When the conflict between the Dakota nation and the white soldiers and settlers on the frontier of Minnesota came to an end in the fall of 1862, Gen. John Pope made clear that he intended to treat the Indians like "maniacs and wild beasts" and, if possible, exterminate them. He hastily impaneled a military court that sentenced 300 Indians to death.

In "38 Nooses," Scott Berg, a native Minnesotan who teaches creative writing at George Mason University, provides an engrossing account of this tragic episode in American history. Although President Abraham Lincoln issued 264 stays of execution, the bloody Dakota War and its bloody aftermath, Berg reminds us, were the product of pervasive perceptions among whites that Minnesota was now their state, that every act of Dakota violence, no matter what the provocation, "was the result of cultural deficiencies and racial wickedness," and that, with the Indians removed from the land they called home for 200 years, boom times were coming.

Berg's finely grained portraits of the protagonists and antagonists humanize the conflict. In siding with the young men in his village, he notes, Little Crow, the Dakota chief, knew he was choosing death as well as war. Even more poignantly, Berg reveals that Chaska, who may have saved the life of Sarah Wakefield, a captive who subsequently fell in love with him, got a reprieve from President Lincoln, only to go to the gallows anyway because three condemned men answered to his name (which means first-born in Dakota). Even if he had known a mistake had been made, Berg writes, Chaska probably would not have protested: A Dakota warrior did not beg for mercy or send someone else to his doom to save his own neck.

Some white settlers, of course, did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. Bishop Henry Benjamin Whipple, Berg indicates, deserved his reputation "as a friend of the Indian. But it was a complicated friendship," all too characteristic of late 19th- and early 20th-century reformers. Until his death in 1901, Whipple advocated for establishment of an Indian peace commission. And he succeeded in getting the Dakotas relocated from parched wasteland to more habitable reservations in Nebraska. His definition of a progressive policy for Indians, however, meant instruction in white customs and religion and an erasure of American Indian identity, values and traditions.

All the more reason for Berg to conclude, with Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's secretary of war, and virtually every historian of red-white relations, that fair (to say nothing of equal) treatment of Indians did not come because in a democracy "the Government never reforms an evil until the people demand it."
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

© 2011 Star Tribune