

# Western Conquest and Native American Assimilation

*by Sophia*



## WHAT'S COVERED

One of the most important issues to confront the U.S. government during the post-Reconstruction period involved Native Americans in the West. Thousands of settlers were moving into the West, and economic interests, including railroads and mining companies, sought to profit from Western resources. The U.S. Army controlled relations with tribes during this time of ongoing encroachment on Native lands, which often led to disastrous consequences.

To resolve the violence that accompanied Western expansion, the United States began an assimilation campaign during the late 19th century.

This tutorial examines the Western expansion, and efforts to assimilate the tribes, in three parts:

## 1. The “Indian Question”

During the late 19th century, the issue of Western expansion, and the fate of Native Americans who seemed to be in the way of that expansion, was sometimes referred to as the “Indian Question.” Tribes throughout the West were involved, including the Lakota (Sioux), who inhabited the Great Plains, the Nez Perce to the Northwest, the Utes in Colorado and Utah, and many others who lived in California and the Southwest.



By 1877, a number of these tribes had fought against the United States in a series of battles known collectively as the **Indian Wars**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Indian Wars

A series of armed conflicts between the United States and Western Native American tribes during the mid- to late-19th century.

Some of the episodes associated with the Indian Wars were particularly vicious.

##### ➔ EXAMPLE Sand Creek Massacre (1864)

On November 29, 1864, near Sand Creek, Colorado, Colonel John Chivington led Colorado militiamen in a raid on a Cheyenne camp that had recently negotiated a peace agreement with a nearby U.S. Army garrison. Chivington's men killed over 100 Cheyenne men, women, and children.

##### ➔ EXAMPLE Battle of the Little Bighorn (1876)

On June 25, 1876, Colonel George Armstrong Custer and about 600 U.S. cavalrymen came upon a camp of 1,500 to 2,000 Lakota and Cheyenne warriors, led by **Sitting Bull** and Crazy Horse, along the Little Bighorn River in eastern Montana. Custer and all of the men in his immediate detachment—approximately 250—were killed.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Sitting Bull

Sioux tribal leader who united Plains Native Americans in resisting the U.S. military during the Indian Wars; he defeated General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn, and was killed in 1890 by tribal police. The bloody engagements of the Indian Wars resulted from the federal government's failed attempts to move Western tribes out of the path of White settlers and onto reservations through negotiation. Congress offered compensation for lands relinquished and promised to provide services that would enable Native Americans to

learn English and modern farming practices and to adopt Christianity. Due to government corruption, however, many payments and services were not provided, which left thousands of Native Americans destitute and near starvation. As settlers continued to pour into the West—more quickly, and in greater numbers—Native American reservations came to be seen as prime locations for farms, mines, and railroad routes. Western tribes were left with few options.

## 2. Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce

The Nez Perce, who lived in northeastern Oregon, had long accommodated American settlers. Nevertheless, they found themselves in direct conflict with Western expansion by the mid-1870s.

In response to pressure from settlers in Oregon, the federal government ordered the removal of the Nez Perce to a reservation in Idaho. In June of 1877, while on their way to the new reservation, four young men from a band led by **Chief Joseph**, angry at being forced from their homes in Oregon, killed four White settlers. Fearing retribution from the army, Chief Joseph and approximately 800 Nez Perce Native Americans attempted to flee to Canada, where they believed they could live freely.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Chief Joseph

Leader of the Nez Perce tribe, who led a group of approximately 800 Nez Perce Native Americans in an attempt to evade capture by the U.S. military and flee to Canada.

During their journey, Joseph's band defeated the army on several occasions. In October of 1877, however, U.S. forces captured the Nez Perce less than 50 miles from the Canadian border. Based on an understanding that his followers would be allowed to go to the reservation in Idaho, Joseph surrendered: "I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more, forever."



Photograph of Chief Joseph taken in 1877.



### DID YOU KNOW

General William Tecumseh Sherman, who commanded the entire U.S. Army in 1877, ordered Chief Joseph and his band to be transported as prisoners to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The federal government would not allow Joseph's band to return to the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho until 1885.

In 1879, two years after surrendering to the United States, Chief Joseph delivered a speech in Washington, DC that criticized the forced subjugation of Native Americans and their confinement on reservations. While reading the selection below, consider what Chief Joseph freedom meant to him, and to his people:

#### Chief Joseph, Speech in Washington, DC, 1878

“ . . . If the White man wants to live in peace with the Indian he can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike. Give them the same laws. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it . . . . If you pen an Indian up on a small spot of earth and compel him to stay there, he will not be contented nor will he grow and prosper. I have asked some of the Great White Chiefs where they get their authority to say to the Indian that he shall stay in one place, while he sees White men going where they please. They cannot tell me . . . .

I know that my race must change. We cannot hold our own with the White men as we are. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work alike on all men. If an Indian breaks the law, punish him by the law. If a White man breaks the law, punish him also.

Let me be a free man, free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to talk, think and act for myself—and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty.” (Green & Stabler, p.541)



#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. What does freedom mean to Chief Joseph?
2. In what ways does Chief Joseph suggest that his “race must change”? In what ways might his understanding of “change” conflict with that of Americans?

In his speech, Chief Joseph used language associated with freedom and equality that many other groups would also use. However, freedom to Chief Joseph also included the ability “to follow the religion of my fathers” and to adhere to his cultural traditions. The desire for freedom and autonomy expressed by Joseph and other Native leaders conflicted with the efforts of legislators and reformers who sought to assimilate Native Americans into American society and to open Native lands to economic development.

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## 3. The Assimilation Campaign

Supporters of Native American **assimilation** included a coalition of business owners, settlers, speculators, legislators, and reformers. Although some had altruistic intentions, they all worked to subjugate or destroy Native cultures so that Native Americans would have no choice but to join American society.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Assimilation

The processes by which a people or individual persons adopt the features of the dominant culture. This assimilation campaign began in earnest during the early 1880s. It focused on two key areas: education and land reform.

### 3a. Education

Schools were one of the most important institutions that reformers sought to establish on reservations. The

federal government played a key role in education initiatives.



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1890, the federal government had established a school on every Native American reservation. By 1895, it was spending over two million dollars a year to educate Native American children.

The federal government permitted reformers to remove Native American children from their homes and place them in boarding schools, where they were taught to abandon tribal traditions and embrace American customs. The best known of these schools was **Carlisle Indian Industrial Training School** in Pennsylvania, which was administered by Richard Henry Pratt.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Carlisle Indian Industrial Training School**

Among the most notable boarding schools that aimed to “civilize” Native American children during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

According to Pratt, the purpose of Carlisle and other boarding schools was to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” Upon arriving at school, Native children were forced to speak English and take a Christian name. Instructors emphasized etiquette, morality, and the importance of accumulating wealth. The schools provided vocational training for males and domestic science classes for females. Native children learned to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and were taught to celebrate the Fourth of July and other American holidays.



Native students enrolled in Carlisle Indian Industrial Training School, ca. 1900. Carlisle provided a model for assimilationist education. By the end of the 19th century, more than 20 government-funded boarding schools had been established in the United States.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Who is the intended audience for the image above?



The experiences of Native children at boarding schools like Carlisle were mixed. Class attendance was mandatory and punishment for a range of transgressions, from speaking a Native language to neglecting one's responsibilities, was harsh.

An account in Carlisle's school newspaper written by Ellis B. Childers, a Creek Native American student at Carlisle in 1882, indicates the pressure experienced by Native children in boarding schools. In the passage below, Childers describes the arrival of a large group of educated Native Americans to the school.

**Ellis B. Childers, Creek Native American student at the Carlisle School**

"Inspector Haworth with a large delegation of Indians visited us on Easter week on their way back home from Washington . . . .

The same evening when they arrived the boys had dress parade . . . . After it was over Inspector Haworth asked some of the delegates to say something to the school . . . . [A]mong other things [one delegate] said to the children: 'Here are people trying to teach you. You must try to learn and when you come back home your people will be glad to see you and what you learn will be a benefit to them . . . .'

Henry Jones the interpreter said something before [the assembly] was closed. He is an Indian but he has learned enough English so as to interpret for his people.

Among other things he said, 'If we Indians are willing to learn we can learn. We can learn as well as our friends, the Whites. We can do just as well as the White people. If we try. We have muscles, brains and eyes just the same as the Whites. If we cultivate our brains and muscles and eyes we can do just the same as they.'

And then closed his speech by saying. 'Don't look back, all that is passed away. This country through here is all improved. You saw when you were coming, cities, railroads, houses, manufactories.'

We have had many Indian delegates, but those were the best delegates we have had."



**THINK ABOUT IT**

1. How would you describe Childers's account of the Native American delegates and their speeches?
2. Does the fact that Childers's account was published in the school newspaper call its reliability as a primary source into question? Why or why not?
3. In what ways is Henry Jones's statement similar to that of Chief Joseph's? In what ways is it different?

This account from the Carlisle School newspaper shows that Native children were at the forefront of the assimilation campaign. Reformers and teachers at Carlisle and other schools hoped that education would provide a way for Native Americans to participate in American society.

### 3b. Land Reform

As a part of their plan to promote the assimilation of Native American tribes, educators and reformers pushed Congress to enact legislation that promoted individual land ownership on reservations. Business interests,

most notably the railroads that sought to build on reservations, and settlers who wanted to live on and farm tribal lands, also supported this initiative.

In 1887, Congress passed the **Dawes Act**, named for reformer and Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Dawes Act

Authorized the federal government to break up reservation lands into individual allotments to be distributed among Native American families; remaining reservation lands would become available for White settlement.

The act empowered the federal government to divide the reservation of any tribe into parcels. The male heads of each family received 160 acres, which they could then distribute among family members. Single men received 80 acres. All lands allotted and distributed to Native American families were to be held in trust by the federal government for 25 years, during which time the land could not be sold or taxed.

Native Americans who chose to accept their allotment would be eligible to become American citizens, as the following passage from the Dawes Act indicates:

##### The Dawes Act

“ . . . every Indian born within the territorial limits of the United States to whom allotments shall have been made under the provisions of this act, or under any law or treaty, and every Indian born within the territorial limits of the United States who has voluntarily taken up, within said limits, his residence separate and apart from any tribe of Indians therein, and has adopted the habits of civilized life, is hereby declared to be a citizen of the United States, and is entitled to all the rights, privileges, and immunities of such citizens, whether said Indian has been or not, by birth or otherwise, a member of any tribe of Indians within the territorial limits of the United States without in any manner impairing or otherwise affecting the right of any such Indian to tribal or other property . . . .”



#### THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think the act's language regarding “the habits of civilized life” means?



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1900, approximately 53,000 Native Americans had gained American citizenship by accepting allotments under the Dawes Act.

Proponents of the Dawes Act claimed that it opened the way for Native Americans to become American citizens, but the Act also placed tribes at a disadvantage by restricting their land base to reservations. All reservation land that the government surveyed but did not distribute to Native families was declared “surplus” and made available for White settlement.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1887, Native Americans possessed 138 million acres of land. That amount declined to about 78 million acres by 1900.



#### SUMMARY

Interaction between Native Americans, White settlers, the U.S. Army, and a variety of reformers was disruptive to traditional Native life. On many occasions, the interaction was violent, as when the U.S. Army sought to move the Nez Perce and other tribes to reservations. Despite proclamations by Chief Joseph and others on behalf of Native sovereignty and autonomy, reformers and policymakers continued to undermine Native American cultures. Assimilation was primarily pursued in two ways: the education of Native children at Carlisle and other boarding schools, and the division of reservation lands into individual allotments owned by Native families. The results of the assimilation campaign were mixed. However, tribal integrity was eroded and Native Americans were relegated to the margins of American society.

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## REFERENCES

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Assimilation

The processes by which a people or individual persons adopt the features of the dominant culture.

### Carlisle Indian Industrial Training School

Among the most notable boarding schools that aimed to "civilize" Native American children during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### Dawes Act

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### Indian Wars

A series of armed conflicts between the United States and Western Native American tribes during the



mid- to late-19th century.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **Chief Joseph**

Leader of the Nez Perce tribe, who led a group of approximately 800 Nez Perce Native Americans in an attempt to evade capture by the U.S. military and flee to Canada.

### **Sitting Bull**

Sioux tribal leader who united Plains Native Americans in resisting the U.S. military during the Indian Wars; he defeated General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn, and was killed in 1890 by tribal police.