American Indian Policy in the United States:
Primary Sources and Activities

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Relationships between the U.S. government and Native peoples of North America had a huge impact on the 19th-century United States. Autonomous tribes that had lived for centuries on the land that became the United States were slowly deprived of their rights as sovereign nations, by changing federal Indian policy. These policies that pushed Indians off their lands led to expansion of the United States as a land mass and as a growing population.

Federal Indian policy in the 19th century shaped the concurrent growth of the United States and the shrinking of sovereign nations. Instruction on federal Indian policy can be easily woven into other instruction related to 19th-century issues, to show students that Indians did not exist on a separate plane than other Americans and should not be viewed as a separate story. Instead, issues related to relationships with American Indians are part of the majority of the 19th-century American story.

Coming into high school, students may have a general understanding of Native peoples of America, but might not yet have learned about the complicated issues related to federal policy. As shown on the timeline below, the number of laws and acts passed by the U.S. government are many. Incorporating discussion and instruction on the effects and reactions to policies, as well as the reasoning behind those policies, can strengthen student knowledge of U.S.-Indian relations without having to dive headfirst into the language of the acts themselves.

Library of Congress Resources

- “Indians of North America” in Prints and Photographs Online: [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/related/?q=Indians%20of%20North%20America&fi=subjects](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/related/?q=Indians%20of%20North%20America&fi=subjects)
- “Indian Boarding Schools” and “American Indian Reservation Controversies” Lesson Plans: [http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/) (under American Indian History)
Federal Indian Policy Primary-Source Set:  
Sources and Activities

This primary-source set builds on the work already done by the Library of Congress, as well as the identification of additional Library of Congress sources and supporting sources from the Minnesota Historical Society, to create three in-class activities for high school students to teach about three particular elements of 19th-century federal Indian policy.

- **Federal Indian Policy Debated in Political Cartoons**
- **Indian Delegations: Traditional v. Western Dress**
- **Indian Children React to Boarding Schools**

The sources and activities here provide teachers with activity suggestions that can occupy one class period or less. The inclusion of Minnesota sources helps to make the connection between state and national history, illustrating that events on the national stage also played out in Minnesota. Library of Congress sources include:

- “‘Move On!’ Has the Native American no rights that the naturalized American is bound to respect?” Thomas Nast. 1871.
- “Conquering the Indians.” Charles Richard Tuttle. 1874.
- Red Cloud and Indians. Standing - Red Bear (Sons Are?), Young Man Afraid of his Horse, Good Voice, Ring Thunder, Iron Crow, White Tail, Young Spotted Tail. Seated - Yellow Bear, Jack Red Cloud, Big Road, Little Wound, Black Crow. Photograph. 1877.
- “Uncle Sam’s Indian policy - the government ‘ward.’” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper. 1878.
- “The nation’s ward.” Grant E. Hamilton. 1885.
- The delegation of Sioux chiefs to ratify the sale of lands in South Dakota to the U.S. government, December, 1889. Photograph. 1889.
- “The reason of the Indian outbreak General Miles declares that the Indians are starved into rebellion.” 1890.
- “Consistency.” 1891.
- “Group of Pueblo Indians photographed at the U.S. Capitol today. This is the first time since the Lincoln Administration that the Pueblo Indians have sent a delegation to Wash. They appeared before the Senate Lands Committee.” Photograph. 1923.

Minnesota Sources (from the Minnesota Historical Society) include:

- “Joseph R. Brown with Dakota Indians and white men who accompanied him to Washington for a treaty with the government.” Photograph. 1858.
- “1858 Treaty Delegation to Washington.” Photograph. 1858.
Federal Indian Policy: Context

Since the creation of the United States government, federal agencies enacted specific laws and policies to administer issues related to American Indians. Policy ranged from treaty-making to removal to assimilation to allotment, and overwhelmingly, federal Indian policy was conducted in a manner that favored white interests and systematically harmed American Indians and their cultures.

As Americans pushed farther west and the desire for land increased, the U.S. government began taking ownership of land occupied by Indians, through treaties negotiated with Indian nations and forced removal. The government passed laws to enable these methods to gain land and control, and policy shifted several times during the century. Initial contact and treaty-making moved into removal or relocation, which eventually led to attempts at assimilation.

Tribes resisted throughout the 19th century, but the government responded with threats, persuasion and force. By the end of the century, almost all American Indians lived on reservations that no longer belonged to the tribe as a whole, watched their children educated in boarding schools, and struggled to maintain their culture and traditions.

The documents that survive are largely the work of white Americans. Many documents are paternalistic, claiming that government actions are in the best interest of Indians; others portray Indians as savage or childlike; and still others reveal great cruelty in the actions of government officials, the military, and U.S. citizens. Some documents do show that not all white Americans agreed with federal policies.

The Native voice, recorded in writing, is largely absent from this time period. Some American Indians expressed their opinions in ways that were recorded on paper, and others’ opinions were printed in white publications, sometimes filtered through a non-Native writer.

Indian Policy in Minnesota

Minnesota has been home to two main tribes for centuries: the Dakota (Sioux) and Ojibwe (Chippewa or Anishinaabe). Federal Indian policy led to several treaties signed with the Dakota and Ojibwe, beginning in 1805, which deprived them of millions of acres of land and created reservations across the state. Broken treaties led to the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, which resulted in the deaths of both Dakota and white settlers, the hanging of 38 Dakota and placement of 300 Dakota to an internment camp, and the removal of several Dakota bands into Iowa, Canada and the Dakotas. The United States continued to make treaties with the Ojibwe throughout the late 19th century. After the Dawes Act initiated allotment policies, the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe in northern Minnesota refused allotment and kept their land in the hands of the entire tribe.
Limited Timeline of Federal Indian Policy, 19th Century

This timeline highlights a small portion of the events of the 19th century related to Federal Indian Policy.

1824: Indian Office Federal Agency. Established, later called the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

1830: Indian Removal Act. Forces entire Indian tribes to leave their land.

1851: Appropriation Act. Western Indian tribes are moved by the U.S. government onto reservations.

1871: Appropriation Act. Indian tribes were no longer considered independent. Any issues concerning American Indians or conflicts regarding land use were now handled exclusively by the U.S. government. Indians are declared to be “wards” of the U.S. government.

1873-1874: Buffalo War. Almost all Indians live on reservations.

1874: Gold found in the Black Hills. Indians on those lands forced to leave, which leads to the Indian Wars.

1880: Beginning of the boarding school policy in the United States.

1887: Dawes Act (General Allotment Act) surveyed Indian tribal land and allotted it to Indian individuals.

1890-1892: Ghost Dance movement, which encouraged American Indians to resist the U.S. government and military. In response, the U.S. government tightens control.

1890: Sitting Bull is killed, and the Wounded Knee Massacre takes place. The end of 19th-century armed resistance by American Indians.


For a more comprehensive timeline of events related specifically to land issues, download this PDF from the Indian Land Tenure Foundation: http://www.iltf.org/sites/default/files/american_indian_history_timeline.pdf.
Federal Indian Policy Debated in Political Cartoons

Library of Congress documents for this activity:


“Uncle Sam’s Indian policy.” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper. 1878. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001696520/


Activity Procedure:

Political cartoons have provided artists and journalists with a medium to express personal or public opinion for centuries. In the 19th century, federal American Indian policy was a constantly evolving, controversial issue, which made it a perfect subject for debate within political cartoons. Cartoons use tools such as symbolism, satire and stereotypes to make their point.

1. Choose one source from the list above as an example. Project a small portion (but magnified) of that cartoon for the whole class to see. Have the class discuss the small piece of the cartoon: what do they see (people, objects, words, emotions, symbols, etc.)? Then zoom out a bit to show more of the cartoon. Does that first small portion start to take on a new meaning when you see more of the cartoon? Finally, zoom out to the whole cartoon. Discuss the perceived meaning of the entire cartoon. How did it help to examine the cartoon a small section at a time?

2. Gather students in groups of three or four. Distribute the cartoons in pairs: Conquering and Outbreak, Move On and Consistency, and Nation’s Ward and Uncle Sam.* Have the groups analyze the cartoons, examining the various elements and then the cartoon as a whole. What is the point of view of each artist, and what issue is he addressing?

3. The groups then will compare the pair of cartoons. What is similar about the two cartoons’ points of view? Are they discussing similar issues regarding federal Indian policy? Are there consistent symbols, themes or attitudes? Do you notice any clear differences?

4. Come back together as a class. Project each cartoon for the class to see and have the groups point out what they discussed, and what similarities and differences they see. As a large group, discuss the effectiveness of these cartoons in addressing debates over federal Indian policy.

* Pairing similarities. Conquering and Outbreak: Both show Indians as submissive/indebted to U.S. government. Move On and Consistency: Both address the inconsistency of U.S. policies toward non-white Americans. Nation’s Ward and Uncle Sam: Both show a negative perception of Indian relationships with the U.S. government.
"Move On! Has the Native American no rights that the naturalized American is bound to respect?" - Thomas Nast.

1871. Library of Congress.
Uncle Sam's Indian policy – the government “ward” – “Ugh! Me got great father’s supplies; now me want pale face’s scalp” [caricature of armed Indian coming out of jack-in-the-box “Indian reservation” and attacking a famer, as soldier approaches from behind. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. 1878. Library of Congress.
“The reason of the Indian outbreak General Miles declares that the Indians are starved into rebellion.” 1890. Library of Congress.
Indian Delegations: Traditional v. Western Dress

**Library of Congress documents for this activity**


The delegation of Sioux chiefs to ratify the sale of lands in South Dakota. 1889. [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91787207/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91787207/)

Group of Pueblo Indians photographed at the U.S. capitol today. 1923. [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004669814/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004669814/)

**Minnesota documents for this activity**


**Activity Procedure:**

Federal Indian policy in the later 19th century emphasized “assimilation,” or forcing American Indians to adopt white culture and abandon Native traditions. Traditional dress was just one element of Native culture that whites discouraged and forcibly changed. Delegations of Indians visiting Washington, D.C., were often swept into tailors’ shops immediately upon arrival to be outfitted in Western clothing.

1. Read this quote as a group: “Since government policy was to turn the Indians into white men, it was presumed that making them look like white men was a giant stride in that direction... The need for Indians to adopt citizen’s dress was a constant theme throughout the nineteenth century... The stress on clothing succeeded to such an extent that Indian delegates were self-conscious and embarrassed by their traditional dress.” *Diplomats in Buckskin*, Herman J. Viola.

2. Discuss these questions as a group: Why was there such an emphasis on changing Indians’ clothing? How would it benefit whites if Indians were dressed in Western clothes? How would you make the argument that the loss of traditional dress was a visible representation of the loss of all Indian culture?

3. Examine the photos. What are your first reactions to the images? Would there have been any reason for Indians to voluntarily wear Western clothing? How do you think a group of traditionally dressed Indians would have impacted federal audiences differently in 1877 and 1923? Why would the same Minnesota delegation have dressed in both ways?

4. As a group, look at the Limited Timeline of Federal Indian Policy and note where these images fit into that timeline. Do the surrounding events have an effect on the dress of the Indians in the pictures?

5. On either the LOC website or the MHS websites, find another image of an Indian delegation to Washington that catches your eye. Based on these discussions, other images, and timeline of policy changes, write a reflection on your chosen image. *Extension: Find documentation of any of these delegations in Chronicling America newspapers: [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/).*
Red Cloud and Indians. Standing – Red Bear (Sons Are?); Young Man Afraid of His Horse; Good Voice; Ring Thunder; Iron Crow; White Tail. Seated – Yellow Bear; Jack Red Cloud; Big Road; Little Wound; Black Crow. Photograph. 1877. Library of Congress.
The delegation of Sioux chiefs to ratify the sale of lands in South Dakota to the U.S. government, December, 1889. Photograph. 1889. Library of Congress.
"Group of Pueblo Indians photographed at the U.S. Capitol today. This is the first time since the Lincoln Administration that the Pueblo Indians have sent a delegation to Wash. They appeared before the Senate Lands Committee." Photograph, 1923. Library of Congress.
Indian Children React to Boarding Schools

Library of Congress documents for this activity

“My Home in Indian Territory.” Etahdleuh Doanmoe. 1879. http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=amis;cc=amis;rgn=full%20text;idno=amis0033-8;didno=amis0033-8;view=image;seq=00267;node=amis0033-8%3A1

“The School Days of an Indian Girl.” Zitkala Sa. 1900. http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=atla;cc=atla;rgn=full%20text;idno=atla0085-2;didno=atla0085-2;view=image;seq=191;node=atla0085-2%3A1;page=root;size=50


Activity Procedure:

The U.S. government began removing American Indian children from their homes and sending them to boarding schools in the late 19th century, in an attempt to “civilize” the children and teach them the work, traditions and culture of whites, while simultaneously taking away all elements of their Native traditions and culture. Government reports, newspapers, and missionary publications generally praised the success of the boarding schools, often including reactions from students or students’ parents. Native reactions to losing their culture or to the negative effects of the schools are not as readily available.

1. Read both “School Days of an Indian Girl: The Cutting of My Long Hair” (page 186-7) and “My Home in Indian Territory.”

2. In small groups, have students determine the viewpoint of the speakers: who are they and what is their experience at boarding schools? List some specific words, phrases or recollections that lead you to those conclusions.

3. Address these additional questions in the same small groups, and then come back together as a large group to discuss:
   a. How are white people and Native people portrayed in these recollections?
   b. What was the purpose of each of these documents?
   c. Why did the writers record their memories?
   d. What is your reaction to the documents?

4. View the drawing “Wards of the Nation.” How do you interpret this drawing? The faces are not clear or not visible, so can you deduce what the parents and children might be feeling, based on the readings?

5. Take on the persona of one of the people in the drawing and write a recollection of this moment, when you saw your family members again. As you are writing, take into consideration what your experiences might have been with white people, the U.S. government, other Native people, and the boarding schools.
CHILDREN'S PAGE.

The following "short talk" was made by Etahdleuh Doanmoe ("Boy Hunting"), at the anniversary at Hampton. He is one of the St. Augustine Indians now studying there:

My Home in Indian Territory.

"I am a Kiowa Indian boy twenty-three years old. My home is in the Indian Territory. My people are not much civilized. They live in houses made of skins of the buffalo. They like to hunt and fight. When I was a little boy I did not see many white people. The Kiowas moved camp often to keep near the buffalo, and we lived on buffalo meat and berries all the time. We had no bread, no coffee or sugar. We boys talked all the time about hunting the buffalo, going to fight the Utes, Navajoes, or Pawnees, and most about fighting the white people or stealing horses. The old Kiowas talked all the time to us about fight or hunt the buffalo. Sometimes the men would go off and bring back scalps of white men and women, or Indian men and women; then we had a big dance. This was all I heard and all I saw, and I thought it was good, so I will be a big hunter and a good hunter too, and may be I get to be a big chief. When I was about fifteen years old I killed my first buffalo with a bow and arrow. I had no gun. Then I was called a man, because I could kill buffalo. Then I went with the young men to fight the Utes and Navajoes and steal horses. I was in three fights with the Utes and two with the Navajoes. All this time I wore a blanket or a buffalo robe, and liked to have my hair long, and paint my face and wear big rings in my ears. I did not know anything about God, or churches, or schools, or how to make things grow from the ground to live on. Four years ago there was a big war. The Kiowas, Comanches and Cheyennes fought the soldiers all winter. The buffalo were nearly all gone, and the Indians got very hungry. The horses worked hard, and it was so cold the grass was poor, so they got very weak, and we lost many in fights with the soldiers. Then the soldiers came to our camps and we had to run away and leave our lodges, then the soldiers burned them. We all got very tired and hungry, and the women and children cried, so the chiefs said we will go into Fort Sill and give up. We met Captain Pratt in the Wichita Mountains. He had some Indian soldiers and two wagons loaded with bread, sugar and coffee. He gave us plenty, and we gave him all our guns, pistols, bows and arrows, shields and spears. That night we had a big dance because we had plenty to eat. I went to Florida. Then I first began to learn something about the good way, and I find Indian's way very bad; so I thought I will never live Indian's way any more. Captain Pratt was our good friend. He taught us many things and showed us the white man's road. We stayed in Florida three years, and then some of the Indians went back home, but the young men wanted to stay east and get a good education. We came to Hampton. We have been here one year, and we study hard and are learning to work and be men. We like it. I see that every white boy and girl, and every black boy and girl can go to school, and that is the way they get ahead of the Indians. Indians have no chance. You give all Indian boys and girls schools and teachers like you have, and Indians will do better."

increased the whirring in my ears. My only safety seemed to be in keeping next to the wall. As I was wondering in which direction to escape from all this confusion, two warm hands grasped me firmly, and in the same moment I was tossed high in midair. A rosy-cheeked paleface woman caught me in her arms. I was both frightened and insulted by such trifling. I stared into her eyes, wishing her to let me stand on my own feet, but she jumped me up and down with increasing enthusiasm. My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud.

They misunderstood the cause of my tears, and placed me at a white table loaded with food. There our party were united again. As I did not have my crying, one of the older ones whispered to me, “Wait until you are alone in the night.”

It was very little I could swallow besides my sobs, that evening.

“Oh, I want my mother and my brother Davee! I want to go to my aunt!” I pleaded; but the ears of the palefaces could not hear me.

From the table we were taken along an upward incline of wooden boxes, which I learned afterward to call a stairway. At the top was a quiet hall, dimly lighted. Many narrow beds were in one straight line down the entire length of the wall. In them lay sleeping brown faces, which peeped just out of the coverings. I was tucked into bed with one of the tall girls, because she talked to me in my mother tongue and seemed to soothe me.

I had arrived in the wonderful land of rosy skies, but I was not happy, as I had thought I should be. My long travel and the bewildering sights had exhausted me. I fell asleep, hearing deep, tired sobs. My tears were left to dry themselves in streaks, because neither my aunt nor my mother was near to wipe them away.

II.

The Cutting of My Long Hair.

The first day in the land of apples was a bitter-cold one; for the snow still covered the ground, and the trees were bare. A large bell rang for breakfast, its loud metallic voles crashing through the bellry overhead and into our sensitive ears. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave us no peace. The constant clash of harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless.

A paleface woman, with white hair, came up after us. We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room. These were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeveless aprons and shingled hair. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders. I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more immodestly dressed than I, in their tightly fitting clothes. While we marched in, the boys entered at an opposite door. I watched for the three young braves who came in our party. I spied them in the rear ranks, looking as uncomfortable as I felt.

A small bell was tapped, and each of the pupils drew a chair from under the table. Supposing this act meant they were to be seated, I pulled out mine and at once slipped into it from one side. But when I turned my head, I saw that I was the only one seated, and all the rest at our table remained standing. Just as I began to rise, looking shyly around to see how chairs were to be used, a second bell was sounded. All were seated at last, and I had to crawl
back into my chair again. I heard a man's voice at one end of the hall, and
I looked around to see him. But all the others hung their heads over their
plates. As I glanced at the long chain of tables, I caught the eyes of a pale-
face woman upon me. Immediately I dropped my eyes, wondering why I was
so keenly watched by the strange woman. The man ceased his murrurings, and
then a third bell was tapped. Every
one picked up his knife and fork and
began eating. I began crying instead,
for by this time I was afraid to venture
anything more.

But this eating by formula was not the
hardest trial in that first day. Late in
the morning, my friend Judéwin gave
me a terrible warning. Judéwin knew
a few words of English; and she had
overheard the paleface woman talk about
cutting our long, heavy hair. Our
mothers had taught us that only unskilled
warriors who were captured had their
hair shingled by the enemy. Among our
people, short hair was worn by mourn-
ers, and shingled hair by cowards!

We discussed our fate some moments,
and when Judéwin said, "We have to
submit, because they are strong," I re-
belled.

"No, I will not submit! I will strug-
gle first!" I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no
one noticed I disappeared. I crept up
the stairs as quietly as I could in my
squeaking shoes,—my moccasins had
been exchanged for shoes. Along the
hall I passed, without knowing whither I
was going. Turning aside to an open
door, I found a large room with three
white beds in it. The windows were
covered with dark green curtains, which
made the room very dim. Thankful that
no one was there, I directed my steps
toward the corner farthest from the door.
On my hands and knees I crawled under
the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark
corner.

From my hiding place I peered out,
shuddering with fear whenever I heard
footsteps near by. Though in the hall
loud voices were calling my name, and I
knew that even Judéwin was searching
for me, I did not open my mouth to an-
swer. Then the steps were quickened
and the voices became excited. The
sounds came nearer and nearer. Wo-
men and girls entered the room. I held
my breath, and watched them open clos-
et doors and peep behind large trunks.
Some one threw up the curtains, and
the room was filled with sudden light.
What caused them to stoop and look un-
der the bed I do not know. I remem-
ber being dragged out, though I resisted
by kicking and scratching wildly. In
spite of myself, I was carried downstairs
and tied fast in a chair.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all
the while until I felt the cold blades of
the scissors against my neck, and heard
them gnaw off one of my thick braids.
Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I
was taken from my mother I had suf-
fcred extreme indignities. People had
stared at me. I had been tossed about
in the air like a wooden puppet. And
now my long hair was shingled like a
coward's! In my anguish I moaned for
my mother, but no one came to comfort
me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with
me, as my own mother used to do; for
now I was only one of many little ani-
mals driven by a herder.

III.

THE SNOW EPISODE.

A short time after our arrival we three
 Dakotas were playing in the snowdrifts.
We were all still deaf to the English
language, excepting Judéwin, who al-
ways heard such puzzling things. One
morning we learned through her ears
that we were forbidden to fall length-
wise in the snow, as we had been doing,
to see our own impressions. However,