

The Ghost Dance: Indian Removal after the War

A Unit of Study for Grades 10–12

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TEACHER BACKGROUND

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The westward moving white Americans clashed with the Native Americans as they moved west of the Mississippi River after the Civil War. The whites sought to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 that granted them free land. The Indians in the West had been there either for hundreds of generations or since they had been driven there by whites from east of the Mississippi in the first great removal of Indians in the 1830s. The federal government now drastically altered national policies on the Indians to displace them and make room for the white ranchers and miners.

An increased understanding of the role of the American Indian in our past is crucial to an understanding of the development of our nation, our ideals, our actions and our policies. As President Rutherford B. Hayes admitted in 1877, *Many, if not most, of our Indian wars have had their origin in broken promises and acts of injustice upon our part. . . .* Students should be exposed to the interplay of legislation, on-the-spot military decisions, and assumptions of cultural superiority that made possible the destruction of the Plains Indian nations. The unit employs situational activities with roles for students that will enable them to understand these factors better. The unit also explores one way the Indians tried to revitalize their cultures amid the tragedy.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit could be employed immediately after lessons on Reconstruction or it could be introduced in conjunction with lessons on the westward migration whenever it fits. The unit could even be employed out of chronological context as an introduction to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, by which federal policies of the preceding century were reversed.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

The Ghost Dance: The Indian Removal After the Civil War provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 6**, "The Development of the Industrial United States." Lessons specifically address **Standard 4A**, Federal Indian policy and United States foreign policy after the Civil War.

Lessons within this unit likewise address a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards. Students are challenged to explain historical continuity and change, differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations; analyze cause-and-effect relationships, formulate historical questions, and marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances.

IV. Unit Objectives

- ◆ To study the geographical location of Indians and white settlers in the West.
- ◆ To examine government Indian policies.
- ◆ To consider options available to white policy-makers in this period and discover how policies changed over time.
- ◆ To show how Native Americans responded to the crisis of the Second Great Removal.

V. INTRODUCTION TO THE *GHOST DANCE: THE INDIAN REMOVAL AFTER THE CIVIL WAR*

Since the founding of the United States, the Indians were regarded as an obstacle to American expansion. The Jeffersonians adopted a philanthropic program of “civilizing” and absorbing the Indians into the American population. However, even though nations such as the Cherokee adopted rapidly to “walking the white man’s road,” the federal government under President Andrew Jackson adopted the policy of removing Indians as far west as possible. With the forced removal of the Southern Indians (the “Five Civilized Tribes”) west of the Mississippi River to present day Oklahoma in the 1830s, Jeffersonian philanthropy was abandoned.

During the Civil War, some of the western Indians sided with the Confederacy, which led the United States Army to regard all Indians as traitors. In New Mexico during the war, for example, Colonel Kit Carson held 8,500 Navajos in captivity for several years. When the war ended, the Army had provoked peaceful Cheyennes and others to war, and when a congressional commission advocated relocating all remaining Indians to present-day South Dakota and Oklahoma, the major Indian nations declared war. General Philip Sheridan, famous for saying “*the only good Indian is a dead Indian,*” was assigned the task of defeating them over the next decade.

Meanwhile, white pioneers, hunters, and railroad crews disrupted the migration patterns of buffalo and wantonly slaughtered them. The buffalo was a central element in Plains Indian culture. It provided a principal food source and hides were used for clothing and shelter. Buffalo also figured prominently in Plains Indians religious and ceremonial life.

Congress added to these pressures beginning in 1870 by passing legislation that ended the original policy of regarding Indian nations as sovereign. Congress extended direct federal jurisdiction to the reservations to undermine tribal leadership and prevent

Indian gatherings for religious ceremonies. In 1887, a major new law expanded upon this logic. By the Dawes Severalty Act, Indians were no longer to be regarded as members of specific Indian nations, but only as individuals. They were offered homestead grants of 160 acres, designed to force them into an agrarian economy and lure them away from their tribes. In actual operation, the act was the means of depriving Indians of two-thirds of their remaining lands and leaving 100,000 of them landless.

The Indians negotiated, fought back, or tried to stay clear of whites, but whatever tactics they chose, their numbers declined dramatically and they seemed on the road to extinction, which was regretted by only a few Americans of conscience.

Some Indians responded to this utter degradation by joining a movement founded called the Ghost Dance religion founded by the Paiute [also *Piute*] Messiah, Wovoka. Wovoka's followers performed a prescribed dance which the Paiute Messiah claimed would eventually bring back the dead Indian peoples and restore the buffalo. The Ghost Dance was regarded as threatening by whites and the Army was order to stamp it out.

The Ghost Dance was a religious revitalization movement among Indians after 1870, in which believers were assured that a day was near when Indians would be relieved of their oppression by the white people. It had spread among the Sioux in South Dakota. In 1890, the U.S. agent on the Sioux reservation ordered Indian police to arrest Sioux Chief Sitting Bull; when he refused to cooperate, he and his son were shot dead in a struggle. The other Sioux—mostly women and children—fled in a panic into the Badlands, but severe weather and hunger soon forced them to return and surrender to soldiers at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota.

At Wounded Knee, after many Indians were disarmed, one resisted, and in a scuffle an officer was killed by a stray shot. The soldiers then opened fire on the Indians, who tried to flee to a gulch for protection, but three hundred were massacred by soldiers using Gatling guns. An Indian named Black Elk came upon the massacre just as it ended. He said *“I wished that I had died too, but I was not sorry for the women and children. It was better for them to be happy in the other world, and I wanted to be there too. But before I went there I wanted to have revenge.”* He never had his revenge as this was the last bloody confrontation between Indians and whites for many years.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. United States Indian Policy in the 19th Century
2. The Senate Debate
3. The Ghost Dance