

## [Author Interview--Pekka Hämäläinen \(Lakota America\) Part 2](#)

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Hello H-CivWar readers,

today we feature part 2 of our interview with Pekka Hämäläinen to talk about his new book [Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power](#), published by Yale University Press.

It is striking that something like Little Bighorn, which has attracted so much attention, is absent from the Lakota's own writing. Much of your book is devoted to the nineteenth century, what do the Lakota focus on and what do they emphasize in their histories for that period?

*PK: From the late 18th century on, Lakotas had lived along the Missouri valley, having essentially reinvented themselves as river people. They had carved out a 200-mile stretch of the valley for themselves, they had reduced the once powerful Arikara people to virtual vassals and they had turned the booming upriver trade from St. Louis to a tribute-yielding machine. They allowed trade vessels to move past them only if they shared a portion of their goods with the Lakotas. And, of course, they had almost stopped the Lewis and Clark expedition on their tracks.*

*That is to say, the Lakotas had already become a domineering, potentially imperial power when in the 1830s they turned westward from the Missouri and spread across the northern Plains in search of bison and protective river valleys (Missouri had become over-exploited). Their westward push triggered multiple wars with both village-dwelling Indigenous nations and nomadic Indigenous nations who considered them strangers and enemies, and those rivalries in the early and mid 19th century dominate the winter counts. Lakotas biggest challenge was the Crow Indians in the far northwestern Plains. Like Lakotas, the Crows were nomads and superb equestrian warriors, and the clashes with them stretched the Lakotas to their very limit. Winter counts make that plain.*

*Another big theme in the winter counts is trade. Now, having a good surplus of horses and bison robes, the Lakotas are able to forge a far-flung trade network that extended the Lakotas' commercial reach from Southwest into southern Canada and the Rockies in the west. One of the groups that now shifts into their orbit as loyal allies is the United States. American traders and government officials cajole the Lakotas who are now a domineering power in the northern Plains through commerce and diplomacy and they establish several well-stocked trading posts just for them. Winter counts trace this commercial boom quite graphically as there are periods when Lakotas suddenly have multiple trading posts at their disposal. The biggest and fanciest trading post, Fort Pierre, is effectively built for Lakotas. The winter counts also mention such new luxuries as finely-crafted Spanish blankets from the Southwest. And, of course, they are now amassing firearms.*

*In the 1851 Horse Creek Treaty near Fort Laramie, Lakotas allowed Americans to travel westward along the Oregon Trail to reach California gold. In exchange, the U.S. government recognized Lakota sovereignty over a vast domain in the northern and central Plains, effectively allocating lands that had belonged to Pawnees and other village groups to Lakotas. The winter counts I've seen do not*

*address territorial arrangements, but several of them do mention the big distribution of gifts at the closing of the Horse Creek Treaty negotiations. That give-away was crucial for Lakotas because it signaled that U.S. government had become their staunch ally.*

This seems like a cruel irony that in 1851, Lakota viewed the United States as an ally, but 13 years in the future you get the Dakota War that culminates with the mass execution of Dakota and in 1876 you got the campaign that involves Custer's demise, how do we reconcile this change in attitude? What impact does say the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Civil War, or Depression of 1873 have on the relations with the Lakota?

*PK: The change in Lakota-U.S. relations was indeed drastic. In the early 1850s, the Lakotas and Americans were allies and managed to coexist in the same interior space while becoming increasingly powerful, emerging as self-conscious empires. They were able to coexist because they saw the world differently. Lakotas sought to control the land's resources—bison, water, grass—whereas the Americans sought to control the land itself. Such dissonances were useful, for they allowed both regimes to claim the midcontinent as sovereign powers. They coexisted on separate mental plains.*

*That coexistence began to crumble in 1852 when the U.S. government reduced the payment of the 1851 treaty annuities from fifty years to ten. Then Lieutenant John Grattan—a genuine Indian hater—plunged the two nations into a war by insisting that the Lakotas had to be punished because one of them had killed a lame cow belonging to a Mormon emigrant near the Oregon Trail. Lakotas promptly killed Grattan and his twenty-nine invading men and then launched a devastating raiding spree along the Platte, the heart of a virtually defenceless Nebraska Territory. This posed a grave threat to the United States' continental ambitions. Excluding Texas and New Mexico, the U.S. Army had fewer than two thousand men between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, and now Lakotas threatened to cut off the United States' umbilical cord to California and its gold. Moreover, Lakotas were spreading terror in the central Great Plains where a simmering dispute over the expansion of slavery—soon to explode into “Bleeding Kansas”—had rendered the survival of the Union itself uncertain. The last thing the United States needed was an Indian war in the midst of it. The U.S. Army sent in William S. Harney, its most experienced general, to reign the Lakotas in. The result was the 1855 Ash Hollow massacre. Harney's soldiers killed eighty-six Lakotas, many of them women and children, and took seventy captives. Chiefs Spotted Tail, Red Leaf, Long Chin, Red Plume, and Spotted Elk were sent to Fort Leavenworth where they were kept for a year as prisoners of war. The staunch allies had become, quite unnecessarily, enemies.*

*After that, Lakotas and Americans struggled to stabilize their relations. The 1862 Dakota War and mass execution of Dakota men further alienated them from the Americans, and the Civil War brought further violence. In 1864 the U.S. Army attacked the Lakotas in the Killdeer Mountains—again without a clear strategic or political rationale. From thereon, for twelve years, Lakota-U.S. relations were defined by an on-and-off again war, fueled by disagreements over overland traffic and its detrimental effects on game, over access to Montana gold, and over U.S. military forts in Lakota land. The 1873 panic and a lingering economic depression drove the United States to seize the Black Hills and its gold and speed up railway construction through Lakota lands. The United States had emerged from the Civil War as an empire and had begun to treat the Lakotas not as allies but as subjects. There is a direct line from that imperial arrogance to the Battle of the Little Bighorn.*

Dan Richter in Facing East from Indian Country suggested that the national narrative changes when not looking from White America, what do you think are the key changes that Lakota America should

bring to the national narrative of the United States? Let's say how should the history from Lewis and Clark to Little Big Horn be different?

*PK: I think it does change quite radically. First of all, we have to understand that there were many westward expansions, not just that of the United States, but also those of several Native nations, including the Lakotas, whose power to arrange the world to meet their needs was, by mid-century, palpable. By the time Lewis and Clark embarked upriver, the Lakotas were in desperate need of trade and allies, and they saw Lewis and Clark as potential allies who could facilitate their ambitions by providing political support and weapons. That said, Lewis and Clark expedition, contrary to the national myth, was not particularly important in Lakota history. Its main impact was that their meddling with Indigenous politics along the Missouri forced the Lakotas to tighten their control over their neighboring Indigenous groups, particularly the Arikaras, whom Lewis and Clark had cajoled to side with them against the Lakotas. Lakotas promptly moved to frustrate their efforts. Rather than establishing US power in the Missouri valley, Lewis and Clark ended up pushing the Lakotas to increase their control in the strategically critical valley. It became their base for further westward expansion across the northern plains and then into the Black Hills. Lewis and Clark, the national heroes, were reduced to also-runs.*

*These kinds of dynamics can only be illuminated if we look at events and outcomes from Indigenous realms outwards, rather than from colonial frontiers inward -- just as Daniel Richter has argued.*

*Indeed, when we do that, the battle of the Little Big Horn appears in a different light. Traditionally, it has been portrayed as a shocking catastrophe, and much of the scholarship has focused on the mistakes and errors of judgement by the U.S. officials. Of course, there were mistakes but, in my view, they were not decisive. In the years leading up to the Little Big Horn, the Lakotas and their allies had fought the U.S. Army multiple times, most notably in the Powder River War, humiliating the Army time and again. By 1876 Lakotas knew exactly how to deal with the U.S. military. They executed a national mobilization which brought together the agency Lakotas and the northern plains Lakota oyates [accent missing] led by Sitting Bull and Crazy horse. They disposed of the 7th Cavalry clinically and decisively. In my view, the Americans never had a chance.*