

Conflict With Native Americans

READING FOCUS

- What caused changes in the life of the Plains Indians?
- How did government policies and battlefield challenges affect the Indian wars?
- What changes occurred in federal Indian policies by 1900?

MAIN IDEA

American expansion into the West led to the near destruction of Native American societies.

KEY TERMS

Great Plains
nomad
reservation
Battle of Little Bighorn
Ghost Dance
Massacre at Wounded
Knee
assimilation
Dawes Act
boomers
sooners

TARGET READING SKILL

Understand Effects As you read, complete this chart, listing federal Indian policies in the West and their outcomes.

Federal Indian Policies	Results
Treaties	Often violated by U.S.

Setting the Scene Easterners called it “the Indian problem.” What could and should be done with western Indians so that their lands could be used productively, as they saw it, for mining, ranching, and farming?

To Native Americans, the “problem” was a life-or-death battle. In the second half of the 1800s, they resisted an all-out assault on their warriors, their women and children, their homelands, their sources of food and shelter, and their ways of life. It was a race against time. They faced their fate in varying ways—with blood-thirsty anger, solemn faith, and cautious compromise. At last, when their time ran out, they faced resignation, fatigue, and heartbreak.

The Life of the Plains Indians

Long before eastern settlers arrived, changes had affected the lives of Native Americans on the **Great Plains**, the vast grassland between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. The changes blended with and altered traditions that had existed for generations.

Well into the 1800s, millions of buffalo ranged the Great Plains. These huge beasts provided life-sustaining supplies to the Plains Indians: meat, hides for making shelters and clothing, and a wealth of other uses. The opening of relations with French and American fur traders in the 1700s allowed the Plains Indians to exchange hides for guns, making buffalo hunting easier.

By the mid-1700s, horses’ hooves thundered across the plains. The Spanish had brought horses to Mexico in the 1500s, and Native Americans obtained them through trading and raids. The impact of the horse on Native American culture was profound.

While many Indian nations continued to live mainly as farmers, hunters, and gatherers, others became **nomads**. These are people who travel from place to place, usually following available food sources, instead of living in one location. With horses, nomadic peoples were better able to carry their possessions as they followed the vast buffalo herds across the plains.

VIEWING FINE ART Artist George Catlin lived with the Plains Indians for years, producing more than 500 sketches and paintings of Native American life, including this work, *Buffalo Chase—Single Death*. **Analyzing Visual Information** How does Catlin depict the equipment, skills, and character needed to hunt the buffalo?



READING CHECK

What changes occurred in the culture of Plains Indians before the arrival of settlers?

The arrival of the horse also brought upheaval. Warfare among Indian nations, to gain possessions or for conquest, rose to a new intensity when waged on horseback. Success in war brought wealth and prestige. The rise of warrior societies led to a decline in village life, as nomadic Native Americans raided more settled groups.

Indian Wars and Government Policy

Before the Civil War, Native Americans west of the Mississippi continued to inhabit their traditional homelands. An uneasy peace prevailed, punctured by occasional hostilities as workers laid railroad track deeper into Indian lands and as the California gold rush of 1848 drew wagon trains across the plains. By the 1860s, however, Americans had discovered that the interior concealed a treasure chest of resources. The battle for the West was on.

Causes of Clashes Settlers' views of land and resource use contrasted sharply with Native American traditions. Many settlers felt justified in taking Indian land because, in their view, they would make it more productive. To Native Americans, the settlers were simply invaders. Increasing intrusions, especially into sacred lands, angered even chiefs who had welcomed the newcomers.

Making Treaties Initially, the government tried to restrict the movements of nomadic Native Americans by negotiating treaties. Some treaties arranged for the federal purchase of Indian land, often for little in return. Other treaties restricted Native Americans to **reservations**, federal lands set aside for them.

The treaties produced misunderstandings and outright fraud. The government continued its longtime practice of designating as "tribes" groups that often had no single leadership or even related clans or traditions. Federal agents selected "chiefs" to sign treaties, but the signers often did not represent the majority of their people. Honest government agents negotiated some pacts in good faith; others had no intention of honoring the treaties. Some sought bribes or dealt violently with tribes until they signed. Indian signers often did not know that they were restricted to the reservations, and that they might be in danger if they left.

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a part of the Interior Department, was supposed to manage the delivery of critical supplies to the reservations. But widespread corruption within the BIA and among its agents resulted in supplies being mishandled or stolen.

The government made some attempts to protect the reservations, but their poorly manned outposts were no match for waves of land-hungry settlers. Unscrupulous settlers stole land, killed buffalo, diverted water supplies, and attacked Indian camps. After a treaty violation in 1873, Kicking Bird, a Kiowa, declared: "I have taken the white man by the hand, thinking him to be a friend, but he is not a friend; government has deceived us. . . ."

Native Americans reacted in frustration and anger. Groups who disagreed with the treaties refused to obey. Acts of violence on both sides set off cycles of revenge that occurred with increasing brutality.

Battlefield Challenges

Federal lawmakers came to view the treaties as useless. In 1871, the government declared that it would make no more treaties and recognize no chiefs.

Focus on GOVERNMENT

Acquiring Indian Lands From the 1860s to 1900, presidential administrations gained Native American lands however they could: through treaties, land purchases, forced relocation of Indians to reservations, wars—or simply looking the other way and letting settlers solve the problem. In 1875, after failed attempts to purchase the mineral-rich but sacred Black Hills of the Sioux, President Ulysses S. Grant gave General William T. Sherman the go-ahead for mining the treaty-protected territory. Sherman wrote that if the miners were to pour in, "I understand that the president and the Interior Department will wink at it." Word got out, and soon the hills were crawling with prospectors.

Inconclusive Battles In 1865, one general urged the government to “finish this Indian war this season, so that it will stay finished.” Yet the tragic conflicts would drag on for nearly three more decades.

Both sides lacked a coherent strategy along with the resources to achieve one. They reacted to each others’ attacks in a long, exhausting dance of death. The Indians were outgunned, and suffered far more casualties. Yet in the end, they succumbed less to war than to disease and to lack of food and shelter.

The United States Army, spread across the South to monitor Reconstruction, had slim resources to send to the West. With infantry, cavalry, and artillery units spread thinly across the vast region, the Army could not build coordinated battle fronts. Battle lines constantly shifted as settlers moved into new areas. Most confrontations were small hit-and-run raids with few decisive outcomes. Still, experienced army generals managed to lead successful campaigns in some regions.

Indian warriors fought mostly on their own turf, employing tactics they had used against their traditional enemies for generations. Profit-seeking whites sold guns to the warriors. Native American groups made some alliances in attempts to defeat the intruders, but their efforts usually failed. Moreover, the army often pitted Indian groups against one another.

The Soldier’s Life on the Frontier Who would volunteer for this army? Living conditions: \$13 a month; a leftover Civil War uniform; rotten food. Duties: build forts; drive settlers from reservations; escort the mail; stop gunfights; prevent liquor smuggling and stagecoach robberies; protect miners, railroad crews, and visiting politicians; and—occasionally—fight Indians. Hazards: smallpox, cholera, and flu; accidents; endless marching; and death in battle. In fact, thousands of recruits—former Civil War soldiers, freed slaves, jobless men—did join the frontier army. Unlike the typical Indian warrior, the average soldier on the plains rarely saw battle. Up to a third of the men deserted.

Key Battles

Native Americans and the army met in battles throughout the interior West. In major engagements, the army usually prevailed.

The Sand Creek Massacre, 1864 The southern Cheyenne occupied the central plains, including parts of Colorado Territory. After some gruesome Cheyenne raids on wagon trains and settlements east of Denver, Colorado’s governor took advantage of a peace campaign led by Cheyenne chief Black Kettle. Promised protection, Black Kettle and other chiefs followed orders to camp at Sand Creek.

Colonel John Chivington, who had so far failed to score a big military victory against the Cheyenne, now saw his chance. On November 29, 1864, his force of 700 men descended upon the encamped Cheyenne and Arapaho. While Black Kettle frantically tried to mount an American flag and a white flag of surrender, Chivington’s men slaughtered between 150 and 500 people—largely women and children. The next year, many southern Cheyenne agreed to move to reservations.

“Nothing lives long.
Only the earth and the mountains.”

—Death song sung by a Cheyenne killed at Sand Creek, 1864

BIOGRAPHY



Chief Joseph
1840-1904

Born in 1840, *Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt*, or “Thunder Rolling Down the Mountain,” was better known by the name he got from his father, Joseph, a converted Christian. As his father lay dying in 1871, he made Joseph promise

never to sell their scenic, fruitful homeland in the Northwest. The promise proved impossible to keep.

Forced to flee in 1877, the Nez Percé fought skillfully, but their chief found no joy in it. In his surrender speech, Joseph reportedly declared, “Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.”

Chief Joseph’s band was exiled to Indian Territory (Oklahoma), where all six of Joseph’s children died. In 1885, the chief was returned to the modern-day state of Washington, but not to his father’s land. He died in 1904 “of a broken heart,” his doctor said.

This 1864 poster promises cavalry recruits “all horses and other plunder taken from the Indians.”

ATTENTION!
INDIAN
FIGHTERS

Having been authorized by the Governme to raise a
Company of 1000 men

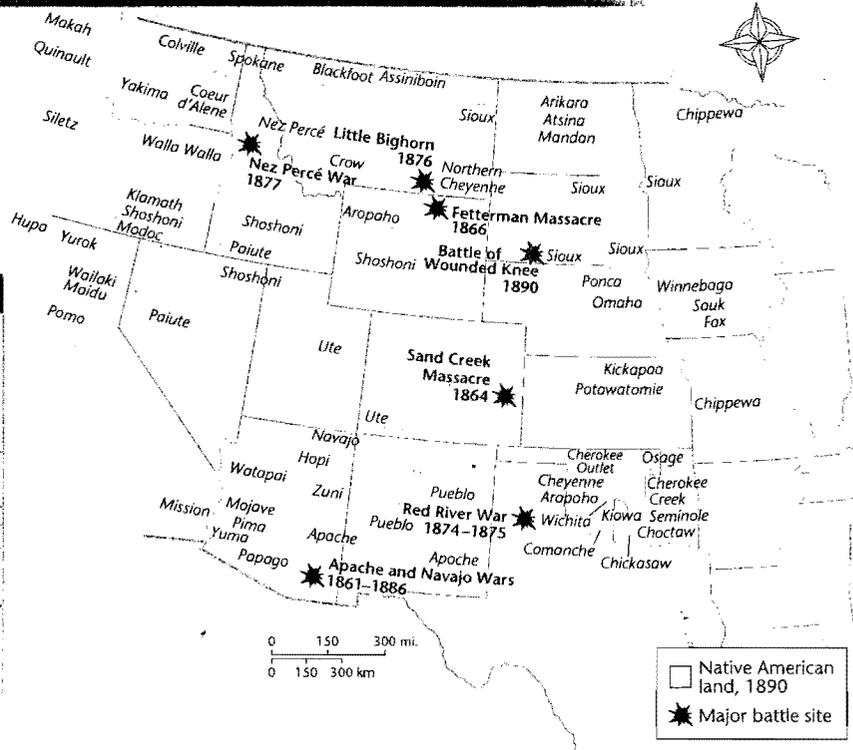
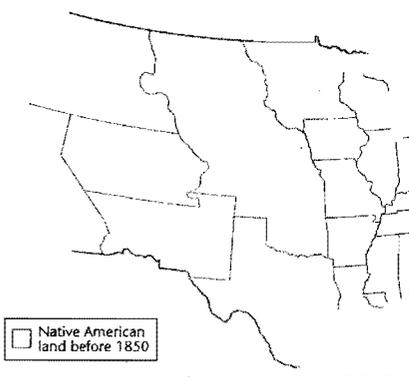
U. S. VOL CAVALRY!

Pay and Rations the same as other U. S. Volunteer Cavalry.

Office First door East of Recorder's Office.
Central City, Aug. 13, '64.

Native American Territory in the West, circa 1890

Native American Territory in the West, c. 1850



Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica*

MAP SKILLS The main map at right shows Indian lands in 1890, compared with the land they roamed in 1850, shown in the inset map above. Regions in what directions were Native Americans pushed as they lost territory?

The Battle of Little Bighorn, 1876 The Sioux of the northern plains—Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana territories—powerfully resisted white expansion. In 1865, the government enraged the Sioux by deciding to build a road, the Bozeman Trail, through prime Sioux hunting grounds in the Bighorn Mountains.

Sioux chief Red Cloud launched a two-year war to block the project. In 1866, Sioux warriors slaughtered more than 80 soldiers under Captain W. J. Fetterman near Fort Phil Kearny. The war ended in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, under which the United States abandoned the Bozeman Trail and created a large Sioux reservation in what is half of South Dakota today.

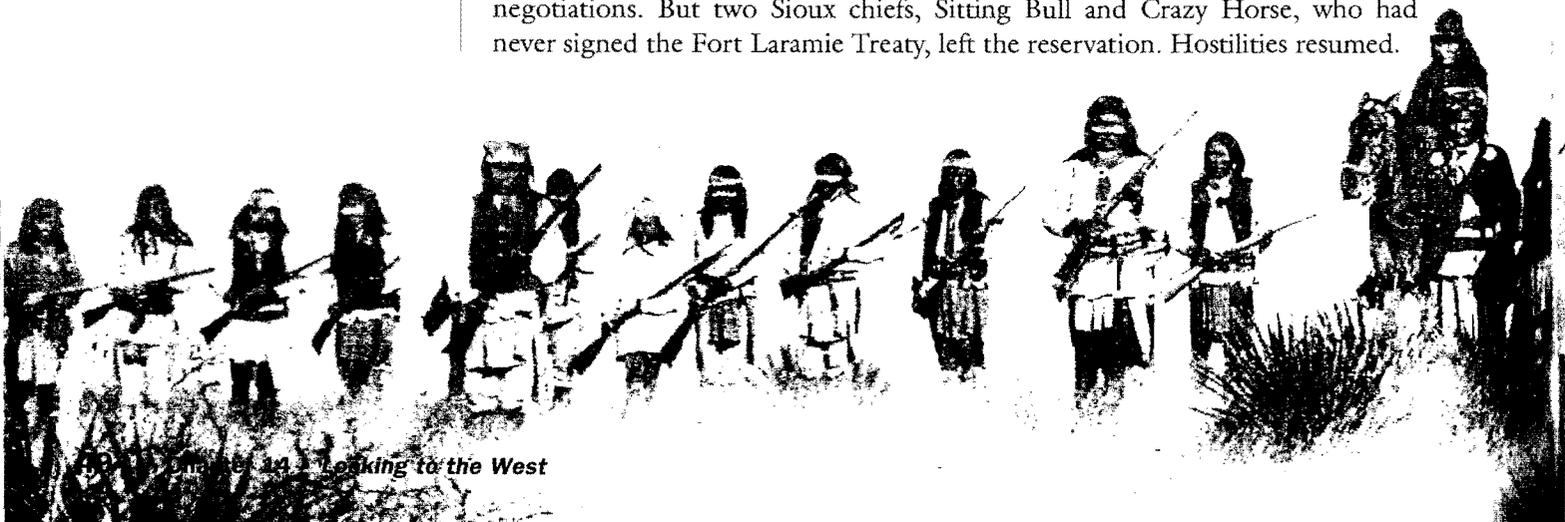
Sioux land protected by the treaty included the Black Hills—tall, dramatic, pine-covered mountains in South Dakota and Wyoming territories, held sacred by many Sioux. But in 1874, the government sent Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer to investigate rumors of gold in the Black Hills. He reported that the hills cradled gold “from the grass roots down.” This news was the starting gun in a mining race that overran the region.

The government offered to buy the Black Hills, and Red Cloud entered negotiations. But two Sioux chiefs, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, who had never signed the Fort Laramie Treaty, left the reservation. Hostilities resumed.



Sounds of an Era

Listen to a Sioux war song and other sounds from the era of western settlement.



In June 1876, Custer was sent to round up the Indians. He moved his cavalry toward the Little Bighorn River in what is now Montana. There he met the full fury of the Sioux: nearly 2,000 warriors, the largest Indian force ever gathered on the plains. Custer, expecting a smaller enemy, had split his forces. The Sioux fell on their prey, wiping out Custer and his more than 200 soldiers within an hour.

The **Battle of Little Bighorn**, or “Custer’s Last Stand,” stunned Americans. The army flooded the area with troops and swiftly forced most of the Sioux back to their reservations. Crazy Horse was killed after surrendering in 1877. Sitting Bull and some remaining Sioux escaped to Canada, but starvation forced them to surrender and return to a reservation four years later.

The Battle of Wounded Knee, 1890 Under stress for a half-century, Native Americans saw the rise of religious prophets predicting danger or prosperity. A prophet of the plains, Wovoka, promised a return to traditional life if people performed purification ceremonies. These included the **Ghost Dance**, a ritual in which people joined hands and whirled in a circle.

The Ghost Dance caught on among the Teton Sioux, who, still struggling to adjust to reservation life, practiced it with great urgency, encouraged by Sitting Bull. In 1890, word spread that the Indians were becoming restless. The government agent at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota wired the army: “Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy. . . . We need protection and we need it now.” The army dispatched the Seventh Cavalry, Custer’s old unit, to the scene.

Hoping to calm the crisis, Indian police officers tried to arrest Sitting Bull. When he hesitated, the officers shot and killed him. His grieving followers, some 120 men and 230 women and children, surrendered and were rounded up at a creek called Wounded Knee. As they were being disarmed, someone fired a shot. Soldiers opened fire, killing more than 200 Sioux. The **Massacre at Wounded Knee** was the last major episode of violence in the Indian wars.

New Policies Toward Native Americans

“I am the last Indian,” Sitting Bull is reported to have said. Indeed, he was among the last to have lived the life of a free Native American, roaming with the buffalo herds across unobstructed plains, practicing traditional customs.

Critics of Federal Indian Policies While many white Americans called for the destruction of Native Americans, others, horrified by the government’s policies, formed a growing peace movement. It found inspiration in Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1881 publication *A Century of Dishonor*. Protesting what she

BIOGRAPHY

George Armstrong Custer
1839–1876

He had the stuff of a legendary hero: charming, fearless, and memorable in his long, golden curls and flamboyant uniform. He was also vain, heedless of authority, and foolhardy—qualities that would prove fatal.

Custer seemed to be born for war. Daring in battle, he achieved great distinction in the Civil War. At the war’s end, he was sent to fight Indians, a job he relished. To the Sioux, he was the “chief of thieves” for entering their sacred Black Hills and spreading word of their gold wealth.

Court-martialed twice for various offenses, Custer at last found fame and adoration in his final impulsive act: rushing to his death in 1876 at the Battle of Little Bighorn. At “Custer’s Last Stand,” he became the heroic victim of legend and song.



Apache chief Geronimo leads a band of renegades. Apache resistance ended with his surrender in 1886, the year of this photograph.



Key Events in the Indian Wars, 1861–1890

Wars / Battles	Native American Nations / Homelands	Key Players	Description / Outcome
Apache and Navajo Wars 1861–1886	Apache in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado territories; Navajo in New Mexico, Colorado territories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geronimo • Col. Christopher “Kit” Carson 	Carson kills or relocates many Apache to reservations in 1862. Clashes drag on until Geronimo’s surrender in 1886. Navajo told to surrender in 1863, but before they can, Carson attacks, killing hundreds, destroying homelands. Navajos moved to New Mexico reservation in 1865.
Sand Creek Massacre 1864	Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, in central plains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black Kettle • Col. John Chivington 	Cheyenne massacres prompt Chivington to kill up to 500 surrendered Cheyenne and Arapaho led by Black Kettle.
Red River War 1874–1875	Comanche and southern branches of Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Arapaho, in southern plains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comanche war parties • Gen. William T. Sherman • Lt. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan 	Southern plains Indians relocated to Oklahoma Indian Territory under 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge. After buffalo hunters destroy the Indians’ food supply, Comanche warriors race to buffalo grazing areas in Texas panhandle to kill hunters. Sherman and Sheridan defeat warriors and open panhandle to cattle ranching.
Battle of Little Bighorn 1876	Northern plains Sioux in Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana territories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sitting Bull • Crazy Horse • Red Cloud • Lt. Col. George A. Custer 	U.S. tries to buy gold-rich Black Hills from Sioux. Talks fail. Custer’s 7th Cavalry is sent to round up Sioux, but meets huge enemy force. Custer and some 200 men perish in “Custer’s Last Stand.”
Nez Percé War 1877	Largest branch of Nez Percé, in Wallowa Valley of Idaho and Washington territories and Oregon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Joseph • Gen. Oliver O. Howard • Col. Nelson Miles 	Howard orders Nez Percé to Idaho reservation; violence erupts. Joseph leads some 700 men, women, and children on 1,400-mile flight. His 200 warriors hold off Miles’s 2,000 soldiers until halted 40 miles short of Canada. Sent to Indian Territory, many die of disease. In 1885, survivors moved to reservation in Washington Territory.
Battle of Wounded Knee 1890	Sioux at Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sitting Bull • U.S. 7th Cavalry 	Ghost Dance raises fears of Sioux uprising; Sitting Bull killed in attempted arrest. His followers surrender and camp at Wounded Knee. Shots are fired; some 200 Sioux die.

INTERPRETING CHARTS

This chart provides a brief summary of some of the key battles that were fought in various areas of the western interior. **Making Comparisons** (a) *What factors did many of these clashes have in common?* (b) *In what ways did they differ?*

saw as the government’s broken promises and treaties, Jackson wrote, “It makes little difference . . . where one opens the record of the history of the Indians; every page and every year has its dark stain.”

Attempts to Change Native American Culture As sincere as the reformers may have been, most believed that Native Americans still needed to be “civilized.” That is, they should be made to give up their traditions, become Christians, learn English, adopt white dress and customs, and support themselves by farming and trades. Tribal elders were ordered to give up their religious beliefs and rituals. Christian missionaries ran schools on the reservations.

In 1879, Army Captain Richard H. Pratt opened the United States Indian Training and Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Children as young as 5 years old were taken from the reservations by coaxing, trickery, or force, and sent to Carlisle and other such schools to be educated “as Americans.” The children were to be integrated into white society. This policy is called **assimilation**, the process by which one society becomes a part of another, more dominant society by adopting its culture.

In 1887, a federal law dismantled the Native American concept of shared land in favor of the principle of private property highly valued by Americans. The **Dawes Act** divided reservation land into individual plots. Each Native American family headed by a man received a plot, usually 160 acres. These landholders were granted U.S. citizenship and were subject to local, state, and federal laws. Many Indian sympathizers believed that the land allocations would make families self-supporting and create pride of ownership.

But the idea of taking up farming offended the beliefs of many Native Americans. Smohalla, a religious teacher from the Northwest, retorted: “You

ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?"

In reality, much reservation land was not suitable for farming. Many Native Americans had no interest or experience in agriculture. Some sold their land to speculators or were swindled out of it. Between 1887 and 1932, some two thirds of the 138 million acres of Indian land wound up in the hands of whites.

The Opening of Indian Territory For the some 55 Indian nations that had been forced into Indian Territory, worse trouble loomed. The territory contained the largest unsettled farmland in the United States—about 2 million unassigned acres. During the 1880s, as squatters overran the land, Congress agreed to buy out Indian claims to the region.

On the morning of April 22, 1889, tens of thousands of homesteaders lined up at the territory's borders. At the stroke of noon, bugles blew, pistols fired, and the eager hordes surged forward, racing to stake a claim.

" [W]ith a shout and a yell the swift riders shot out, then followed the light buggies or wagons and last the lumbering prairie schooner and freighters' wagons, with here and there even a man on a bicycle and many too on foot—above all a great cloud of dust hovering like smoke over a battlefield."

—newspaper reporter, 1889

By sundown, these settlers, called **boomers**, had staked claims on almost 2 million acres. Many boomers discovered that some of the best lands had been grabbed by **sooners**, people who had sneaked past the government officials earlier to mark their claims. Under continued pressure from settlers, Congress created Oklahoma Territory in 1890. In the following years, the remainder of Indian Territory was opened to settlement.

It took a half-century, more than a thousand battles, and the deaths of about 950 United States soldiers to conquer the Native Americans. The clashes also took the lives of countless Indians used by the army as scouts and fighters; of settlers killed in Indian attacks; and of millions of Native American men, women, and children who died in battles or on squalid reservations.



VIEWING HISTORY Officials at the Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Indian school took before-and-after photographs of their students. Analyzing Visual Information List details that show the changes undergone by these boys.

Section

2

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Describe early changes in the lifestyle of the Plains Indians.
2. Why were Indian treaties often unsuccessful?
3. How did the **Ghost Dance** lead to a tragic conflict?
4. Describe two major federal **assimilation** policies.

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Identifying Assumptions** What assumptions about Native Americans did sympathetic easterners make when proposing improvements on the reservations?
6. **Writing a News Story** As an eastern reporter traveling with an army unit, report on one of the battles discussed in this section.

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