

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

November 2, 2021

The Honorable President Joseph R. Biden  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

We write to urge you to use executive authority to rescind the Medals of Honor awarded to the soldiers who participated in the Wounded Knee Massacre. We ask you to act swiftly to revoke these undue honors—a step that will help right this historical wrong and begin to heal the lasting wounds of many Native American descendants today.

On December 29, 1890, U.S. Army soldiers mercilessly slaughtered hundreds of Lakota men, women, and children at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota during what came to be known as the Wounded Knee Massacre.<sup>1</sup> The Lakota people were practically defenseless as the soldiers shot them to death.<sup>2</sup> A year later, on December 17, 1891, 20 Medals of Honor were awarded to soldiers who had participated in the massacre.<sup>3</sup> The massacre at Wounded Knee was one of the last military actions that occurred between Native Americans and the U.S. military as part of the larger “Indian Wars” campaign.<sup>4</sup>

The Medal of Honor is the highest military honor awarded in the United States across all service branches and should be reserved for “gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”<sup>5</sup> The Medals of Honor awarded to U.S. Army personnel for their participation in the Wounded Knee Massacre were wrongly bestowed. The actions of these soldiers were not heroic, and allowing them to continue to bear the highest military honor glorifies what should be treated as a shameful episode in our nation’s history.

It has been over 30 years since Congress acknowledged the horror of the U.S. Army’s atrocity at Wounded Knee. The 101<sup>st</sup> Congress adopted a concurrent resolution acknowledging the 100th anniversary of the massacre and “expresse[d] its deep regret on behalf of the United States” for

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<sup>1</sup> S.Con.Res. 153 (101<sup>st</sup> Congress).

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Green, “The Medals of Wounded Knee,” *Nebraska History* 75 (1994), pp. 200-208, <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1994MedalsWKnee.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Army Center of Military History, “Indian War Campaigns,” [https://history.army.mil/html/reference/army\\_flag/iw.html](https://history.army.mil/html/reference/army_flag/iw.html).

<sup>5</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 8291; Army Publishing Directorate, “Personnel-General Military Awards,” March 3, 2015, pp. 89, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN18147\\_R600\\_8\\_22\\_admin2\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN18147_R600_8_22_admin2_FINAL.pdf).

the “terrible tragedy.”<sup>6</sup> The resolution was an important first step in recognizing the disgraceful events at Wounded Knee. Decades later, it is beyond time for executive action to follow suit and attempt to remedy the enduring pain still felt by many.

The National Congress of American Indians adopted a resolution calling for the Wounded Knee Medals of Honor to be revoked and stated that the awards to the perpetrators of this massacre “dishonors the Medals of Honor and is a message of hostility and genocide by the United States against the Great Sioux Nation and our precious relatives who were massacred at Wounded Knee.”<sup>7</sup> The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe passed a resolution in 2001 calling on the federal government to “renounce the issuance of said medals” and stated that these medals should be “null and void” in light of the violence towards unarmed noncombatants.<sup>8</sup> In February 2021, the South Dakota State Senate unanimously adopted a resolution calling on the Federal government to investigate and possibly rescind the Medals of Honor.<sup>9</sup> There continue to be compelling calls from Indian Country for the federal government to right this historical wrong.<sup>10</sup> Some descendants of those massacred at Wounded Knee speak of a “pervasive sadness that exists on our reservation” and note that there “has never been closure to the horrific unprovoked massacre at Wounded Knee.”<sup>11</sup>

There is precedent for reviewing and withdrawing Medals of Honor. In 1916, a federal review board reviewed all 2,625 Medals of Honor that had been awarded up to that point. Following the review, over 900 of the medals were rescinded.<sup>12</sup>

Under Army Regulations, Medals of Honor can be rescinded if additional information is presented showing an individual failed to meet the awards criteria.<sup>13</sup> While revoking military valor medals is a rare occurrence, this step can be taken if later evidence shows the honor was improperly awarded.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore these regulations state that “[o]nce an award has been approved, the same command may revoke the award if facts subsequently determined would

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<sup>6</sup> S.Con.Res. 153 (101<sup>st</sup> Congress). See also H.Con.Res. 386 (101<sup>st</sup> Congress).

<sup>7</sup> National Congress of American Indians, Resolution #ABQ-19-074: To Support Legislation to Revoke the Medals of Honor Issued to Seventh Cavalry Soldiers for Actions During the Massacre of Wounded Knee, October 20-25, 2019, <https://www.ncai.org/ABQ-19-074.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Resolution No. 132-01-CR, June 13, 2001, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/12.%20CRST%20Res.%20Rescind%20Medals%20Reso%202001.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Grand Forks Herald, “South Dakota Senate unanimously backs opening inquiry into Wounded Knee Massacre medals,” Christopher Vondracek, February 22, 2021, <https://www.grandforksherald.com/news/government-and-politics/6899695-South-Dakota-Senate-unanimously-backs-opening-inquiry-into-Wounded-Knee-Massacre-medals>.

<sup>10</sup> New York Times, “Tribes Want Medals Awarded for Wounded Knee Massacre Rescinded,” Mark Walker, April 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/23/us/politics/tribes-medal-honor-wounded-knee.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, “Warren, Merkley, and Kahele Reintroduce the Remove the Stain Act,” press release, March 26, 2021, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/warren-merkley-and-kahele-reintroduce-the-remove-the-stain-act>.

<sup>12</sup> Dwight S. Mears, “The Medal of Honor: The Evolution of America’s Highest Military Decoration,” Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2018, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/download/medal-of-honor-evolution-of-americas-highest-military-decoration-ch4-the-1917-purge>.

<sup>13</sup> Army Publishing Directorate, “Personnel-General Military Awards,” March 3, 2015, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN18147\\_R600\\_8\\_22\\_admin2\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN18147_R600_8_22_admin2_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* 1–16. Reconsideration or appeal of previous award recommendations.


have prevented original approval of the award had they been known at the time of approval.”<sup>15</sup> In passing the concurrent resolution, the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress acknowledged the horrendous actions of the U.S. Army at Wounded Knee—facts that were clearly not sufficiently determined or acknowledged at the time the medals were conferred. We ask that you act swiftly to revoke these undue honors in light of the understanding—explicitly acknowledged by Congress—that the U.S. Army acted inappropriately at Wounded Knee.<sup>16</sup>

Medals of Honor are approved and awarded by the President of the United States.<sup>17</sup> We believe that it is within your authority to confer with the Secretary of Defense and the secretaries of the military departments and revoke these honors when appropriate.

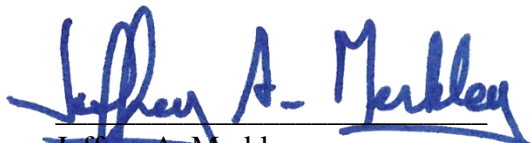
We have introduced the *Remove the Stain Act*, legislation to revoke the Medals of Honor awarded to the perpetrators of the Wounded Knee Massacre.<sup>18</sup> This legislation has received widespread support from tribal nations, direct descendants of the Wounded Knee Massacre, tribal organizations, and veterans’ associations. However, an act of Congress is only one possible way this historical wrong can be remedied. You have the authority to revoke these medals immediately.

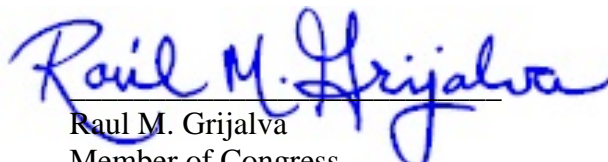
It has been over 130 years since the Wounded Knee Massacre, and yet, the actions of the U.S. Army and the bestowment of 20 Medals of Honor upon the perpetrators of the massacre remain a persistent shame on the nation. For the families and descendants of those massacred, the revocation of these 20 Medals of Honor would have a profound and lasting impact—as has the federal government’s ongoing choice to allow these wrongly bestowed honors to stand. It is well past time to remove this stain from our nation’s history, and we call on you to do so.

Thank you for your consideration.

  
Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

  
Kaiuli'i Kahele  
Member of Congress

  
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

  
Raul M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress

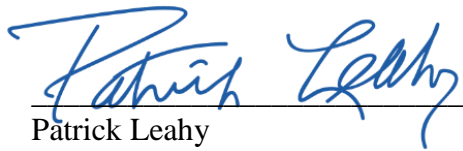
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<sup>15</sup> *Id.* 1–30. Revocation of personal decorations and suspension of authority to wear.

<sup>16</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 1130.

<sup>17</sup> 10 U.S.C. § 7271.

<sup>18</sup> Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, “Warren, Merkley, and Kahele Reintroduce the Remove the Stain Act,” press release, March 26, 2021, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/warren-merkley-and-kahele-reintroduce-the-remove-the-stain-act>; S. 1073. See also H.R. 2226 (117<sup>th</sup> Congress).



Patrick Leahy  
United States Senator



Daniel T. Kildee  
Member of Congress



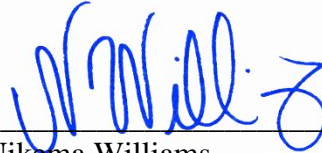
Ron Wyden  
United States Senator



Earl Blumenauer  
Member of Congress



Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator



Nikema Williams  
Member of Congress



Tina Smith  
United States Senator



Ruben Gallego  
Member of Congress



Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



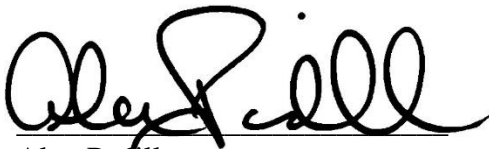
Sharice L. Davids  
Member of Congress



Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator



Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress



Alex Padilla  
United States Senator