

## Government Policy—The Grant Peace Plan

The rapid expansion of the nation after the Civil War added complex new issues to the government Indian policy. In the trans-Mississippi West significant contact between Europeans and western tribes—Comanches, Navajo, Apaches, Cheyennes, and Sioux—was relatively new. While generations of U.S. leaders had advocated moving Indians who lived in the eastern United States further west to make room for white settlement, once white settlement reached the West itself there was simply no place to push the western tribes. All of these issues complicated government policy and tribal responses in the West.

Prior to the Civil War, the Army represented the U.S. government to Indians west of the Mississippi. While the army was often far from respectful in the ways it dealt with western tribes, the goal was usually to limit warfare while allowing white transit across the Great Plains to California and Oregon. Few whites settled on the Great Plains prior to the 1860s. The first Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851 did not limit Indian land use except to try to keep the peace by keeping tribe apart from tribe. No reservations were established. Rather, in exchange for gifts the army asked the tribes to avoid conflict with each other and with military forts and the transit routes for the mails and settlers. Asking for more was beyond the limits of what the 270 soldiers at Fort Laramie could reasonably ask in a meeting attended by perhaps ten thousand American Indians including the Sioux, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Assinboins, Shoshones, Arikaras, Hidatsas, Mandans, and Crows.

After the Civil War the pressure for space for white settlement greatly expanded. In 1862 a Republican Congress passed and President Lincoln signed the **Homestead Act** fulfilling a major Republican campaign promise to make more federal land available for white settlement. The Act provided 160 acres of federal land to a family that would settle and maintain the land for five years. Much of the initial homestead settlements were in Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas, all on lands that had been prime buffalo hunting locations for Indians. If before the Civil War most whites had moved across the Great Plains and kept going under the protection of U.S. Army, after the Civil War whites were coming to the Plains to stay and larger army forces were coming with them. In addition to farming the discovery of mineral wealth in places like the Black Hills of the Dakotas brought more whites and further racial conflict.

Immediately after the war the same Congress that was taking control of Reconstruction also created its own Indian peace policy. The battles with the Lakota Sioux led Congress to seek a more peaceful plan and Congress created the Indian Peace Commission to negotiate treaties. The Congressional Commission developed the idea of tribal reserves or reservations, large tracts of land that would, they hoped, be set aside for the Indians, protecting the tribes from encroaching white civilization while ensuring their eventual assimilation into white culture. At the same time, of course, confining the tribes on reservations would ensure that most of the land of the West could be opened for white development. The plan was not a great success.

Tribes like the Sioux, Nez Perce, and Comanche resented the confinement of reservation life and often wandered far beyond their assigned bounds.

When Ulysses S. Grant became president in 1869 he initiated a new peace policy that became known as **Grant's Peace Policy**. Grant's thinking was shaped by the terrible bloodshed he had seen in the Civil War and by his identification with the emancipation of slaves. He wanted to end the corruption that he saw in the Indian Bureau, and wanted to treat the Indians with dignity. His goal was peace. At the same time Grant wanted room for white settlement and was certainly not planning to keep whites out of the vast tracts of western land that the Indians used for hunting. He said there was no turning back the clock and that the past, "cannot be undone, and the question must be met as we now find it." Meeting the question, he believed, meant assimilating Indians into white society or as the president said, "The moral view of the question should be considered, and the question asked, cannot the Indian be made a useful and productive member of society by proper teaching and treatment." Since most of the Indians did not want to become "useful and productive members" of white society, Grant's policy may have been doomed from the beginning, but he tried to find a human solution to the clash of quite different cultures in the American West.

In his first annual message to Congress in December 1869 Grant announced his Indian Peace Policy. The president said, "The building of rail-roads and the access thereby given to all the agricultural and mineral regions of the country is rapidly bringing civilized settlements into contact with all the tribes of Indians. . . . I see no remedy for this except in placing all the Indians on large reservations . . . and giving them absolute protection there." Grant then appointed a member of the Seneca tribe, Ely S. Parker, as the first Commissioner of Indian Affairs, the first nonwhite to hold high government position. And Grant turned from both the army and the Indian Office to Christian missionaries to take the lead in managing reservation affairs. He declared the reservations off limits to the army, even troops who were chasing Indians with whom they had been in battle.

The missionaries, people like the Quaker Lawrie Tatum who was appointed to lead the Comanche and Kiowa reservation, tried to make the peace policy work. But government supplies were slow in coming and often of shoddy workmanship. Many Indians resisted the confinement of reservation life. For the army the rule that they could not follow Indians into the reservation asylum while they were expected to police the non-Indian territories was frustrating. General Sheridan condemned the Peace Policy saying, "If a white man commits murder or robs, we hang him or send him to the penitentiary; if an Indian does the same, we have been in the habit of giving him more blankets." The Indians, on the other hand, saw the whites as thieves who were stealing their land.

In the face of continued battles across the Great Plains, the Indian Peace Policy was not repealed but the army simply ignored it. Sherman's defeat of the Comanches in 1874-1875 was in violation of the policy that army units could not enter reservations, but the general was praised not reprimanded. Within a year after Custer's 1876 defeat, the army had subdued nearly all of the Sioux. Crazy Horse, one of the Sioux who was at the Little Big Horn the day Custer died, became an army scout and was killed at an army post in September 1877. Sitting Bull was arrested in 1881 after returning from exile in Canada. He toured briefly with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show in the 1880s then retired to the Standing Rock reservation where, as the Ghost Dance movement grew, he was killed in a standoff with other Sioux sent by the army to arrest him. But the Grant Peace Policy had died long before the old chief met his end.

## Government Policy—The Dawes Act

Within a decade of the last major Indian wars in the 1870s and the settlement of most western Indians on reservations, the U.S. government again began to change policy. By the 1880s reformers in and out of government were concluding that the assimilation of Indians into white society—a goal many shared—would not happen as long as they maintained their ancient ways on reservations. If the route to Indian survival was becoming independent farmers who attended churches and schools just as whites did then why, reformers asked, should they live on reservations? Why not give them all the benefits of the Homestead Act and allow Indians, like whites, to gain free title to their own 160 acre farm and American citizenship?

The result of these arguments was that Congress passed the General Allotment Act, known as the **Dawes Act** for its prime sponsor Massachusetts Senator Henry L. Dawes, in 1887. The Dawes Act divided the reservations into 160-acre tracts to be assigned to each family. After a twenty-five year waiting period Indian families could sell the land like their white neighbors. Indians who took possession of a homestead also became U.S. citizens. At first glance the Dawes Act might seem like an enlightened piece of legislation and at least some of its sponsors certainly believed that it was.

The Dawes Act had other provisions, however. Where Indian culture was tribal and communal and hunting was a major activity, the Dawes Act pushed Indians to be farmers; to join an individualistic culture that many found to be quite alien. Beyond that, the most immediate impact of the Act was that after each family on a reservation was allotted its 160 acres; all “surplus” land could be sold by the government to white families. Later as Indian land came on the market, Indian families sometimes sold their land, giving them a profit but alienating them from their tribe. A few tribes, the Navajo and the Seneca, were able to avoid implementation of the Dawes Act and retain communal ownership of their reservations. But for many the act was an economic and cultural disaster.

In 1881 155 million acres were set aside as reservations belonging to Indian tribes. As a result of the Dawes Act, by 1900 Indians controlled only 78 million acres. While the Dawes Act broke up tribal lands, other federal policies undercut Indian culture. Few white authorities believed that the First Amendment protections of religious freedom applied to Indian religion, especially because Indian religion and Indian warfare were often linked. It was not until 1978, that Congress declared traditional Indian religions to have First Amendment rights.

Sending Indian young people to special schools was also seen by officials as one of the surest ways of implementing Grant’s promise to “favor any course towards them which tends to their civilization and ultimate citizenship.” In 1875 the army ordered seventy-two Indian prisoners—Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Caddo—moved from Fort Sill, Indian Territory to a new federal prison in St. Augustine, Florida. Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt, a Civil War, veteran was put in charge of the prisoners decided to create a model Indian school. He hired Sarah Mather from Mt. Holyoke College and the two began to teach the prisoners American-style dress, the English language, and Protestant Christianity. Pratt and Mather viewed converting the Indians to white ways and to Christianity as essential. The isolation of the prisoner-students made the process earlier. Soaring Eagle, A Cheyenne warrior said, “It is good to go to church . . . . When I go home, I hope to sit down and sing God’s hymns.” Of course Soaring Eagle and the other prisoners knew that about the only chance they had to actually go home was to comply with the school’s policies.

Pratt and Mather’s experiment drew widespread praise. They were authorized to expand their efforts and open the **Carlisle Indian School** in old army barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Pratt was convinced that total immersion in white culture was the only key to effective Indian education. Eventually twenty-five Indian boarding schools were built on the Carlisle model between 1879 and 1902. Using federal tax dollars these schools—eventually there were Catholic as well as Protestant ones—taught religion, western customs and values to their Indian students.

While the goal of the Indian boarding schools was the transformation of individual Indians, resistance continued though it was harshly punished. Francis La Flesche, an Omaha who attended a Presbyterian mission school in the 1860s reported that he and his friends spoke English during the day, but at night when the missionaries were gone, they continued to tell each other the Omaha stories and speak the Omaha language.