

Primary Sources from the United States – Dakota War of 1862

Chief Wamditanka (Big Eagle)

Comments on US Government Assimilation Policies

"There was great dissatisfaction among the Indians over many things the whites did. The whites would not let them go to war against their enemies... Then the whites were always trying to make the Indians give up their life and live like white men—go to farming, work hard as they did—and the Indians did not know how to do that, and did not want to anyway. It seemed too sudden to make such a change. If the Indians had tried to make the whites live like them, the whites would have resisted, and it was the same way with many Indians. The Indians wanted to live as they did before the treaty of Traverse des Sioux—go where they pleased and when they pleased; hunt game wherever they could find it, sell their furs to the traders and live as they could."

Motivation for Going to War

"It began to be whispered about that now would be a good time to go to war with the whites and get back the lands. It was believed that the men who had enlisted [to fight in the Civil War] last had all left the state, and that before help could be sent the Indians could clean out the country, and that the Winnebagoes [Ho-Chunk], and even the Chippewas [Ojibwe], would assist the Sioux. It was also thought that a war with the whites would cause the Sioux to forget the troubles among themselves and enable many of them to pay off some old scores. Though I took part in the war, I was against it. I knew there was no good cause for it, and I had been to Washington and knew the power of the whites and that they would finally conquer us. We might succeed for a time, but we would be overpowered and defeated at last. I said all this and many more things to my people, but many of my own bands were against me, and some of the other chiefs put words in their mouths to say to me."

Conflicting Feelings Over the War

"I did not have a very large band... Most of them were not for the war at first, but nearly all got into it at last. A great many members of the other bands were like my men; they took no part in the first movements, but afterwards did... When I returned to my village that day I found that many of my band had changed their minds about the war, and wanted to go into it... I was still of the belief that it was not best, but I thought I must go with my band and my nation, and I said to my men that I would lead them into the war, and we would all act like brave Dakotas and do the best we could. All my men were with me; none had gone off on raids, but we did not have guns for all at first."

[Source: Anderson, Gary Clayton and Alan R. Woolworth, eds. *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862*. Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press (1988), 23, 26, & 55–56.]

1st Lieutenant Clark Keysor, Co. E, 9th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry

"It is very easy for a white man to fall into the habits of the Indian, but almost impossible to raise the Indian to the standard of the white man. The head chief of the Winnebagoes was well known to me and we became fast friends. He was a friendly man to all the settlers, but I knew the characteristic of the Indian well enough to trust none of them. He never overcomes the cunning and trickery in his nature and ingratiating was the time to look out for some deviltry. The Indians were great gamblers, the squaws especially. They would gamble away everything they owned, stopping only at the short cotton skirt they wore."

[Source: Morris, Lucy Leavenworth Wilder. *Old Rail Fence Corners: Frontier Tales Told by Minnesota Pioneers*. Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press (1976), 178–179.]