maintain solitary power, and the Lakota leaders, who rather shared their political duties in a system that balanced authority between the *itancan*, the headman, holy men, and the young hunters and warriors.

While illustrating the many developments that worked against the Oglala, Price unsparingly points out the Americans' polarized attitude toward Native Americans, and the intense factionalism between the Department of the Interior and the Department of War, or between the president and the Congress. She reveals Americans' key misconceptions of the Oglala—such as the belief that the tribes' political systems were identical to those of the United States; the assumption that the Oglala and Americans shared a common concept of a nation and nationalism; and the notion that the Oglala were led by a head chief, identical in status to the American president. Price also exposes the misperception of American officials and journalists who believed that Red Cloud pos-

sessed the authority to control the Oglala people and to make binding decisions for all of the Sioux, even though Red Cloud himself warned that he did not. Since the United States' political system is characterized by hierarchical offices with fixed terms and clearly defined roles, and because it was driven by the expansionism of the age, American emissaries naturally considered the Oglala as a state and latched onto Red Cloud as the epitome of the vanishing noble savage.

Using the 1856 Fort Pierre council as a principal example, Price illustrates the U.S. Army's attempt to interfere with the political affairs of the Lakota. In their dealings with the Oglala, the military officers repeatedly called for head chiefs, subchiefs, and marshals to control the extended families of the Oglala. The military leaders hoped that communication would be improved if the Lakota political system could be modified to mirror the American organization and would meet American standards. The resulting collision between the two peoples exacerbated the internal tensions of the Oglala, who struggled to determine whether war or peace was the appropriate method to deal with the intruding whites. Furthermore, the U.S. military officials' grave misunderstanding of Oglala customs often contributed to the disruptive outbursts that were sparked by the presence of immigrants in the area surrounding the Black Hills.

Price cites the mysterious death of Crazy Horse, together with the resulting surrender of Oglala pro-war camps and the establishment of the Pine Ridge Reservation, as the major turning point in Lakota history. Despite this reputed defeat, however, the acculturation efforts of the U.S. government failed to destroy Oglala political customs. Even after subjugation, the *tiyospaye* and multiband councils continued to recognize Oglala leadership roles and to reach vital decisions by means of a con-

sensus. Decision-making authority, fluid and adaptable by nature, was determined by the occasion, and thus a change in the authoritative structure symbolized neither a radical nor a permanent modification in Oglala political customs.

In closing, Price points out that some traditional practices of the Oglala still endure today, even after a more static political organization was established after the Oglala settled down at Pine Ridge. Intense factionalism did not destroy the political independence of the Oglala people, even in the wake of Bull Bear's murder in 1841, during the years of sustained warfare with the U.S. military, or after the founding of the Red Cloud Agency. The Oglala took matters in their own hands and adapted their political customs to ever-changing needs.

Price's extremely well-documented book is a most welcome contribution to the field of Native American Studies, and it proves to be a valuable guide for all scholars interested in the political life of the Oglala. Heeding the advice of anthropologist Alfonso Ortiz, Price strives to write a balanced and honest history of Indian-white interactions—that is, to portray the indigenous peoples of North America as multi-dimensional, culturally advanced human beings, and, more specifically, to present Oglala leaders in a realistic light. She succeeds in her endeavors, and for this reason I highly recommend her excellent book. Many scholars will benefit from her extensive, painstaking research.

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