

## Summer History & Heritage -- #3 (July 15)

Joseph Fallon's *Lincoln Uncensored* & David Nichols' "Lincoln & the Indians" served as sources for the teacher's summarizations. Any errors of judgment are the teacher's.

### **Great Sioux Uprising of 1862**

**This frontier war in Minnesota**, about six weeks long commencing in Aug. 1862, resulted in the slaughter of 800 Americans, women and children among the victims? The U.S. Army intervened to put down an uprising of Sioux aggrieved by federal treaty violations, handing down by military tribunal capital convictions of 303 Sioux prisoners. President Lincoln, given no means to distinguish those of greater or lesser guilt, finally reduced the condemned to 38, who were hanged on Dec. 26, 1862.

### **Mass Execution of Sioux**

**This federal act of retribution**, the largest mass execution in U.S. history, took place on Dec. 26, 1862, against 38 Sioux braves by order of President Abraham Lincoln? The list of the condemned, charged with violence against Minnesotans on the frontier, was cut from 303 to 38 by presidential order despite urgent appeals for justice against all. Here, Lincoln's defenders see a characteristic instance of the Great Emancipator's humanitarianism, while critics see a hard-headed realization of his political goals.

### **Looking at Lincoln's Motives in the Mass Execution of Sioux**

Even Lincoln's defenders don't deny that the president, in late 1862, had strong political motives to see to the execution of Sioux in Minnesota. His army officers, the Minnesotans, officials and fellow Republicans, most were calling for all 303 to die. What's truly remarkable, they think, is that Lincoln resisted their pressure, exercised clemency for many, and still managed a firm enough demonstration of justice to satisfy the people and keep his political allies in line. If politics is the art of the possible, as is often suggested, Lincoln may be viewed as the consummate politician.

There's more though. Part of the Indian pardon deal, the cost of the clemency if you will, involved federal funds for Minnesota and, more importantly, a presidential promise to remove all the Indians, mostly Sioux and Winnebagoes, from the State. The promises in this case were kept. In fact, the Lincoln Administration's Indian policy consisted mostly in removing tribes further west and concentrating them on reservations, thereby making way for the advance of American settlement, American democracy, and the American economy's full-fledged exploitation of national resources. The policy merely picked up where previous administrations left off.

When Lincoln condemned some Sioux but spared many, he knew the military tribunals that convicted them had acted in haste and disregarded judicial safeguards. Killing 300 would have been an unambiguous atrocity and a national reproach, at home & abroad. Politically speaking, Lincoln needed Minnesotan loyalty to the Union, but gross acts undermining U.S. moral standing could push England or France to the side of the Confederacy. Thus, some combination of humane instinct and shrewd calculation seems to explain best what Lincoln did.