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## Review of *The Oglala People, 1841-1879: A Political History* By Catherine Price

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*The Oglala People, 1841-1879: A Political History.* By Catherine Price. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. Photographs, maps, lists of abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index. xiv + 234 pp. \$40.00.

This book is a thorough history of official relations between the Oglala Lakota and the US Government during the mid-nineteenth century, with a special eye to the impact of these relations on the political structures that

had been characteristic of Oglala society before significant white contact. The book's structure is straightforward: an introductory chapter draws on early ethnographic data and related scholarship to lay out the political anatomy of Oglala society in the early nineteenth century, while the following six chapters cover Oglala-white relations from 1841 to 1879. Each of the six historical chapters not only recounts important events but also interprets the actions of Oglala groups and individuals through the political lens provided by the first chapter. The book quite simply makes new sense of Oglala actions usually left under-interpreted or dismissed as capricious in standard accounts. My own research on US Government strategies for bringing the Oglalas under control during the 1870s would have benefitted substantially had Price's book been available a few years earlier.

Previous scholarship on this period has established that the US Government's insistence on singling out Red Cloud and other "head chiefs" as representatives and rulers of their peoples resulted from fundamental misunderstandings of Oglala political life. However, many scholars (myself included) have contented themselves with the assertion that Plains Indian societies were simply more "decentralized" and "democratic" than Government officials assumed, perhaps going so far as to mention that *akicitas* and warrior societies were a significant locus of power. We have thus perpetuated the misleading impression that the failure of "head chiefs" to control their societies was basically equivalent to a lack of political order. Price shows that a quite complicated but nevertheless stable and resilient political structure accounted for what appeared to non-Oglalas as unpredictability and disorder. Unlike Western political structures, Oglala political authority was situational, shifting from one individual or group to another depending on whether the band was engaged in hunting, war, ceremonial activities, or facing a crisis. While the patterns of frequency with which different groups or individuals held temporary power changed as

contact with whites became more common, the flexible structure within which the exercise of power was assigned did not (at least during the period with which Price is concerned).

This book is interesting in its own right and constitutes a valuable enrichment of our understanding of the period.

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