

On a Knife Edge

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



Top: George Dull Knife.

Above: The Pine Ridge Reservation at the edge of the Badlands.

Right: American Indian Movement (AIM) members lead one of four columns that will converge at Wounded Knee on the 42nd anniversary of the Takeover.



Program Synopsis

A stunning coming-of-age journey from the Pine Ridge Reservation, set against a background of rising tension and protest, a Lakota/Northern Cheyenne teenager learns first-hand what it means to lead a new generation and enter adulthood in a world where the odds are stacked against him.

Filmed over a five-year period, *On a Knife Edge* provides an intimate journey into the world of George Dull Knife as he becomes politically active with the American Indian Movement, confronts the challenges of growing up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and wrestles with accepting leadership of his storied family from his aging father.

In Their Words

“I know there’s going to be a lot of danger to my family. I think about it every day. But when I look around, I see all these Indian kids having a bad time. Somebody’s got to stick up for them. And I’m glad that I still have that little spark in me. So I try to teach my kids not to be afraid.”

— Guy Dull Knife, Jr.
(Oglala Lakota/Northern Cheyenne)



Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Producer Comments



Eli Cane

When we began the film seven years ago, we didn't expect to be filming with George for another five years. But this is a far more relevant moment for the film's release than we could have anticipated. While we watch

George wrestle with his legacy, identity and sense of self, he becomes a keen combatant in a social justice struggle that connects him to both past and future generations.

As racism and xenophobic rhetoric becomes policy, George's search for courage and clarity in his struggle has become far more meaningful to audiences everywhere. *On a Knife Edge* is not an advocacy film; it simply provides a unique opportunity to hear the voices and perspectives of people for whom there are no sidelines; for whom resistance is a birthright.

My grandfather, Lawrence Cane, fought in Spain in the XV International Brigade, and he remained committed to the cause of social justice his entire life. He died shortly before I was born, but hundreds of his letters survive, and stories of his courage and dedication to the cause have permeated family lore. Although I never knew him, a project such as *On a Knife Edge* is in one sense an attempt to understand him more thoroughly; as I watch Guy Dull Knife bring his young son George into a movement that routinely demands terrible sacrifice, I feel in some way that my connection to my own grandfather has become more nuanced.

Radicals and revolutionaries can be killed, they can be jailed—often, they simply become exhausted. This side of things is routinely overlooked but rings true to many who have spent their lives in struggle, and its portrayal is one of the aspects of the film I feel is most important, and of which I am most proud.

Discussion Questions

1. The film, *On a Knife Edge*, is about a young Lakota/Northern Cheyenne man coming of age on the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota. George sees the effects that drugs, alcohol and gangs are having on those around him, and he determines to make a difference. Explore how George's challenges compare with what his great-great grandfather faced in the late 1800s. How are they different? How are they the same?
2. George says that the sweat lodge and "knowing who I am" help keep him away from the bad things happening on the reservation such as gangs and drugs. How do you think a strong cultural identity helps people find their place in the world? What other factors did you see in the film that may be contributing to George's sense of identity?
3. Explore and discuss what George meant when he said, "But now it's not us fighting the white people, it's us fighting each other." Weave into your discussion what elements, both historical and cultural, may be contributing to this internalized fight between the Lakota people.
4. Guy Dull Knife taught his children about the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the need for activism in the face of racism and social injustice. After the tribe votes to legalize alcohol on the reservation, George deeply questions the purpose of activism for bringing about change. What are your thoughts on protest and activism as a mechanism for social change? What in your life has caused you to "lose heart" in a similar way?
5. George's sister Mary committed suicide in March 2015. In the midst of this loss, George renews his determination to continue to actively fight against the issues causing such pain in his world. Explain what you think he meant when he said, "People say the Indian wars ended in 1890. All of us Lakota know that the war is still going."



Demonstrators march in protest of the Rapid City Rush hockey game incident, Rapid City, South Dakota.

By the Numbers

1. The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota spans 2.1 million acres and is the ninth-largest reservation in the United States (Bureau of Indian Affairs).
2. Of Pine Ridge youth ages 16 through 24, 41 percent are neither employed nor in school—as compared with 25 percent of Native Americans in the same age range nationally and 10 percent of their white counterparts (The Atlantic).
3. The suicide rate for South Dakota young people, ages 15 to 24, is double the average rate in the nation and young American Indian males in South Dakota die from suicide at a rate that is four to five times the national rate (Suicide Prevention Resource Center).
4. Native Americans comprise only 12 percent of the population of Rapid City, South Dakota, yet 60 percent of all arrests in this city are Native American (University of South Dakota Government Research Bureau).
5. The Wounded Knee Massacre on Dec. 29, 1890, resulted in the deaths of between 250-300 Lakota men, women and children (Encyclopedia of the Great Plains).
6. On Feb. 27, 1973, a group of about 250 people led by the American Indian Movement took over Wounded Knee village to protest injustices to Native People. The standoff lasted 71 days (Indian Country Today).
7. The population of Whiteclay, Nebraska, is 10--with four liquor stores. In May 2017, the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission ruled there was not enough law enforcement in the community to provide safe alcohol sales. That decision was reversed by a Lancaster County District judge. In August 2017, the owners of the liquor stores took their case to the Nebraska Supreme Court. On Sept. 29, 2017, the state Supreme Court rejected the owners' appeal. Therefore, beer sales will not resume in Whiteclay (Lincoln Journal Star).
8. In 1879 a group of Lakota people including George Dull Knife's great grandfather attempted a 600 mile trek back to their homeland after the U.S government initiated a forced removal of tribes to Oklahoma (Nebraska: Celebrate the State).



Anti-racism forum at the Ramkota Motel, Rapid City, South Dakota.

Suggested Activities

1. The history of the Lakota people and the United States government is long and complex. George says, "It's just all about the land. That's all it has ever been about." Create a timeline that shows three to five key events in American history relating to the land base or loss of the land base once occupied by the Lakota tribe. Document what changes have come about for the Lakota people because of the loss of this land base?
2. The American Indian Movement (AIM) raised national awareness of the issues that Native American people face. Trace the early origins of AIM and the key events that occurred relating to the protests and activities of AIM.
3. In the film *Whiteclay, Nebraska*, is in the spotlight for selling alcohol to the people of the Pine Ridge Reservation. Research and explore how Pine Ridge became a "dry" reservation and discover how many other Native American reservations have no alcohol laws.
4. High rates of suicide in young people is an issue that many Native people across the country are facing. Find the data and compare the rates of suicide on four different reservations and compare them to the national average in mainstream communities. Then identify four different effective movements or strategies that Native people are using to combat this issue.
5. Standing Rock gained national attention during 2016 and showed people coming from many nations to take a stand. What was the issue that initiated this coming together? Explain why you think this was such an important moment for George Dull Knife.

Resources

Websites:

Vision Maker Media -

<https://www.visionmakermedia.org/films/knife-edge>

Books:

The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge: A Lakota Odyssey by Joe Starita, Bison Books, 2002.

The Thunder Before the Storm: The Autobiography of Clyde Bellecourt by Clyde Bellecourt and Jon Lurie, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016.

Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance by Leonard Peltier. St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.

Films:

We Shall Remain, Episode 5: Wounded Knee directed by Stanley Nelson

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Headshot of Eli Cane © 2017 Rose Lichter-Marck



George Dull Knife and friends take a break at the 42nd anniversary of the Wounded Knee Takeover.



Guy Dull Knife, Jr..

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Educational resources for this film are available at <http://www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/knife-edge>

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