

Name: _____ Class: _____

From Resistance to Reservations

By USHistory.org
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This informational text discusses the finale of the American Indian Wars, a succession of official and unofficial wars and attacks between American Indian tribes, U.S. military, and individual American settlers west of the Mississippi River from the early 1600s to the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890. At the end of the American Indian Wars, all surviving Native Americans were assigned to reservations where they faced poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, poor farming land, depression, and the forced removal of children to Indian boarding schools where they were stripped of their culture and language. As you read, note what motivates multiple sides to compromise or not compromise with one another on how American Indians can live.

- [1] In the second half of the late 19th century, America's westward expansion¹ was meeting forceful resistance from native populations.² Settlers seeking opportunity out West were eager for land and resources controlled by different Indian tribes. The U.S. government fell into a pattern of forming and then breaking treaties with the Indians. This allowed settlers to take more and more Indian land, forcing Indians to respond with violence. The repeated cycle of stealth, resistance, and defeat that followed would eventually force the surviving Indian populations to bend to the will of the U.S. government.



"The Custer Fight" by Charles Marion Russell is in the public domain.

Another Broken Treaty

America had a long history of forming treaties with tribes, and as western expansion continued, the government sought to use treaties to force Native Americans onto smaller and smaller tracts³ of land. Treaties did not promise peace though. In 1864, government troops massacred⁴ a peaceful Cheyenne⁵ village at Sand Creek in Colorado. Subsequently, Cheyenne, Arapaho,⁶ and Sioux⁷ warriors retaliated. By 1868, the upsurge of violence on the Great Plains forced the U.S. to amend the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie⁸ with these and other regional tribes.

1. By 1850, through economic or peace treaty negotiations, the United States had acquired all of the territory found in the modern-day continental 48 states, except for some southern portions of New Mexico and Arizona. By 1850, over 7 million Americans had traveled west of the Mississippi River to explore, farm, look for gold, build businesses and railroads, or find some other way to make a living.
2. There were over 300,000 Native Americans in America according to 1860-1880 U.S. Census data; at least 75,000 lived in the Great Plains. Major tribes included the Apache, Comanche, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Pawnee, Sioux, Navajo, Nez Percé, and Apache; each of these major tribes was divided into smaller tribes.
3. **Tract (noun):** an extended area, as of land
4. **Massacre (verb):** to kill indiscriminately or in large numbers

Following the new Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868,⁹ which altered tribes' territories in the northern Great Plains, the American military shared a delicate peace with the Sioux and the Cheyenne. Gold broke it. In 1874, a scientific exploration group led by General George Armstrong Custer¹⁰ discovered the precious metal in the heart of the Black Hills of South Dakota, a land sacred to the Lakota Sioux. ;

When word of the discovery leaked, nothing could stop the masses of prospectors¹¹ looking to get rich quick, despite the treaty protections that awarded that land to the Sioux. Two local Indian leaders, Sitting Bull¹² and Crazy Horse,¹³ decided to take up arms to defend their dwindling¹⁴ land supply.

Little Bighorn

- [5] Custer was perhaps the most flashy and brash¹⁵ officer in the United States Army. He was confident that his technologically superior troops could contain the Native American fighters. Armed with new weapons of destruction such as the rapid-firing Gatling gun,¹⁶ Custer and his soldiers felt that it was only a matter of time before the Indians would surrender and submit to life on a smaller reservation than promised in the Fort Laramie Treaty. Custer hoped to make that happen sooner rather than later.

His orders were to locate the Sioux encampment in the Bighorn Mountains of Montana and trap them until reinforcements¹⁷ arrived. But the prideful Custer sought to engage the Sioux on his own.

On June 25, 1876, he discovered a small Indian village on the banks of the Little Bighorn River. Custer confidently ordered his troops to attack, not realizing that he was confronting the main Sioux and Cheyenne encampment.¹⁸ About three thousand Sioux warriors led by Crazy Horse descended upon Custer's regiment, and within hours Custer and his entire Seventh Cavalry were dead.

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5. The Cheyenne are an Algonquian-speaking people of the Great Plains. They lived in Minnesota before European settlers pushed them west, into North and South Dakota. Today the Southern Cheyenne live in Oklahoma and the Northern Cheyenne live in Montana.
 6. The Arapaho are a tribe of Native Americans from the Great Plains (historically Colorado and Wyoming) who speak an Algonquian dialect.
 7. The Sioux, or Oceti Sakowin, are a group of Great Plains tribes with three major divisions based on language: Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota. They live today in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Montana. They are the second most populous tribe today behind the Navajo.
 8. The 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie was signed between the U.S. government, and the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara nations. It gave a large territory, including half of South Dakota, significant portions of Wyoming and Nebraska, and parts of Montana and North Dakota to the eight tribes for their exclusive use. The Indians had to allow safe passage and cease fighting with other tribes, while the government had to protect Indians from U.S. citizens.
 9. One major difference with the treaty of 1851 was that the treaty of 1868 established the Great Sioux Reservation in the western half of South Dakota, giving them exclusive rights to the Black Hills, land sacred to several tribes. Sitting Bull was one of several Lakota Sioux leaders who did not sign the later treaty and continued to hunt outside reservation borders.
 10. General George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) was a Union officer in the Civil War. He was assigned as lieutenant colonel in the 7th Cavalry Regiment during the American Indian Wars (a cavalry is a group of soldiers who fight on horseback).
 11. Prospectors are people who look for gold or other precious metals.
 12. Sitting Bull (1831-1890) led his Hunkpapa Lakota band in resistance to the U.S. government.
 13. Crazy Horse (1842-1877) was an Oglala Lakota leader and warrior against the U.S. government.
 14. **Dwindle (verb):** to gradually become smaller
 15. **Brash (adjective):** very aggressive or harsh
 16. The Gatling gun was the predecessor for the modern-day machine gun.
 17. **Reinforcement (noun):** people and supplies sent to help or support an army, military force, etc.
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The victory was brief for the warring Sioux. Soldiers arrived and chased them for the next several months. By October, much of the native resistance had ended. Crazy Horse had surrendered, but Sitting Bull and a small band of warriors escaped to Canada. Eventually, in 1881, they returned to the United States and surrendered due to hunger.

Reactions Back East

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, or Custer's Last Stand as it was called back East, caused massive debate. War hawks¹⁹ demanded an immediate increase in federal military spending and swift judgment for the noncompliant²⁰ Sioux.

- [10] Critics of United States policy also made their opinions known. The most vocal detractor,²¹ Helen Hunt Jackson, published a blistering assault on United States Indian policy in her 1881 book *A Century of Dishonor*. It chronicled²² injustices toward Native Americans over the past hundred years.

The American masses, however, were unsympathetic or indifferent.²³ A systematic plan to end all native resistance was approved, and the Indians of the West would not see another victory like the Little Bighorn.

In spite of the Sioux's fighting, Custer's vision for gold-mining the Black Hills came true. In 1877, Congress seized the land in violation of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. (To add insult to injury, 50 years later the U.S. government would commission the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in the Black Hills.)

The End of Resistance

The crackdown on Native Americans went far beyond those involved in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Settlers and federal troops now relentlessly hunted any tribes resisting American advancement. Tribes that wished to survive were thus slowly forced onto reservations.

The Lakota Sioux were decimated²⁴ by yet another American tactic of war: an attack on their food supply. Travelers heading westward were encouraged to kill any buffalo they encountered. Buffalo robes became fashionable in the East, so profit-seekers slaughtered thousands of bison simply for their hides. Others shot them for sport, leaving their remains for the local vultures.

- [15] The army was even known to use Gatling guns on the herds to reduce their numbers. The plan was effective. At the end of the Civil War, an estimated 15 million buffalo roamed the Great Plains. By 1900, there were only several hundred, as the species was nearly extinct. The Sioux and other Plains tribes lost their chief means of subsistence²⁵ and mourned the loss of the animal, which was revered²⁶ as sacred according to many tribal religions.

19. A war hawk is a politician or influential individual who favors war over peace in debates.

20. **Noncompliant** (*adjective*): not willing to do whatever is asked or ordered

21. **Detractor** (*noun*): one who slanders or criticizes (something)

22. **Chronicle** (*verb*): to put on record or report

23. **Indifferent** (*adjective*): not interested or concerned about something

24. **Decimate** (*verb*): to destroy

25. **Subsistence** (*noun*): the amount of materials, such as food, needed to stay alive

26. **Revere** (*verb*): to have or show great respect or devotion

Chief Joseph and the Nez Percé

The year after Custer's infamous²⁷ defeat, the Nez Percé Indians of Idaho fell victim to western expansion. When gold was discovered on their lands in 1877, demands were made for over 90 percent of their territory. After a stand-off between tribal warriors and the United States Army, their leader Chief Joseph directed his followers toward Canada to avoid capture. He hoped to join forces with Sitting Bull and plan the next move from there.

Army officials chased the Nez Percé 1700 miles across Idaho and Western Montana. As they neared the border, the army closed in and Chief Joseph was forced to surrender in the Bear Paw Mountains, where he famously said:

"Tell General Howard that I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead, Tu-hul-hil-sote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who now say yes or no. He who led the young men [Joseph's brother Alikut] is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people — some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets and no food. No one knows where they are — perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more against the white man."

The entire tribe was relocated to Oklahoma where nearly half of them perished from disease and despair. Chief Joseph went to Washington D.C. in 1879 where he said, "I have heard talk and talk, but nothing is done. Good words do not last long unless they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men.... I am tired of talk that comes to nothing."

Carving Up Oklahoma

[20] Homesteaders²⁸ had taken over much of the land that Indians once roamed in search of game or cultivated for crops. The last land to be claimed by homesteaders was in Oklahoma. Previously dubbed²⁹ "Indian Territory " by the federal government, Oklahoma had been used as a state-sized reservation of many tribes around the country, ranging from the Nez Percé of Idaho to the Cherokee of Georgia.

Not all of the land in Oklahoma had been assigned to a specific tribe though. So, in 1889, the United States Government decided to break Oklahoma up from one reservation into many, with all the land left unassigned to a tribe up for grabs. Two million acres of Indian land would be available to homesteaders.

At noon on April 22, 1889, the land was legally opened to claim under the provisions³⁰ of the Homestead Act. Thousands rushed across Oklahoma to grab a piece. Land once promised to the Indians was gobbled up in a matter of hours.

27. **Infamous (adjective):** well-known for being bad

28. Homesteaders were those that received a piece of government land by living and farming on it.

29. **Dub (verb):** to call by a distinctive name

30. **Provision (noun):** a condition, as of a contract

By nightfall, Oklahoma City qualified as a city of 10,000 tent inhabitants. Those who staked a claim before it was legal were called “Sooners,” giving the state its future nickname. Successful homesteaders rested that night in triumph, leaving the Indians of the area to despair over yet another grand theft and reduction of their land.

After being forced off their native lands, many American Indians found life to be most difficult. Beginning in the first half of the 19th century, federal policy dictated that certain tribes be confined to fixed land plots to continue their traditional ways of life. There were many problems with this approach. Besides the moral issue of depriving a people of life on their historic land, many economic issues plagued reservations. Nomadic³¹ tribes that followed animal migrations lost their entire means of subsistence by being constricted³² to a defined area. Farmers found themselves with land unsuitable for agriculture. Many lacked the know-how to implement complex irrigation systems.³³ Hostile tribes were often forced into the same proximity. The results were disastrous.

The Dawes Act

[25] Faced with disease, alcoholism,³⁴ and despair on the reservations, federal officials changed directions with the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. Each Native American family was offered 160 acres of tribal land to own outright. Although the land could not be sold for 25 years, these new landowners could farm it for profit like other farmers in the West.

Congress hoped that this system would end the dependency of the tribes on the federal government, enable Indians to become individually prosperous,³⁵ and assimilate³⁶ the Indians into mainstream American life. After 25 years, participants would become American citizens, effectively ending the tribal way of life.

Tribes widely resisted what the government saw as a fair proposal. Tribal leaders foretold the end of their ancient folkways and a further loss of communal land. When individuals did attempt this new way of life, they were often unsuccessful. Farming the West takes considerable expertise. Lacking this knowledge, many were still dependent upon the government for assistance, revealing a flaw in the federal plan.

The Dawes Act was an unmitigated disaster for tribal units. Native American tribes lost half their land in less than two decades.³⁷ When the Dawes Act was repealed in 1934, alcoholism, poverty, illiteracy, and suicide rates were higher for Native Americans than any other ethnic group in the United States. As America grew to the status of a world power, the first Americans were reduced to hopelessness.

Many 19th century Americans saw the Dawes Act as a way to “civilize” the Native Americans. Visiting missionaries attempted to convert the Indians to Christianity, although they found few new believers.

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31. **Nomadic** (*adjective*): roaming about from place to place
 32. **Constrict** (*verb*): to make (something) narrower, smaller, or tighter
 33. Complex irrigation systems allow farmers to water land by artificial means (rather than the natural means of rainwater).
 34. White settlers had introduced many Native American people to alcohol, often using it to manipulate them into unfair treaties or agreements.
 35. **Prosperous** (*adjective*): successful or wealthy
 36. **Assimilate** (*verb*): to adopt the ways of another culture
 37. Land that was not allotted to individual Indian families was considered “excess” land and was sold on the open market to non-Native Americans.

[30] Since it was no longer possible to resist forced assimilation through armed resistance, many American Indians turned to spiritual resistance. The Ghost Dance emerged in the northern Great Plains as a new spiritual gathering of Native Americans committed to their ancestral ways of life.³⁸ Like the armed warriors before them, these peaceful natives would be swept up in a violent end at the hands of the U.S. government: the 1890 Massacre of Wounded Knee.³⁹

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38. The Ghost Dance, which emerged in the 1870s among the Paiute, was an indigenous religious movement that gained widespread attention when thousands of natives in the Great Plains began to gather in 1890.

39. The new Seventh Cavalry slaughtered between 150 and 300 native men, women, and children at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in December of 1890.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO of the following best identify the central idea of this text? [RI.2]
 - A. The U.S. government was justified to treat the Indians harshly because they lost the American Indian Wars.
 - B. The U.S. government put the needs of American settlers and homesteaders over the treaty-protected rights of American Indians to their land.
 - C. The U.S. government did the most good possible by taking land from a few Indians to give to many settlers, minimizing violence for both sides.
 - D. The Indians who did not resist American advancement and retreated to reservations were treated better than those who fought and eventually surrendered to the U.S. government.
 - E. The Seventh Cavalry got revenge for the Battle of the Little Bighorn at the Massacre of Wounded Knee.
 - F. Life was difficult for Indians on reservations because they could not practice their ancestral ways of living nor adapt to new ways without proper resources and guidance.

2. PART B: Which TWO phrases from the text best support the answers to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "Crazy Horse had surrendered, but Sitting Bull and a small band of warriors escaped to Canada. Eventually, in 1881, they returned to the United States and surrendered due to hunger." (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "The Sioux and other Plains tribes lost their chief means of subsistence and mourned the loss of the animal, which was revered as sacred according to many tribal religions." (Paragraph 15)
 - C. "Previously dubbed "Indian Territory " by the federal government, Oklahoma had been used as a state-sized reservation of many tribes around the country, ranging from the Nez Percé of Idaho to the Cherokee of Georgia." (Paragraph 20)
 - D. "So, in 1889, the United States Government decided to break Oklahoma up from one reservation into many, with all the land left unassigned to a tribe up for grabs. Two million acres of Indian land would be available to homesteaders." (Paragraph 21)
 - E. "Nomadic tribes that followed animal migrations lost their entire means of subsistence by being constricted to a defined area. Farmers found themselves with land unsuitable for agriculture." (Paragraph 24)
 - F. "Like the armed warriors before them, these peaceful natives would be swept up in a violent end at the hands of the U.S. government: the 1890 Massacre of Wounded Knee." (Paragraph 30)

3. What connection does the author draw between the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the U.S. government's efforts to force American Indians onto reservations? [RI.3]
- A. After the battle, the U.S. government was frightened of the Indians' strength and did not want to risk forcing Indians onto reservations for a significant period of time.
 - B. After the battle, most Indians involved were encouraged to resist their relocation to reservations for years to come.
 - C. After the battle, the U.S. government severely punished those involved but was more lenient to other tribes that resisted relocation to reservations.
 - D. After the battle, the U.S. government dealt harshly with any tribe that resisted relocation to reservations.
4. What is the author's main purpose in the text? [RI.6]
- A. To undo the myth of violence in the American West
 - B. To question to validity of the American Dream
 - C. To question the fairness of American policy towards Indians
 - D. To discuss the lasting impacts of the American Indian Wars on Native Americans today
5. How does paragraph 18 contribute to the author's explanation of Indian resistance in the text? [RI.5]
- A. It reveals how harsh conditions can break the spirit of resistance.
 - B. It reveals the selfish motivations of chiefs to resist American advancement.
 - C. It reveals the defiance of the defeated Indian leaders who led resistance.
 - D. It reveals how resistance ended because of an understanding between opposing leaders.
6. How does the section "Reactions Back East," from paragraphs 9-12, contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.1]
- A. It highlights the scarcity of support or empathy towards American Indians.
 - B. It reveals the cruelty of the American people in their quest for more resources.
 - C. It captures the idealistic spirit of the American Dream and Manifest Destiny.
 - D. It showcases how Americans checked the brutality of the U.S. government's position towards American Indians.
7. How does the campaign to kill the buffalo contribute to the central ideas of the text? [RI.2]

8. Why might the author choose to structure the text to end with a focus on the Dawes Act? Cite evidence from the text in your answer. [RI.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What do you believe motivated the U.S. government and military in their policies towards American Indians in the West? Cite evidence from the text, your personal experience, art, literature, and history in your answer.
2. Why do you think tribes and the U.S. government could not reach lasting compromises throughout the 1800s? What was fair or unfair about some of the proposed compromises?
3. In your opinion, was the violence on both sides of the American Indian Wars justified? How could massacres have been avoided?
4. The Battle of the Little Bighorn has been called the Battle of the Greasy Grass by American Indians and Custer's Last Stand by white Americans. Why do you believe different groups call this battle by different names? What does this indicate about how America records its history and how Americans view their country?
5. How do we see the effects of the American Indian Wars in society today? Cite evidence from the text, your personal experience, art, literature, and history in your answer.