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There's a Growing Push to Rescind the Medals of Honor Awarded to the U.S. Soldiers at Wounded Knee

Tweets by Donald Trump about Elizabeth Warren prompted a Native American voting rights group to call for honors bestowed on the perpetrators of the massacre to be rescinded.

Massoud Hayoun · Feb 22, 2019



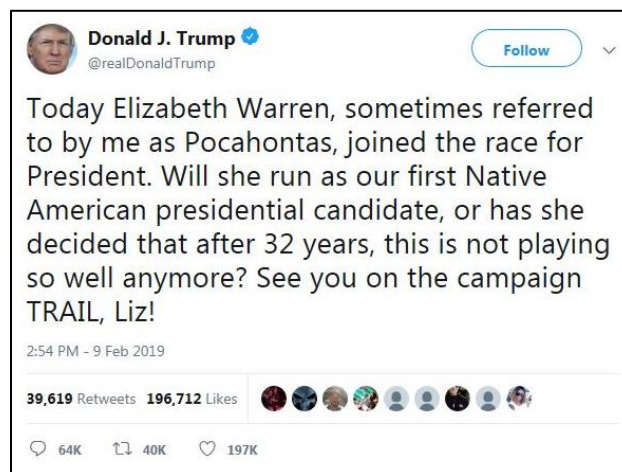
Four Lakota Sioux lay dead, as a United States soldier walks through the remains of Chief Big Foot's camp three weeks after the Wounded Knee Massacre. Twenty soldiers were issued [M]edals of [H]onor after the massacre. Four Directions, a Native American voting rights group, is mounting an effort to get the U.S. government to rescind those medals. (Photo: Trager & Kuhn/Northwestern Photo Co.)

Native American voting rights group Four Directions is building support for its bid to rescind the [M]edals of [H]onor issued to the United States military personnel who perpetrated the Wounded Knee massacre a little over a century ago. In so doing, the organization hopes to spur support for Native American rights ahead of an election where the group says many Native Americans are being dissuaded from the polls.

[OJ Semans](#), co-director of Four Directions voting rights advocacy group and member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, has written the Trump administration, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, calling for the rescinding of 20 [M]edals of [H]onor issued by the army to the soldiers who on December 29th, 1890, massacred hundreds of Lakota people, including many women and children, at Wounded Knee Creek in southwest South Dakota.

Semans' letters were written in direct response to recent tweets from the president prodding Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts), who has continued to [lay claim](#) to Native American ancestry.

After Warren announced her presidential bid in January, President Donald Trump tweeted, "If Elizabeth Warren, often referred to by me as Pocahontas, did this commercial from Bighorn or Wounded Knee instead of her kitchen, with her husband dressed in full Indian garb, it would have been a smash!" And then this month, in a separate jab at Warren—one that [roiled](#) the survivors of the U.S.'s historical slaughter of Native Americans—Trump [tweeted](#), "See you on the campaign TRAIL, Liz!" The tweet left little doubt that Trump was referring to the Trail of Tears, the forced relocations of Native American nations in the first half of the 19th century that killed thousands.



"This letter is not to explain the wrong done in invoking this horror," Semans writes in his letters. "Instead I write to call on you to right a much graver wrong."

"United States soldiers murdered innocent women and children. Many of my ancestors were among the Lakota people murdered that chilling winter," Semans writes, requesting the medal rescission.

Observers of Native American affairs say that, while the push to rescind the medals for Wounded Knee is a sign of more actions to come, that push is the result of increasingly politically active Native American nations, empowered to address both historical, and enduring, human rights abuses.

"I think what is going on in Indian Country is that Native people are recognizing their political strength now more than ever," says [Walter Flemming](#) [sic], professor of Native culture and history at Montana State University.

"As a result of this awakening of political activity, Native people are feeling empowered to address what they (we) feel are historic wrongs," Flemming [sic] says. "Across the United States, Native activists are tackling such issues as Columbus Day, for example, where states are replacing that holiday with Indigenous Peoples' Day recognitions. We have always known that American soldiers were awarded the [M]edal of [H]onor for the Wounded Knee Massacre but it has only been recently that there is a sense that Native people could right that particular wrong."



Flemming [sic] explained that, although it has been little over a century since the Wounded Knee Massacre, recollections of the recent past are transmitted to newer generations of Native Americans, and Trump's comments have underlined the necessity of a renewed movement to address the assault against Native people and rights of past and present.

"As president, he has shown a lack of tact when [honoring](#) Dine (Navajo) code talkers while standing underneath a portrait of President Andrew Jackson, who authorized the Indian Removal Act of 1830 that beget the Cherokee Trail of Tears," Flemming [sic] says. "One cannot exclude the assumption that he did so intentionally, to send a message that his Indian policy, as president, is cultural genocide. His continued attack on Senator Elizabeth Warren, calling her Pocahontas, is an attempt to make derogatory a name that should be spoken with reverence."

Notably, Semans and Four Directions won't stop at federal government recognition of what transpired at Wounded Knee; rescinding the medals is the start of what he anticipates will be a resounding call to preserve the human rights of Native people. Semans told Pacific Standard in a [recent interview](#) that his team is already working to combat voter identification laws that he says disenfranchise Native American nations across the U.S., and particularly in a handful of states that are home to Native American nations and where Native American voter turnout is traditionally low.

"It's going to be a political movement," he says. While meeting with Native American governments next month to discuss how to effectively organize around voting rights, he will urge Native American governments to join in the call for U.S. federal authorities to remove official honorable recognition from the perpetrators of the massacre.

In concert with the medal rescission movement, Flemming [sic] heralded the work of Four Directions and countless other activists across the country to guarantee Native Americans access to the polls in the already hotly contested bid to unseat Trump in 2020.

"In the West, the number of Natives elected to state and national offices is significant. Non-Indian allies, mainly Democrats, are actively courting the Indian vote, giving strength to the growing movement to address historic patterns of oppression," Flemming [sic] says. "There are plenty of examples whereby the Indian vote has been identified as significant to the election of candidates. Even Republicans are visiting Native communities, trying to win support; they just don't seem to know what to say when they get there."