

## THE INDIAN QUESTION

### A/ American Perceptions of Native Americans

During the 19th century and the period of **Manifest Destiny**, Americans sought to move westward to build a new life, to search for wealth, or a piece of land to live on. After the Civil War (1861-1865), the migration of Americans westward increased and the number of settlers, **frontiersmen** (also called pioneers) grew significantly. For many Americans, settling the West was an opportunity; it was the American Dream. However, most Americans did not understand (or refused to recognize) that the more they moved west, the more they encroached upon lands already occupied and sustaining the lives of people who had been there for thousands of years. Americans viewed these people, the Native Americans, as inferior, uncivilized, and thus unworthy of the lands they were living in.

While there were many different representations about Native Americans were present during that time, most Americans viewed them as **blood thirsty savages**, a depiction far from the truth. This attitude was driven by an American desire to move westward and conquer the lands to the west.

### B/ Key American Policies towards Native Americans

While **Manifest Destiny** was the justification used by many for the removal of Native Americans, many US policies and critical events led to the Native Americans' dispossession of their lands, their displacement, and ultimately, their extermination. The superior technology of the white man who possessed guns and railroads made the defeat of the Native American inevitable.

- **1828 - Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia** - In 1828 the Cherokee, a "civilized" tribe who had lived in peace working as farmers, building houses and roads found gold on their land. As a result white settlers moved in and the State of Georgia claimed jurisdiction over the Cherokee. The Cherokee sued claiming they were independent from Georgia. **The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Cherokee.** The victory was short lived, however, as **President Andrew Jackson did not accept the Courts decision and refused to enforce it.** Instead the federal government removed the Indians to Oklahoma.
- **In 1830, the Indian Removal Act** authorized the President to negotiate treaties and remove the remaining Eastern Indians to lands west of the Mississippi. Under **Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren**, federal agents again used threats, bribes and liquor to secure Indian consent to one sided treaties. The federal government, under the presidency of Andrew Jackson, removed thousands of Indians, some in chains, on a trip marked by hunger, disease and death. This became known as the **"Trail of Tears."** By the late 1840's almost all Native Americans had been moved to lands west of the Mississippi.

#### *THE TRAIL OF TEARS*

*United States President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1832 that it was illegal for the state of Georgia to remove the Cherokee nation from their land. As a result, in 1838, federal soldiers forced most of the Cherokee to march about 1,285 km from Georgia to Indian Territory. This was an area in what is now Oklahoma, set aside for Native Americans who had been living east of the Mississippi River. Thousands died on the march, later known as the Trail of Tears, which began in the midst of a drought and continued into a fierce winter.*

- **The Gold Rush of 1849:** hundreds of thousands of adventurers and speculators rushed west after gold had been found in California. All wanted to acquire wealth there.
- **In 1962, the Homestead Act,** a legislation passed by the US Congress, promised free land to all settlers who decided to move west.
- **During that period, the Land Grants** were vast tracts of land given to railroad entrepreneurs so that a transcontinental railroad would be built. Indeed, **the railroad was both a reason and a means to dispossess and displace Native Americans of their lands.**
- **The Plains Indians Wars**  
**From 1860 to the 1890's,** wars dominated Whites-Natives relations. During this period Americans and plains Indians clashed as Americans attempted to force Indians onto reservations. The battles are highlighted by the **Battle of Little Bighorn (1876)**, where Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his regiment of 250 men were all killed by some 4,500 **Sioux** and **Cheyenne** warriors. Another more tragic event was the battle at **Wounded Knee (1890)** where hundreds of Cheyenne men, women and children were slaughtered by the American Cavalry. **Wounded Knee represented the end of any real armed resistance on the part of the Native American.**
- **In 1887, the US Congress passed the Dawes Act.** It provided for the following:
  1. Each Indian family head was allotted a 160 acre farm out of reservation lands.
  2. Each new land owner who abandoned tribal practices and adopted the "habits of civilized life" would be granted American citizenship.
  3. "Surplus" reservation lands i.e. lands that were left would be made available to sell to white settlers.

The Dawes Act did not benefit the Indians. The lands they were assigned were poor and the concept of "**Americanization**" **led to a destruction of Indian culture and the destruction of the traditional status of Indian women in tribal life.** Finally, as a result of the "surplus" land provision the **Indians lost 90 million out of 140 acres of reservation land.**
- **In 1953, the Termination Policy** ended the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and all of the programs that went with it. **It divided tribal property among the tribes' members thus subjecting them to taxation.** It also curtailed tribal self government and **relocated many Indians to the cities.** **The Termination policy also ended federal responsibility and social services - education, health and welfare, to the Indians.**

#### Native American Territories

*At the time of the first European contact, an estimated 90 million Native Americans lived in the Americas. Much of the Native American population in the present-day United States was decimated by war, famine, and disease with the encroachment of the Europeans.*

