Native Americans under Siege

Westward expansion benefited many Americans, but it proved a devastating fate for Native Americans. They faced a relentless tide of white settlers who possessed both superior weaponry and a belief that they had a higher claim to western land. White settlers also enjoyed the support of the federal government and army. The result for Native Americans in the last third of the nineteenth century was broken treaties, devastating wars, relocation to reservations, and a policy of forced assimilation.

Mounting Problems for Native Americans

In 1851, as it became clear that the traditional government policy of simply forcing tribes into the West was no longer viable because of increased white migration into the region, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act. It set aside vast tracts of the Oklahoma Territory as reservations for dozens of Native American tribes. That same year the U.S. government, the Sioux, and several other Plains tribes signed the first Treaty of Fort Laramie. In exchange for declaring nearly all of the central and northern Great Plains off limits, the tribes agreed to allow white settlers to pass unmolested along the Oregon Trail as they moved westward. But the lasting peace that government officials and tribal leaders hoped the treaty would secure did not materialize. Tension and violence between white settlers and Native American tribes only increased in the coming years.

Native Americans faced a series of problems that ultimately doomed their efforts to resist Euro-American incursion onto their lands. Chief among these were the racist attitudes of white Americans that characterized Indians as backward, pagan, violent savages. who lacked a rightful claim to the lands they occupied. Many Americans believed their own culture vastly superior and considered Native Americans obstacles to national progress that must be removed. "The Red Men are a doomed race," claimed one writer in 1877, for "the savage is giving place to a higher and more civilized race." These notions originated in the colonial period, but greater contact and conflict between whites and Indians after 1850 led to a proliferation of largely negative depictions of Native Americans in newspapers, magazines, songs, plays, and works of art like *The Rescue*, by sculptor Horatio Greenough (**15.12**).

15.12 Promoting an Image of Indian Savagery This 1853 sculpture by Horatio Greenough promoted the idea among white Americans that Native Americans were violent savages.

Comissioned by the federal government and placed at the entrance to the U.S. Capitol in 1853, the scene drew upon the many sensationalized stories and paintings of white settlers, especially women, being kidnapped, raped, and murdered by Native Americans. But Greenough departed from the traditional depictions and introduced a towering, dominant white settler. Notice the contrasts in the men's size, demeanor, and clothing. "I have endeavoured," Greenough explained, "to convey the idea of the triumph of the whites over the savage tribes." By 1874, the scene had merged with the life of the famous pioneer and icon of frontier masculinity, Daniel Boone (**15.13**). Both images proclaim Indian savagery and justify white domination, a message that eventually resulted in the sculpture's removal from public view in 1958.

15.13 Seeing Savagery Greenough's image became so widely known that a dime novel artist easily adapted it to a Daniel Boone story.

What did the government hope to accomplish by signing treaties with Native American tribes?

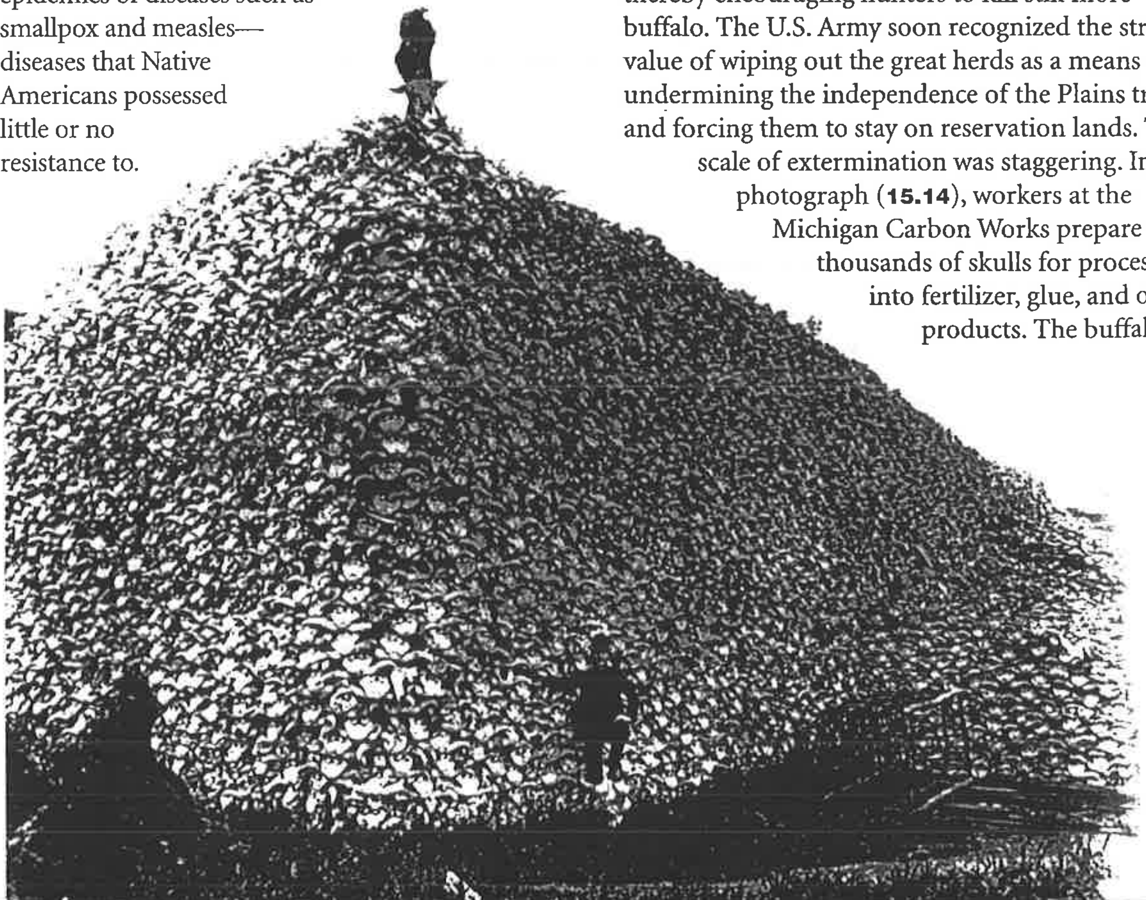
White hostility to Native Americans shaped government policy, especially when it came to signing and honoring treaties. Invariably, it seemed, federal officials negotiated treaties with tribes that promised to permanently fix the boundaries of their hunting grounds and places of habitation, only to find soon thereafter that whites, hungry for land, had begun settling there. Rather than enforce the terms of the treaty and force the removal of white settlers, the government inevitably revised the treaty to further shrink designated Native American lands.

This combination of white settlers' desire for land and disregard for Native Americans' rights, and the efforts of Native Americans to resist white encroachment, led to repeated outbreaks of violence. one of the most egregious incidents was the **Sand Creek Massacre**. Angered by sporadic attacks on settlers by some Native American tribes in Colorado, a military outfit under Colonel John M. Chivington raided on November 29, 1864 a peaceful encampment of eight hundred Cheyenne at Sand Creek. With most of the Cheyenne men off hunting, Chivington's force slaughtered more than two hundred Indians, mostly defenseless women and children, mutilated their bodies, and returned to Denver with their scalps.

Native Americans also confronted epidemics of diseases such as smallpox and measles—diseases that Native Americans possessed little or no resistance to. While the worst devastation had taken place in previous centuries during initial European contact (see Chapter 1), epidemics of smallpox continued to erupt, killing thousands. For example, a smallpox outbreak in the Pacific Northwest in 1862 killed s... twelve thousand Indians. The widespread abuse of alcohol, a commodity obtained through trade with whites, further compromised Native American health.

Additionally, long-standing animosities among tribes prevented Native Americans from developing a united front against the U.S. Army. White officials took advantage of these divisions to obtain help from one tribe, in the form of guides and even soldiers, against another. Disunity *within* tribes also contributed to this problem, as individual bands guarded their autonomy and resisted the idea of centralized authority. For example, in 1863 leaders of the Nez Perce tribe split over whether to sign a treaty that would confine them to a reservation. There were exceptions, of course, and some tribes managed to overcome this problem, at least temporarily.

The Plains tribes' dependence upon the buffalo left them particularly vulnerable in the 1870s. Railroad companies, disdainful of the large herds that occasionally disrupted the passage of trains, hired gunmen to kill buffalo. Entrepreneurs presently made buffalo robes fashionable in the East, thereby encouraging hunters to kill still more buffalo. The U.S. Army soon recognized the stra... value of wiping out the great herds as a means o... undermining the independence of the Plains tribes and forcing them to stay on reservation lands. The scale of extermination was staggering. In this photograph (**15.14**), workers at the Michigan Carbon Works prepare thousands of skulls for processing into fertilizer, glue, and other products. The buffalo



15.14 Evidence of Extermination This mountain of buffalo skulls gathered by a fertilizer company attests to the scale of wanton killing of buffalo in the 1870s and 1880s.

How did negative stereotypes of Native Americans influence government policy?

population, estimated at thirty million in 1800, plunged to only a few thousand by the early 1880s ·ing a major crisis for the Plains Indians who depended on them.

The technological disparity between white settlers and Indians gave the former an enormous advantage. Euro-American settlers and army soldiers alike were heavily armed with modern rifles. The army also possessed early machine guns (called Gatling guns) and heavy artillery. While many Native American tribes had long ago acquired firearms, they never produced guns and ammunition and they remained dependent on whites for them. The U.S. ·y also benefited from the telegraph, which allowed them to communicate over great distances about troop movements and Native American military activity, and to request supplies and reinforcements as needed.

> "Women and children were killed and scalped, children shot at their mothers' breasts, and all the bodies mutilated in the most horrible manner. ... Colonel J. M. Chivington all the time inciting his troops to their diabolical outrages."
>
> MAJOR EDWARD WYNKOOP, testimony before congressional committee investigating the Sand Creek Massacre

Wars on the Plains

Despite its lack of commitment to honoring them, the federal government nonetheless signed many treaties in the late 1860s hoping to bring peace to the West and allow continued settlement by whites. Treaties were drawn up and signed with the Apache, Cheyenne, and Arapaho in 1865, the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache in 1867 (the Medicine Lodge Treaty), and the Sioux (the second Fort Laramie Treaty) in 1868. The latter treaty ended Red Cloud's War (1866–1868), a conflict that erupted when the army announced plans to build forts along the Bozeman Trail in the Wyoming and Montana territories to protect white migrants drawn by the discovery of gold in Montana. It guaranteed to the Sioux ownership of the Black Hills and land and hunting rights in South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana. It also explicitly barred white people ·n these lands. "From this day forward all war between the parties to this agreement shall for ever cease," declared the treaty in words that would soon prove false. "The government of the United States desires peace, and its honor is hereby pledged to keep it."

Despite these measures, continued violation of treaties by white settlers who ventured onto Indian lands and bands of Indians who refused to accept confinement on reservation lands led to increased bloodshed. The Red River War broke out in 1874 on the southern plains in present-day Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas when bands of Kiowa, Comanche, southern Cheyenne, and southern Arapaho Indians, angered over the federal government's failure to uphold its obligation to provide adequate supplies and keep whites off the reservation land (the army actually organized buffalo hunting parties that devastated local herds), left the reservation and launched raids against white settlements. Led by Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan, the army crushed the rebellion by the spring of 1875, thereby ending any future Native American resistance on the southern plains.

By then the primary scenes of conflict had shifted to the northern plains. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1874 touched off a flood of white fortune seekers into the region that was indisputably (as stipulated in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty) territory granted exclusively to Native American tribes. Rather than keep white trespassers out, however, the federal government demanded the Sioux vacate their Red River hunting grounds and return to their reservations. When the tribes refused to comply, the army launched an offensive.

In the late spring of 1876 the Seventh Cavalry, led by a young and vainglorious lieutenant colonel named George Armstrong Custer, closed in on a large band of Cheyenne, Sioux, and Arapaho warriors,

How did the dependence of the Plains Indians on the buffalo weaken their ability to resist the loss of their lands?

including the well-known Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, near the Little Bighorn River in Montana. Eager to earn fame and believing there were only a few hundred Indian warriors when in fact the number was closer to four thousand, Custer attacked before the rest of the army (and other officers who might overshadow him) arrived. The **Battle of Little Bighorn** quickly disintegrated into one of the most devastating defeats ever suffered by the U.S. military as Custer and 257 of his men were killed.

Although the Battle of Little Bighorn was an overwhelming triumph for the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, it quickly proved a hollow victory. As ·· cartoon (**15.15**) published in the *New York Gra* few weeks after the battle vividly demonstrates, the eastern media ignored Custer's blundering and instead depicted him and his men as valiant victims and demanded vengeance. Notice the artist's blunt depiction of Indians as savage, semianimal beings in stark contrast to the two white soldiers, one a heroic victim and the other a coolheaded executioner. The caption, "The Right Way to Dispose of Sitting Bull and His Braves—What the Country Expects of General Sheridan," was a not-so-subtle assertion of the popular belief that the government was showing too much leniency toward Native Americans who resisted white expansion into the West. Responding to this pressure, the U.S. government expanded military action in the Black Hills, forcing the Sioux ? other defiant tribes onto reservations.

15.15 The Negative Fallout from Little Bighorn
After the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians defeated Custer and the Seventh Cavalry in the Battle of Little Bighorn, negative press coverage hardened white attitudes toward Native Americans. This image appeared in the *New York Graphic* (August 15, 1876).

War and Conflict in the Far West

Farther west, native tribes encountered similar problems. During the final third of the nineteenth century, the states and territories west of the Rockies also were growing. The mining and railroad industries, the economic centerpieces of that region, required a great deal of land—land long occupied by Native Americans. Just as they were on the Great Plains, the tribes on the West Coast and in the intermountain West

How did the victory over Custer and his men ultimately prove very costly to the Plains Indians?

faced an encroaching white population that considered · · land theirs for the taking.

n 1876, following the massacre of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, army and government officials increased pressure on tribes to move to reservations. One such group targeted was a portion of the Nez Perce tribe that lived on the northwestern plateau of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. In 1863 most of the Nez Perce tribe had agreed to move onto a reservation, but about a quarter had refused. Led by Chief Joseph, about 750 Nez Perce (500 of them women, children, and elderly non-combatants) fled the region to escape the army. Over the ensuing four months, they engaged in an epic flight of 1,500 miles, hoping to cross into Canada. Despite their small numbers and dwindling supplies, they defeated the army in several battles and came within 40 miles of the adian border before they were forced to sur-..nder to the army and to life on a reservation.

> "Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."
>
> CHIEF JOSEPH, shortly after his surrender in 1877

Similar scenes of final military resistance played out in the Southwest. An Apache warrior named Geronimo had emerged in the 1860s and 1870s as a fearless opponent to encroaching Euro-American and Mexican settlers. Eventually captured by federal authorities in 1874, Geronimo and some four thousand Apaches were sent to a reservation at San Carlos, Arizona. The grim life on the reservation led him to escape and resume his campaign of resistance. In the face of mounting pressure from the army, he surrendered again in 1884. In 1885 and again in 1886, Geronimo escaped with a small band of warriors and their families and eluded capture for months. These escapades added to his already legendary status, but he eventually surrendered for good in 1886, ending the last significant Native American resistance.

Resistance to exploitation and abuse also erupted in the Southwest among Hispanos (descendants of Spanish colonists) and Mexicans in the 1880s and 1890s. Euro-American settlers who arrived in New Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century eventually gave rise to a powerful ruling class of ticians, landowners, and ranchers. Many allied themselves with powerful gangs that provided protection and intimidated (and sometimes killed) their rivals. Poor Hispano and Mexican farmers often bore the brunt of these ruling Euro-Americans' ruthless tactics and hunger for land. When officials began to sell off to speculators and ranchers what had long been used as common grazing lands, the poor farmers resisted. The most famous of these resistors were *Las Gorras Blancas*, or The White Caps, a secret militant vigilante group of Mexican men who in the late 1880s and early 1890s wore white masks and cut fences on lands taken over by speculators. They also destroyed railroad bridges, buildings, and crops.

In Pursuit of a Solution

While most Americans expressed little concern over the fate of Native Americans in the West, a notable few did raise their voices in protest. One of the first was Helen Hunt Jackson. Inspired by an 1879 lecture by Susette La Flesche and her uncle, Chief Standing Bear, relating the plight of the Ponca tribe to an audience in Connecticut, she began speaking and lobbying on behalf of Native Americans. In 1881 she published *A Century of Dishonor*, a book that chronicled in searing detail the misguided and murderous treatment of Native Americans by the U.S. government. The book prompted Congress to appoint a commission to study Indian affairs and seek a new and more humane policy.

Another influential reformer garnered a wide audience as an authentic spokesperson for the Native Americans. Sarah Winnemucca, the granddaughter of a Northern Paiute chief, had received some education from white families in Nevada and California and worked as a translator for the army. In the late 1870s she began lecturing in the East demanding more humane treatment of the Paiutes and other tribes that brought her to the attention of eastern and western reformers. Winnemucca tried to gain credibility among whites by presenting herself as an "Indian Princess," an image firmly

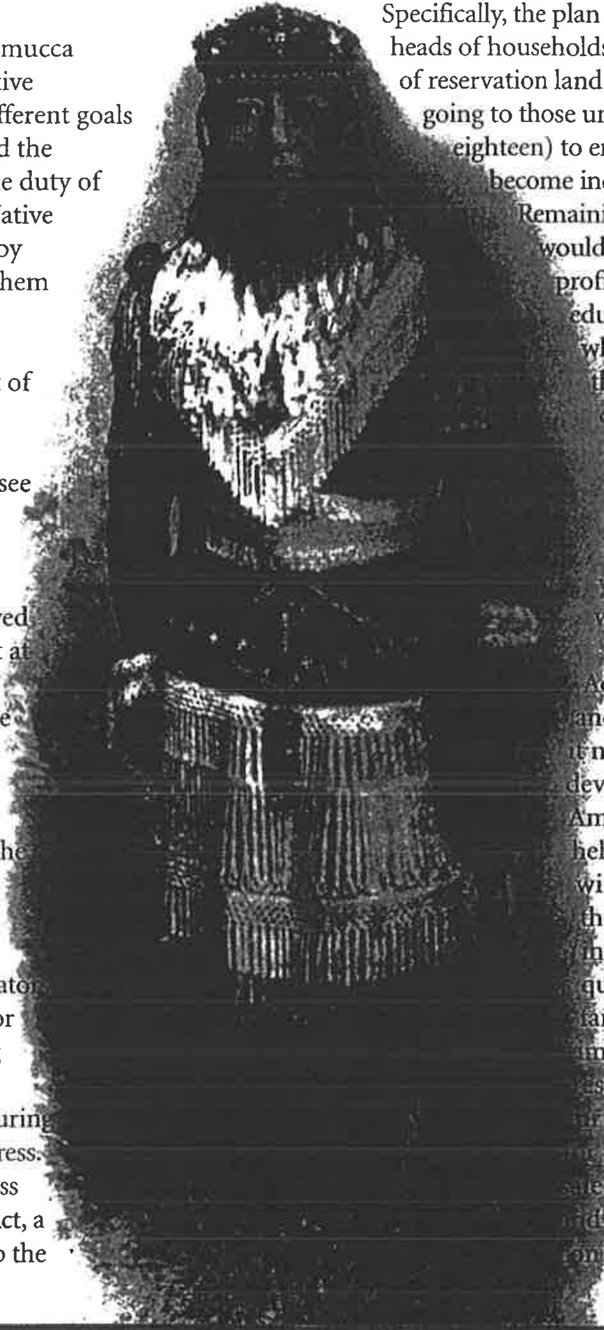
Why were Native Americans so resistant to the government's demand that they settle on reservations?

established in American popular culture by the mid-nineteenth century, notably in the story of Pocahontas (see Chapter 2). In her posed portrait (**15.16**), hardly anything in her costume, especially the crown and bag embroidered with a cupid and bow and arrow, resembles traditional Paiute clothing and jewelry. Nonetheless, in an era when the political and social opinions of women, especially Native American women, were largely ignored, Winnemucca's strategy succeeded for a time in bringing extensive and respectful press coverage of her speeches and eventually her book, *Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (1883). "In the history of the Indians," wrote one reporter in 1885, "she and Pocahontas will be the principal female characters."

Both Jackson and Winnemucca promoted education for Native Americans, but with very different goals in mind. Jackson represented the reformers who believed it the duty of the government to elevate Native Americans from "savagery" by educating and assimilating them into white Euro-American society. In particular they advocated the establishment of boarding schools for Indian children and the eventual dissolution of reservations (see *Choices and Consequences: Forced Assimilation versus Cultural Preservation*). In contrast Winnemucca believed in formal education, but not at the expense of eliminating Native American culture. She believed it was possible for Indian children to become educated and productive Americans, while retaining the core of their culture and traditions.

Jackson's ideas prevailed among reform-minded legislators in Congress, especially Senator Henry L. Dawes. He had long taken a sincere interest in the plight of Native Americans during nearly three decades in Congress. In 1887 he wrote and Congress passed the Dawes Severalty Act, a measure designed to break up the reservations and assimilate Native Americans into the dominant white Christian American culture.

> "For shame! For shame! You dare to cry out Liberty, when you hold us in places against our will, driving us from place to place as if we were beasts."
>
> SARAH WINNEMUCCA, *Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (1883)



15.16 Speaking Out for Native American Rights Sarah Winnemucca, a member of the Paiute tribe in California, drew attention to the injustices being suffered by Native Americans through a speaking tour of the eastern United States and the publication of a book.

Specifically, the plan offered Native American heads of households allotments of 160 acres of reservation land (with smaller amounts going to those unmarried or under age eighteen) to encourage them to become independent family farmers. Remaining reservation lands would be sold off and the profits set aside for tools and education. Native Americans who accepted these terms then could apply for U.S. citizenship. To prevent speculators from defrauding Indians, land allotments would be held in trust for twenty-five years before full ownership was conferred.

The Dawes Severalty Act was born of high ideals and good intentions, but it nonetheless proved devastating to the Native Americans it was intended to help. The program was rife with flaws, beginning with the allotment of land that, in many cases, was of poor quality, making successful farming difficult if not impossible. It also included restrictions on hunting, further limiting options for participants. Despite safeguards, white speculators and scammers found ways to con Native Americans ov

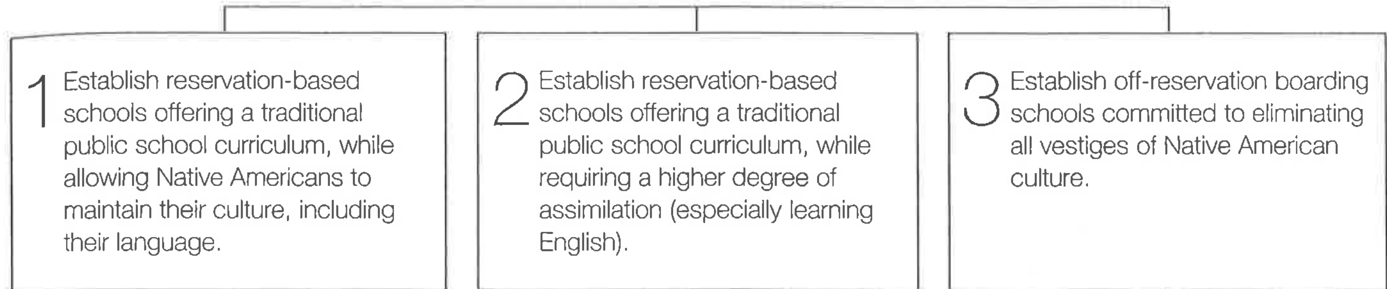
What led reformers like Dawes to believe the break up of reservations would be beneficial to Native Americans?

Choices and Consequences

FORCED ASSIMILATION VERSUS CULTURAL PRESERVATION

The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 stipulated that revenue generated from the sale of reservation lands be applied to the education of Native American children. As with the land allotment plan, the principal motivation of people like Dawes and reformer Helen Hunt Jackson was to assimilate Indians into American society, which they believed would be facilitated by providing vocational training to enhance their job prospects. But the act did not specify what kind of education ought to be provided, and so Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs faced a choice.

Choices



Decision

The federal government chose to promote the establishment of off-reservation boarding schools. The model was the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Established in 1879, it operated on the simple, but brutal principle of "kill the Indian, save the man." As the "before and after" photographs indicate, Native American children sent to boarding schools were required to cut their hair, wear American clothing, take an American name, and speak only English. Some schools made conversion to Christianity a top priority.

Consequences

Removal from families and fellow Native Americans on their reservations caused many children to suffer psychological trauma. Many also suffered from physical abuse, malnutrition, and poor health care. About one in seven ran away, and an unusually high number committed suicide. Still, by 1902 twenty-five federally funded boarding schools, and many more private ones, operated in fifteen states with an enrollment of six thousand students.

Continuing Controversies

What was the long-term impact of the boarding schools?
Along with the trauma inflicted on generations of children, it hastened the demise of Native American culture, including the disappearance or near disappearance of many languages. Several Native American groups have filed lawsuits against the U.S. government and the churches that ran the schools and demanded formal apologies.

Before-and-after photos of Chiricahua Apache children at the Carlisle Boarding School, circa 1890.

What assumptions about Native American culture influenced the boarding school program?

"The Indians must conform to "the white man's ways," peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must. They must adjust themselves to their environment, and conform their mode of living substantially to our civilization. ... They can not escape it, and must either conform to it or be crushed by it."

THOMAS J. MORGAN, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1889

INDIAN LAND FOR SALE

GET A HOME OF YOUR OWN • EASY PAYMENTS

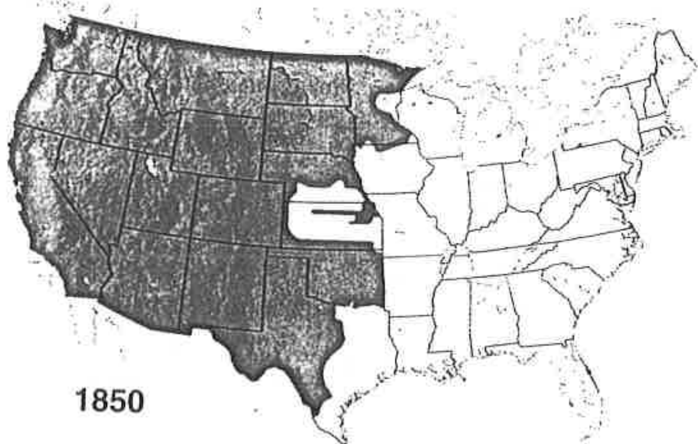
PERFECT TITLE • POSSESSION WITHIN THIRTY DAYS

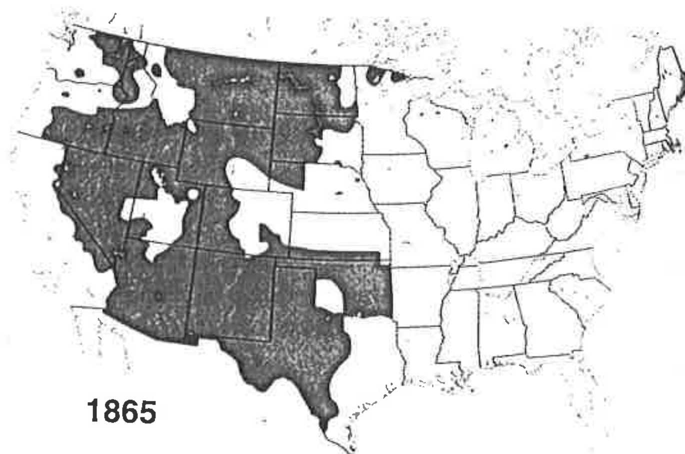
FINE LANDS IN THE WEST

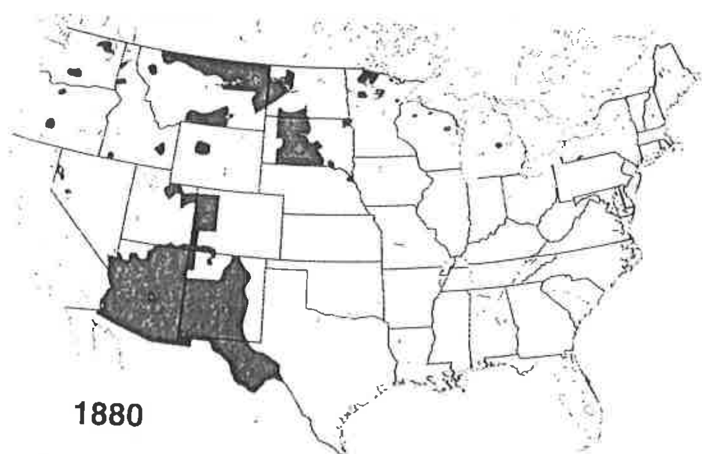
IRRIGATED IRRIGABLE — GRAZING — AGRICULTURAL DRY FARMING

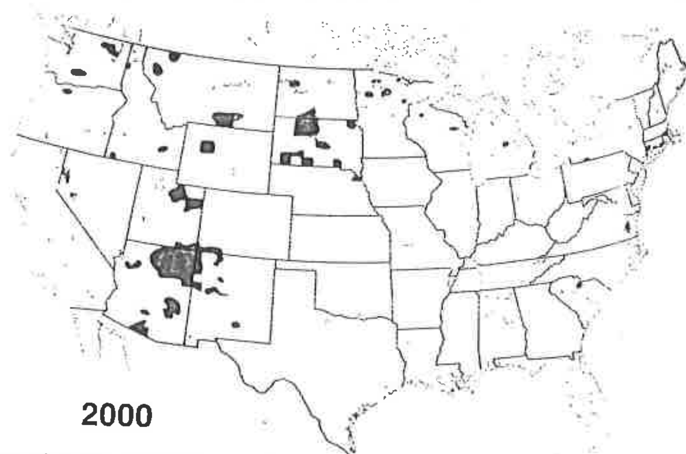
15.17 Selling off Reservation Lands
This advertisement issued by the federal government in 1911 vividly illustrates the Dawes Severalty Act in action as it exuberantly proclaims a sale of 350,000 acres of Indian land.

their allotted land long before the twenty-five-year term. The act also allowed, as indicated by the poster (**15.17**), for the government to sell land deemed "surplus" to white settlers. This poster touts the high quality of the estimated 350,000 acres being offered for sale in 1910. As the map (**15.18**) shows, by the time the Dawes Act was replaced in 1934, two-thirds of Native American reservation land had been lost.









Land transferred from Indians to whites

Land held by or returned to Indians

15.18 The Loss of Native American Lands
Native American land possessions shrank steadily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through a combination of treaties, sales, and forced expulsion by white settlers and soldiers. In 1887 the Dawes Severalty Act accelerated this trend by encouraging the breakup of reservations.

How did the Dawes Act play a key role in the loss of Native American land?