The Ghost Dance:
Indian Removal after the War

A Unit of Study for Grades 10–12

Alli Jason

National Center for History in the Schools
University of California, Los Angeles

NH126 v1.0

Table of Contents

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 Angele, 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

LESSON TWO

The Senate Debate

A. OBJECTIVES

- To illustrate how an actual debate on Indian policy proceeded.
- To understand the differing points of view on the important topic of federal Indian policy.

B. Lesson Activities

1. Dividing students into assigned roles, as specified in **Lesson One's** Homework assignment, hold the Senate debate. Debaters should either read their parts or present the arguments in their own words. Allow time for other senators and members of the press to ask questions.

2. Homework Assignment for Lesson Three:

   Hand out **Document E**, James Mooney's "Report on the Ghost Dance" and **Document F**, Black Elk's "Description of the Ghost Dance," for reading at home and preparation for class discussion the following day.

C. EVALUATING THE LESSON

When arguments in the Senate debate are completed, students will write, in a narrative, editorial form, a short essay summarizing the main points of the debaters' arguments and explaining why some are more convincing than others.

SENATE DEBATE ON FEEDING VS. FIGHTING THE INDIANS
February 19, 1875
(Primary Source)

The next amendment of the Committee on Appropriations was in lines 204 and 205, to increase the appropriation to subsist and properly care for the Apaches of Arizona, from $300,000 to $375,000.

John Sherman (Rep., Ohio):

> I do not know upon what basis the Committee on Appropriations offer amendments of this character to increase a definite appropriation. It is almost impossible for the Committee on Appropriations or any committee to estimate the amount of money that should be expended in the way money is now expended in the Indian service. Therefore in my judgment the Committee on Appropriations, unless they have a clear, satisfactory showing that an amount greater than is proposed by the House of Representatives ought to be expended for a given purpose of this kind, ought not to propose it, and we ought not to agree to it. I ask the Senator having charge of this bill upon what basis they propose to increase by these very large sums appropriations of a specific character for the Indian service?

William Windom (Rep., Minn.):

> It is one of the most difficult branches of the public service to know precisely what is the right thing to do. There is no question about that. This appropriation is made for the purpose of carrying out what is denominated the peace policy with the Indians; that is, that is is much cheaper to feed them than fight them. The amount recommended by the House committee for these Indians in Arizona is too small to enable the Government to carry out that policy with them. The recommendations of the Department were $750,000 as the amount necessary to keep the peace with these Indians in Arizona and New Mexico. . . .
>
> . . . I wish we could adopt some policy which would enable us to get along better with our Indian affairs; but until we can devise some policy better than the old one of fighting them, I say let us stick to the present one of feeding them; and if we do that, let us honestly feed those that we agreed to feed and keep them upon the reservations rather than take the risk of fighting them and killing them at the cost of a million a head. . . .

Mr. Sherman:

> The Senator has said enough to answer my purpose. He can give no reason for the increase, and I can give no reason why the appropriation should not be increased. In other words, in appropriating money for what is called the peace policy with the Indians, we are doing it as blindly as bats in the brightness of day. . . .
>
> Mr. President, it seems to me that a policy of this kind, which absorbs three-fourths of the whole of our appropriations in the expense of transportation, agencies, and expenditures of that kind which neither reach the backs nor mouths of the Indians, is an ill-defined policy which ought not to be carried out. These Indians ought to live by work, just as other people do, or they ought to be gathered where they could be compelled to earn their own living. . . .

Aaron Sargent (Rep., Cal.):

> . . . Withdraw your appropriations, and you have men upon desert tracts who must starve or break out and go upon the highways, who must rob, who will murder. That is the alternative. That is the complement of the speech of my friend from Nevada.
>
> . . . Now these Indians are made to work. There is not a ration issued to feed an Indian who is able to work, that is to say who is not sick, or an infant; or who is able to work. He is required to make in return an equivalent in his labor, which is used in digging ditches from the accessible rivers or streams on to the reservation to prepare the way by which irrigation can be supplied to those desert lands. I admit that the labor is not always valuable or efficient; but nevertheless it teaches the Indian to labor; nevertheless it redeems him so far from his barbarous habits and makes it easier hereafter to maintain him. . . .
>
> . . . If you talk about the comparative cost of feeding and fighting them, then I cite the report made by the brother of the eminent Senator from Ohio, wherein in an elaborate report on this very question he said the Government had expended $30,000,000 on the plains to fight the Sioux and the result was that the troops had killed thirty Indians; that is to say, at a cost of $1,000,000 apiece. Although an Army man and well versed in all these matters and illustrious in the military service, he said in most pregnant language, italicizing it in his report, that it was cheaper as well as more humane for the Government to feed the Indians rather than fight them. Acting on that advice, we have appropriated since that time from a million to a million and half annually for rations, and we have had to keep no military force and there have been no more such ravages as there were in the State of the Senator who has charge of this bill, where men, women, and children

were murdered, where women were ravished, and where scenes were enacted as if the devils in hell had broke loose and come down upon Minnesota. Those scenes stopped. This has cost a million and a quarter a year. Adopt the other policy and the cost is $30,000,000 a year, and still your people are not protected. Therefore I insist that it is the part of wisdom and the part of humanity toward our own people to adhere to this policy. . . .

John Hager (Dem., Cal.):

Mr. President, it seems to me a question of policy how the Indians should be managed; that is to say, the proposition contained in this bill is the pursuit of a policy inaugurated heretofore which is a departure from what had been hitherto the policy of the country in regard to the Indians. Hitherto we have had wars with the Indians; and in that respect it looks like extermination. The other policy is to put them upon reservations and take care of them at Government expense by feeding them there. If the money is expended through the Army, we understand it; but if appropriations are made here of money to be distributed through agents for the benefit of the Indians, it is a very difficult matter for the Senate or any person to understand where that finally lodges. It is a well-ascertained fact, I believe, that it becomes dissolved or melts away before it ever reaches the Indians, through the hands of those who may manipulate it or otherwise. . . .

. . . I have heard it said, as the Senator from Kansas has intimated, that the policy amounts to this, that you fatten the Indians during the winter in order that they may be better prepared to slay during the summer; but from what I have heard on the other side in regard to these reservations I do not believe there is much fattening of the Indians. It is rather starvation in consequence of a deficiency of food, and they break out in search of the necessaries of life from these reservations in consequence of the inefficiency of the supply. That has been the history. . . .

J. Rodman West (Rep., La.):

I should like to have the amendment reported that we may understand what it is. I want to know what the pending question is. . . .

. . . There is a principle before the Senate and a very simple one as to whether it is cheaper to feed Indians than to fight them. Having in the course of my military experience spent eighteen months precisely in the locality of these Indians and controlling them absolutely by military power, I think I have some reason to give my experience to the Senate.

Then the mere question is whether we shall feed or fight them. To fight them will cost you $2,000,000. To feed them will cost you $525,000. The question is, is $525,000 too much, or is it not enough? Let me say that I have figured just this moment how many Apache Indians there are on the reservations in New Mexico and Arizona. There are seventy-eight hundred and twenty. the difficulty the Senator from Kansas finds is that he confounds other Indians with the Apaches. The Apaches have various names, I think some seven or eight, for the various tribes according to the manner in which they stain their arrows. I could always tell when I was fighting in an Indian fight by their arrows as we picked them up afterward.

So we have according to the Commissioner's statement seventy-eight hundred and twenty of these Indians upon the reservation. The estimate is that they can be fed for twenty cents a day, giving you $1,564 a day and $570,860 a year, and this bill calls for $500,000.

That in brief has been my experience and that is the result as stated by the Commissioner, and it is economy of the most judicious kind. I have no love for these Indians; if I had any use for them they would not be where they are, considering the treatment that men under my command met at their hands; but it is an absolute economy and it is an economy within a judicious limitation and within a numerical limitation that cannot be controverted. . . .

Source: Congressional Record, 43rd Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 1474–79.