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The Treatment of Native Americans in the Late Nineteenth Century

The relationship between white settlers and Native Americans has been charged with tension since Europeans first settled in North America. Though some friendships were forged between the two groups, such as the Nez Perce's aid to Lewis and Clark, the culture clash often resulted in violence (Young, 36). The culmination of hundreds of years of Native American oppression occurred in the late 1800's, when the influx of whites settling in the West resulted in a massive effort to exterminate the Native American cultures. The treatment of Native Americans by the United States government during this time was nothing short of appalling, and left a stain on the history of America as large as that left by slavery.

The root of all the strife between Native Americans and which undoubtedly lays with the white man's idea of superiority. Whites in America believed they were racially and ethnically superior to the Native American population, and had little to no respect for the Native American culture. This is evidenced again and again, from giving Heintot Tooyalaket a white man's name, Chief Joseph, to refusing to acknowledge the Native Americans' rights to their land (Young, 36). Whites repeatedly broke their promises to the Native Americans, and would not grant them equality under the law, instead treating them as sub-citizens if they were treated as Americans at all (Young, 37).

One of the most heinous offenses committed by the United States government was its seizure of Native American lands and the forced removal of Native Americans to reservations. Whole tribes were rounded up and made to march for hundreds of miles, as

on the Trail of Tears, only to die among the poor conditions of the reservations (Roark, 467). Any rebellions were fiercely crushed, sometimes resulting in massacres that killed hundreds of Native American men, women, and children, such as at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota (Roark, 471). By the 1890's, even those few Native Americans who remained free were forced to "choose between starvation and the reservations," because the arrival of the transcontinental railroads had driven the buffalo population down so far that the crucially important food and fuel source could no longer sustain the tribes (Roark, 468).

The only attempt to help the Native Americans on the reservation occurred in 1887, when Congress passed the Dawes Allotment Act, a bill which got rid of the reservations in favor of individually owned plots of land. The Act failed to make the Native Americans "self sufficient," and when it was repealed, it had actually cost Native Americans millions of acres of land (Roark, 469).

Native Americans continued fighting their unfair treatment into the early 1910's, but every attempt at an uprising failed, crushed by the United States military. Even peaceful protests, such as the Ghost Dance religion, which was practiced throughout the plains, were perceived as threatening and were ruthlessly crushed (Roark, 471). Pleas for equality and freedom, like Chief Joseph's appeal to President Hayes in 1879, fell on deaf ears, and the oppression of Native Americans continued (Young, 36-37). It was not until the 1960's that the plight of the Native Americans was brought to the foreground (Roark, 471) and the stain left by their unfair treatment began to fade.