

Changes to the Plains Indians' Way of Life

Although the Indians won against the US army at the battle of Little Bighorn (see p.72), it was too little too late.

The *Sioux* eventually *Lost the Great Sioux War*

- 1) After the Battle of Little Bighorn, the army launched a winter campaign against the Sioux in 1876-77. Facing hunger and the loss of their horses, the Sioux surrendered and were forced onto reservations.
- 2) Crazy Horse surrendered in May 1877 and was later killed by a US soldier while resisting arrest. Sitting Bull retreated to Canada, but returned and surrendered in 1881.
- 3) Sioux reservations were put under military control and, in 1877, the Black Hills were opened to white settlement.

Comment and Analysis

Little Bighorn was only a short term victory for the Native Americans. It wasn't enough to turn their fortunes around.

Buffalo Slaughter forced Native Americans to accept *Reservations*

- 1) Millions of buffalo had once roamed the Plains. They were vital to many Plains Indians' survival (see p.58) and were sacred to them.
- 2) Buffalo were slaughtered in large numbers by white settlers (see p.71). They were killed to feed soldiers and railroad construction workers. People also killed them for their skins and others just killed them for sport — men would shoot the animals from the windows of trains.
- 3) As a result of this, buffalo numbers decreased rapidly — there roughly were 13 million buffalo on the plains in 1865, but by the end of the century they were almost extinct.
- 4) The effect on the Plains Indians was devastating — their main source of food was gone, as well as a major part of their culture. This caused many Indians to accept life on the reservations — they feared starvation.
- 5) It's unclear whether there was an official policy to exterminate the buffalo, but many people recognised that destroying them would help defeat the Indians.



© Photo Researchers / Mary Evans Picture Library

A buffalo skinner. Buffalo skins were much in demand. The rest of the animal would be left to decay on the Plains.

General Sheridan is quoted as saying, 'let them kill, skin and sell until the buffalo is exterminated, as it is the only way to bring lasting peace and allow civilisation to advance.'

Reservations destroyed their Culture

- 1) The formerly nomadic Plains Indians, now confined to smaller areas, could no longer feed or clothe themselves without government aid. Living on hand-outs, they became demoralised and there were high rates of alcoholism.
- 2) Many tribes were moved off their culturally significant ancestral lands and onto reservations elsewhere. The influence of chiefs declined because reservations were run by Indian agents, undermining tribal structure. Hostile tribes were sometimes put on reservations in close proximity.
- 3) Many children were taken away to be educated, for example at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania (founded in 1879). Polygamy (having more than one wife) and religious practices such as the Sun Dance were banned. The threat of withholding rations was used to enforce cooperation.

Comment and Analysis

The government had always wanted the Indians to assimilate. As Indians living on the reservations were now dependent on the state, there was a way to force them to abandon their own culture.

It is debatable whether the Plains Indians could have protected their way of life. There were many factors at work against them. The US army usually had better weapons than the Native Americans — repeating rifles, machine guns and cannons. The system of forts gave the US army control on the Plains. The railroads and telegraph system provided fast transport and communication. Divisions between Native American nations meant that they had no organised resistance. Reservation life also made it more difficult for them to resist.

The Native Americans couldn't bring the buffalo back...

If you're writing about how the Native Americans were defeated, make sure you mention the impact of the destruction of the buffalo — the buffalo were crucial to their survival.



Assimilation of the Native Americans

America's population was growing — increasing the pressure on reservation land.

The Dawes Act (1887) Parcelled Out tribal lands

- 1) The aim of the Dawes Act was to convert tribesmen into independent farmers. It was hoped this would help destroy tribal bonds and lead to the assimilation of Native Americans into white society.
- 2) The Dawes Act broke reservations up into allotments. Each head of family was assigned 160 acres, each single adult 80 acres, and each child 40 acres. US citizenship was also part of the deal.
- 3) When all the inhabitants of a reservation had been assigned their holdings, the remaining land was thrown open to white settlement. Indian schools were established from the sale of this surplus land.
- 4) The Act was a disaster for the Native Americans:
 - Their tribal communities were broken up and their culture almost destroyed — the idea of land ownership went against Native American tradition.
 - The creation of allotments led to Indians losing their land — down from 138 million acres in 1887 to 78 million acres in 1900. They also lost land granted to them under the Act (nearly two thirds of it between 1887 and 1934) as a result of being cheated by land speculators.

Some reformers supported the Act because they wanted to stop Indian suffering on reservations. Some believed that reservation life encouraged idleness and reliance on government hand-outs. Others just wanted to open up reservation lands to settlers.

Men found it difficult to adapt to farming — this had traditionally been seen as a woman's role. In Indian schools, children had to dress like white Americans and weren't allowed to speak tribal languages.

Comment and Analysis

While many reformers may have believed they had good intentions, their actions were based on their prejudiced belief that Native Americans needed to be introduced to Christianity and western civilisation to improve themselves.

- Lands belonging to the five eastern tribes that had been moved on to the Plains in the 1830s (see p.57) were exempt from the Dawes Act, yet through forced sales they too were eventually lost.
- In 1934, the government repealed the Dawes Act and encouraged tribal identities. But by that time, Native Americans had lost over 60 per cent of their original reservation lands and were suffering from high rates of poverty, alcoholism, illiteracy and suicide.

The Wounded Knee Massacre was the End of Indian resistance

The Wounded Knee Massacre was the last confrontation between Native Americans and the US army.

- The spiritual leader Wovoka taught that a special Ghost Dance could raise the dead and bring a new world free from settlers. He was against violence, but ghost dances built the dancers up into a frenzy — this unsettled white Americans, who feared that the dance would lead to rebellion.
- Tensions peaked at the Pine Ridge Reservation in Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota. Fighting broke out between a band of Sioux and the US army — 150 Sioux and 25 soldiers died.

Some of the ghost dancers believed that special shirts would protect them from bullets. The sight of the shirts pierced by bullets after the battle destroyed their faith in a magical restoration of the old way of life. The reservation was reluctantly accepted as home.

Americans became aware of the End of the Frontier

- 1) In 1890, census results revealed that, unlike in 1880, there was no longer a definable western frontier of settlement. The frontier was declared officially closed.
- 2) This didn't mean that there was no more land available for settlers, but what remained was in isolated pockets and the best areas had been taken.

The Native Americans were no longer a barrier to settlement — they'd been subdued and were in the process of being assimilated into white society.

The frontier closed — and the West is history...

To sum up — settlers in, Indians out. It's all very well knowing all the little facts about this period of American history, but to write a good answer you've got to know how they fit together too.

EXAM TIP