

A Massacre of History in Colorado



A wood engraving published in an 1868 edition of Harper's Weekly shows the Seventh U.S. Cavalry charging into Black Kettle's village subsequent to Sand Creek attack by Col. Custer at Washita. (Library of Congress)

by Bruce Gilley

Every school child in Colorado is taught about the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. On a wintry day in November of that year, an untrained and undisciplined territorial militia attacked an Indian camp near the eastern border of the territory leaving 150 to 200 dead. The tragedy has long been the subject of roiling debate about who or what was to blame. When the History Colorado Center opened a new exhibit on the event in 2012, visitors were offered competing perspectives of Indian, soldier, and settler.

The exhibit was immediately assailed by native activists for not taking an exclusively "indigenous perspective." They demanded "co-authorship" of the exhibit, which was shut down.

Last year, a revised exhibit opened, greased by a \$400,000 federal grant. The History Colorado Center announced proudly that the entire show had been “vetted and approved by tribal representatives.” The *Denver Post* [enthused](#) that “there are no detached experts on local history telling the story about how things happened.”

The result is a farce. It [portrays](#) the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes whose members were killed that day as peaceable spiritualists who spent their days nurturing family and staring at the skies. Malicious whites out to steal their land and commit genocide set upon them unprovoked. The whole thing just goes to show the need for “contemporary sovereignty” for native Americans as well as billions in reparations for centuries of harms.

A little history. The allied tribes of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians migrated to the Colorado territory from present-day South Dakota in the 1830s fleeing tribal conflicts. They had been on these “traditional homelands,” as the exhibition calls them, for less time than many white settlers. The American civil war weakened security in the Western territories just as white settlement was increasing. In Colorado, one of two regular regiments was away fighting for the Union.

In Spring 1864, the Cheyenne and Arapaho began attacking farms, wagon trains, and stage coaches, usually leaving a dozen to two dozen dead with every raid. “Family time” for the tribes included a lot of time managing the babies and women they kidnapped. Arapaho informants reported that the two tribes had formed a pact with the Apaches, Kiowas, and Sioux to launch an all-out war on white settlers. The plans were real, even if the confederation never materialized. The news put Colorado officials on the alert. A similar all-Indian uprising in Minnesota in 1862 had left 700 whites dead.

Peace efforts by well-meaning men on both sides were repeatedly thwarted by rebels in their ranks. In June 1864, a

white farmer, his wife, and two young children were murdered and scalped by Arapahos. Their bodies were put on display in front of the Denver City Hall. "The murders and the morbid display of the mutilated bodies touched off a feeling of panic," noted University of Central Oklahoma professor Stan Hoig in his definitive 1961 history of the event, *The Sand Creek Massacre*. By summer, the territory was enduring weekly Indian attacks, even as it faced Confederate incursions from the south. Stagecoaches discontinued service. Denver was isolated, and its residents faced starvation. Many ranches were abandoned. In all, 208 whites were killed by Indians in the spring and summer of 1864.

The Colorado governor raised a volunteer force to steady nerves. It was this irregular corps that carried out the unnecessary raid in November. Condemnation was swift and unsparing. Three separate federal inquiries (Army, House, and Joint Congressional) were held at a time when the U.S. federal government had some rather major business in the American South. The "foul and dastardly massacre," as the House investigation called it, led to the disbandment of the militia and the disgrace of its officers.

But debates on the event raged on. As late as 1959, a full-throated defense of the commander who led the raid was published by a lawyer under the title *The Fighting Parson: The Biography of Colonel John M. Chivington*. Many "eyewitnesses" had changed their accounts by the week, he found. The federal inquiries were driven by a desire for peace with the tribes, not a desire for justice, much less truth.

A 2013 book by the UC Davis historian Ari Kelman, *Misplaced Massacre*, also showed how good relations with the tribes, not the search for truth, explained federal behavior leading to the opening of a monument at the massacre site in 2007. The tribes, meanwhile, are revealed in that book as caring mainly about extracting resources from the American taxpayer via reparations, land grabs, and casino licenses. Their "oral

histories” are contradictory, and it is the National Park Service scientists, not the native soothsayers, who find the actual massacre site in 1999. In the new exhibition, the death count is inexplicably revised upward to 230 based on “oral histories.”

If the purpose of the new exhibit is to stoke outrage and anger among the hundreds of schoolchildren who are ushered through every week, then it succeeds brilliantly. “I am so angry at history,” one 17-year old girl was quoted as saying afterwards. “Expose Chivington!” other students chanted upon exit.

But if the purpose was to tell the truth and encourage critical thinking, then the exhibit has no place in a public museum. The tribes have done exactly what the white rebels did after the massacre by telling a one-sided story filled with bloodlust against the enemy. Their “oral histories” are pure fabrication given that they are seven or eight generations removed from the event and most have only the faintest genetic ties to the Indians of the time. Certainly, they did not consult descendants of the victims of their spring and summer 1864 atrocities when considering their fable.

Defenders are now deploying the loaded terms “apologists” and “deniers” to anyone who questions the new exhibition. The main victim here is history itself.