

## INDIAN POLICIES

444  
The opening of the West to railroads and the spread of farmers onto the Great Plains meant that Native Americans had to resist an encroaching white presence as had happened in the 1830s and 1850s. What had once been called "The Great American Desert" now beckoned as the home for countless farmers. The tribes that were living in the West and the Native Americans who had been displaced there in the 1830s and 1840s found their hunting grounds and tribal domains under siege.

**The Peace Policy** Treatment of Native Americans after the Civil War mixed benevolence and cruelty. Grant brought more insight and respect to the issue of Native Americans than most previous presidents. His administration pursued what became known as the "peace policy." While a majority of western settlers advocated the removal or outright extermination of the Indian tribes, Grant's conciliatory approach won applause in the East.

The policy issues took shape in the years before Grant became president. Advocates of the Indians contended that the hostile tribes should be located in Dakota Territory and the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). The government would stop treating the entire West as a giant Indian reservation. Instead, specific areas would be set aside for the Native Americans. On these "reservations," the inhabitants would learn the cultural values of white society, be taught to grow crops, and be paid a small income until they could support themselves.

Grant took up the ideas of the Indian reformers. He appointed Ely Parker, a Seneca, as commissioner of Indian affairs. Congress appropriated \$2 million for Indian problems and set up the Board of Indian Commissioners to distribute the funds. Indian agents would be chosen from nominees that Christian churches provided. The peace policy blended kindness and force. If the Indians accepted the presence of church officials on the reservations, the government would leave them alone. Resistance, however, would bring the army to see that Indians stayed on the reservations. To whites, the peace policy was humane. For Native Americans, it was another in the long series of white efforts to undermine their way of life.

## Slaughter of the Buffalo

415  
The manner in which the opening of the West after the Civil War is depicted in textbooks has changed in dramatic ways during the past two decades. More attention is now given to the impact on the environment



(Kansas State Historical Society)

and on the nomadic lifestyle of the Native American residents of the Great Plains arising from the disappearance of the buffalo herds. The critical role that these animals played in sustaining the Indian way of life meant that the task of white settlers became much less dangerous when the buffalo were gone. Pictures such as this one of forty thousand hides piled up outside Dodge City, Kansas, convey a dramatic sense of the extermination of these animals. Of course, no picture can impart the odor of that many hides.

Pressures on  
the Indians --

415

The 1870s brought increasing tensions. The 1870 census reported more than 2.7 million farms; ten years later, that number had risen to more than 4 million. A competition for space and resources intensified. With millions of acres under cultivation and the spread of cattle drives across Indian lands, the tribes found themselves squeezed from their traditional nomadic hunting grounds.

The systematic destruction of the buffalo herds dealt Indians another devastating blow. In the societies of the Plains tribes, the meat of the bison supplied food, and the hides provided shelter and clothes. Removal of these resources hurt the Indians economically, but the cultural impact was even greater because buffalo represented the continuity of nature and the renewal of life cycles.

The decline of the herds began during the 1860s as drought, disease, and erosion shrank their habitat. Then the demand for buffalo robes and pemmican (dried buffalo meat, berries, and fat) among whites spurred more intensive hunting. As railroads penetrated the West, hunters could send their products to customers with relative ease. More than 5 million buffalo were slaughtered during the early 1870s, and by the end of the century, only a few of these animals were alive. Conservation eventually saved the buffalo from the near extinction.

During the mid-1870s, Native Americans tried a last effort to block the social and economic tides overwhelming their way of life. By that time, Grant's peace policy had

416 faltered as corruption and politics replaced the original desire to treat the Indians in a more humane manner. The tribes that continued to hunt and pursue their nomadic culture found unhappy whites and a hostile military in their way. The Red River War, led by Cheyenne, Kiowas, and Comanches, erupted on the southern Plain, and Indian resistance ultimately collapsed when food and supplies ran out.

The discovery of gold in the Black Hills of Dakota brought white settlers into an area where the Sioux had dominated. The Indians refused to leave, and the government sent troops to protect the gold seekers. The Indian leaders, **Crazy Horse** and **Sitting Bull**, rallied their followers to stop the army. Near what the Indians called the Greasy Grass (whites called it the Little Bighorn), Colonel **George Armstrong Custer** led a force of six hundred men in 1876. With a third of his detachment, he attacked more than two thousand Sioux warriors. Custer and his soldiers perished. The whites called it "Custer's Last Stand." The Indian victory, shocking to whites, was only a temporary success, however. The army pursued the Indians during the ensuing months. By the end of the Grant administration, the Sioux had been conquered. Only in the Southwest did the Apaches successfully resist the power of the military. Native Americans now faced cruelty, exploitation, and oppression that extended through the rest of the nineteenth century and beyond 1900. In the face of these relentless pressures from white society, Indians struggled just to survive.