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Book Review: Viet Cong at Wounded Knee: The Trail of a Blackfeet Activist

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Viet Cong at Wounded Knee: The Trail of a Blackfeet Activist. By Woody Kipp. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 157 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95.

Since at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Native peoples have penned their autobiographies in large part to demonstrate to a white audience that their cultures were worthy of saving, if not emulating. Charles A. Eastman, a Dakota, was one of the most prolific of these writers, publishing no less than ten books, most of them autobiographical or about the culture he remained loyal to throughout his life. Eastman continually tried to make the point that Native American art was of the highest and most sophisticated caliber, and that a life close to nature gave Indian people a spiritual connection with the land and a physical well-being that had only declined because of European-introduced diseases and alcohol. Native autobiography has, until recently, followed the lines of Eastman's works.

Woody Kipp's life story is a reflection of a new generation of Native writers and activists. His autobiography has nothing to do with trying to save the white world from itself or to explain Indians to a curious and perhaps even sympathetic white audience. The white world literally and figuratively took aim at Woody Kipp (and a number of other American Indian Vietnam veterans) for daring to oppose the injustices he saw in Indian life. He became, as the title of his book indicates, the then current

enemy of the American state. He was, ironically, a domestic version of the Viet Cong he had fought as a young Marine in Vietnam.

Kipp's story is ironic on several levels and remarkably typical of dozens of Native veterans of the war and its political reverberations. War veterans adjust to their return home on several levels. They have to reorient themselves socially because civilian social arrangements often clash with those developed in the military. Indian veterans have to adjust themselves in a cultural sense because military rituals, behaviors, and customs differ greatly from the culture in which they were brought up. But another important adjustment, given the period in American history about which Kipp writes, was the veterans' political adjustment. All Vietnam veterans returned to a highly charged political atmosphere. American Indian veterans of the war returned to an especially turbulent political environment, a time in which their peoples were expressing the strong desire for self-sufficiency and political autonomy. In some cases, their own tribal governments were the targets for reform. But by and large, aggressive political action was aimed at the federal government for not keeping its agreements or for ignoring its side of the Indian-federal trust relationship.

For some Indian Vietnam veterans, political activism was more or less limited to voting in tribal elections; for others it took the form of running for tribal office or taking appointed positions within tribal governments. Some took jobs with the federal government in an attempt to change the system from within. Still others took up aggressive political activism, sometimes for reasons of their own, whether they gained status within a particular group or because they shared the group's ideological stand. The author seems to have had many reasons for being aggressively active in his political adjustment, and that is what makes his book a welcome contribution to our knowledge of Indian activism in the period as well as a compelling story of the transition all veterans make from peace to war and back again.

This is a distinctly new kind of Native autobiography. Kipp's journey through the 1960s

and 1970s is almost an exercise in decolonization. Ultimately, colonization is an attack on Native peoplehood. It displaces communities; it attempts to replace traditional ceremonies connected to a particular territory and cosmos with introduced rituals; it institutes a new version of history to undermine traditional sacred histories; and it endeavors to render Native languages ineffectual. Because these four elements of peoplehood—place, language, ceremonial cycle, and sacred history—are interlinked so as to be inseparable, the destruction of one undermines the rest and effectively destroys identity. Colonization is the deprivation of a culture's ability to experience change on its own terms. Kipp's book is about taking back the ability to determine one's own destiny and ultimately decolonizing a people through the reclamation of identity. Unlike the earlier Indian autobiographies, Kipp's does not claim

to be a "success story" of how he journeyed from "savagery to civilization." Rather, his story deals with the effort to decolonize himself and other Native peoples.

Truth be told, I am looking forward to the rest of Kipp's life story. He is an accomplished storyteller in the oldest tradition of indigenous peoples everywhere. That he has become a grass dancer of some repute attests to the notion that once he made his political adjustment he felt the need to return to his culture. Political ideology is only one aspect of a person's identity and probably a small one at that. Kipp's reaffirmation of his Blackfeet cultural identity is another important transition, and I am sure that it will be an equally compelling story.

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