

Lincoln's Bishop: A President, a Priest, and the Fate of 300 Dakota Sioux Warriors

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Review

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Niebuhr, Gustav *Lincoln's Bishop: A President, A Priest, and the Fate of 300 Dakota Sioux Warriors*. Harper One, \$29.99 ISBN 9780062097682

Ethics and Reflection on the "Minnesota War" of 1862

Few can agree on what to call the bloody conflict between some of the Dakota people of Minnesota and European American civilians and soldiers in the late summer and early fall of 1862. Every possible name, from the "Sioux Uprising" to the "Dakota War," carries with it assumptions of right and wrong, power and weakness, and, perhaps most importantly, memory and ignorance. In 2012, the 150th anniversary of what I choose to call the "Minnesota War," there was as much opening of old wounds as attempts to educate people about the conflict that led to the largest mass execution in American History. On December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged from a four-sided scaffold in Mankato, Minnesota. The lithograph image is familiar to students of American history. Some 339 would have met the same fate had not President Abraham Lincoln intervened by carefully reviewing to total list of war crimes convictions then commuting the greater number of death sentences. The most treasured possession of the Minnesota Historical Society in Saint Paul is this commutation letter from the 16th President.

Lincoln had other things to do at the time. America had just experienced its most deadly day with the inconclusive battle of Antietam on September 17. The fact that Union forces still held the battlefield in Maryland both discouraged European powers that were poised to recognize the Confederacy, and prompted Lincoln to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Nevertheless, Lincoln willingly met with The Right Reverend Benjamin Whipple, the first Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota. Whipple had come to Washington City to speak to him directly about the aftermath of the Minnesota War. (His cousin Gen. Henry Halleck escorted the Bishop to the White House. Whipple was also a close friend of Gen. George B. McClellan. Lincoln had his

own problems with both of these men.) Whipple had witnessed the conflict's white and Dakota casualties directly and even bore an infected wound he received while stitching the wounds of white survivors. However, Whipple's broader purpose in meeting with Lincoln was to address the sorry state of U.S. Indian Agency dealings with Native People across the country. Lincoln listened.

Niebuhr succinctly describes the main circumstances of this tragic subset of the Civil War. *Lincoln's Bishop*, however, is not meant to be a comprehensive description of the Minnesota War. Instead, it is a meditation on the roles played by Dakota leader Little Crow, Whipple, and Lincoln when confronted with complex moral and ethical circumstances demanding decisions, reassessments of policy and intervening actions. It seems that Niebuhr begins his book somewhat haltingly. However, he correctly assumes that his readership will know little about both the Minnesota War and the Episcopal Church in mid-nineteenth century America. He carefully describes Benjamin Whipple's background in upstate New York and how it was that he, like Lincoln, did not come to be an Indian hater. He also explains Whipple's initial attraction to the Episcopal Church and then its ordained Priesthood. Whipple's early ministry experiences in frontier Chicago curiously shaped his vocational inclinations as demonstrated when he was later elected Bishop of Minnesota – then very much a frontier state. Whipple viewed both whites and Native Americans as his charge. Niebuhr also emphasizes Whipple's concern for whites that experienced the brutality of the conflict while still holding the view that U.S. treatment of the Dakota and other Native Americans was corrupt and often equally brutal.

Lincoln's Bishop is an important contribution to studies of the Civil War, of the American frontier experience and American religious history. In the tradition of William Lee Miller's *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*, it examines the importance of careful observation of real world situations from a moral and spiritual framework.

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