

Chapter 6

Federal Indian Policy

(18:40 minutes)

Synopsis

This 19-minute video examines the changes in federal government policy toward American Indians in the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on the story of one particular family, the video looks at the relocation program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the effects the relocation program had on American Indian identity. The video touches on the events surrounding and leading up to the formation of the American Indian Movement along with the movement's goals. Interviewees talk about their continuing commitment to shape the federal policy and to regain control over their tribe's futures.

► The video begins with the question: **“What is the history of the American federal Indian policy?”** Teachers may wish to ask their students the same questions before viewing the episode.

The narrator answers the focus question:

“When the United States annexed Montana lands in the nineteenth century, it imposed federal laws on the newly acquired property and the people already on those lands. Despite tens of thousands of years that native peoples already lived in Montana—the United States government dictated Indian policy. Treaties, executive orders, and congressional legislation created that policy. American Indians fought this alien system in the ‘Indian Wars’ of the nineteenth century. Federal Indian policy alternately attempted to isolate Indians on reservations (inadvertently preserving their cultures) and to assimilate Indians into the Euro-American population. In yet another strategy, some legislation made Indians ‘wards of the federal government.’ The life experiences of each Montana Indian can be understood only by recognizing the ever-changing federal Indian policies.”

Post-viewing Discussion Questions

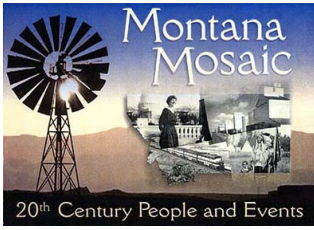
Engage students’ critical thinking skills and elicit their emotional responses with the following four questions, most easily remembered through the acronym DICE: What **disturbed** you? What **interested** you? What **confused** you? What **enlightened** you?

“Getting at the Meaning” Questions

1. How did the federal government’s Relocation policy affect tribal identity?
2. How would you respond to Denise Juneau’s statement that “That tension between the United States government and sovereign tribal nations will continue to be there as long as Indian tribes survive . . . But I also think it is a good tension”?
3. Indian activists in the 1960s and 1970s used rallies, marches, and civil disobedience to protest the treatment of American Indians. How effective do you think these techniques were? How effective would similar techniques be today?

Vocabulary Terms

Relocation: a federal government policy that encouraged American Indian families to leave their reservations for the city. The Bureau of Indian affairs paid for 100,000 American Indians to relocate from their reservations, where there were few jobs, to cities where there were more jobs. This policy was a return to the assimilationist policies of



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the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and part of the Relocation policy's purpose was to "bring Indians into the American mainstream." (Quote from *Indian Education for All, Connecting Cultures and Classrooms: K 12 Curriculum Guide*, (Helena, MT, 2006): 162, available online at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494322.pdf>).

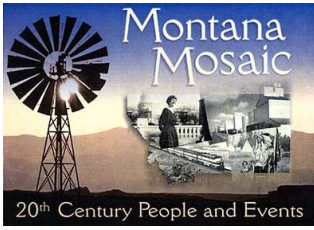
Sovereign: independent and self-governing. When people talk about tribal sovereignty they are referring to the degree to which tribes have the right to make decisions for themselves. When Europeans began to come to the New World, Indian peoples had strength in numbers and highly structured forms of government; thus, tribes were treated as sovereign, self-governing nations with whom treaties had to be made. Indian policy shifted in the late nineteenth century and the United States government tried to define Indian individuals as ethnic minorities rather than members of sovereign nations. Today, tribes have limited sovereignty. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, this means that "tribes enjoy a direct government-to-government relationship with the U.S. government wherein no decisions about their lands and people are made without their consent." (Quotes from <http://cwis.org>, accessed 10/6/2009.)

American Indian Movement (AIM): "a militant American Indian civil rights organization . . . Its original purpose was to help Indians in urban ghettos who had been displaced by government programs that had the effect of forcing them from the reservations. Its goals eventually encompassed the entire spectrum of Indian demands—economic independence, revitalization of traditional culture, protection of legal rights, and most especially, autonomy over tribal areas and the restoration of lands that they believed had been illegally seized.

AIM was involved in many highly publicized protests including, the occupation (1969–1971) of Alcatraz Island, the march (1972) on Washington, D.C., to protest violation of treaties (in which AIM members occupied the office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs), and the takeover (1973) of a site at Wounded Knee to protest the government's Indian policy. In the mid-1970s AIM's efforts were centered on the prevention of resource exploitation of Indian lands by the federal government. With many of its leaders in prison, and torn by internal dissension, the national leadership disbanded in 1978, although local groups continued to function." (Quoted from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Indian-Movement>)

The Longest Walk: a 1978 walk of 3,600 miles from San Francisco to Washington D.C. "The walk was in response to eleven legislative bills introduced in the 95th U.S. Congress that would have abrogated treaties" which protected remaining native sovereignty. According to organizers, "the Longest Walk of 1978 was a peaceful, spiritual effort to educate the public about Native American rights" and the constitutional obligation to honor treaty rights. "The 3,600 mile walk was successful in its purpose: to gather enough support to halt proposed legislation abrogating Indian treaties with the U.S. government."

On July 15, 1978, the Longest Walk arrived in Washington, D.C., with hundreds of supporters including Muhammed Ali, Senator Ted Kennedy, and Marlon Brando. The eleven legislative bills that threatened Native sovereignty were defeated, protecting the remaining treaty rights Native Americans possessed. In 2008, activists organized the Longest Walk II to "raise awareness about sacred sites protection, cultural survival, youth empowerment and Native American rights." (Quotes from



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<http://www.longestwalk.org>)

Termination: “During the 1950s and early 1960s, Congress passed a number of . . . bills designed to terminate the government’s relationship with Native Americans.” Tribes were chosen for termination based on an evaluation of how well group members had assimilated into mainstream American culture and their economic condition. “Congress made the final determination of which groups to terminate, and the secretary of the interior set up the timetable for federal control to end. Terminated tribes’ reservation lands were sold or allotted, and members of terminated tribes were no longer eligible for housing, health, education, and community development programs designed to help native people.” (Quotes from “Native American Policy” encarta.msn.com Encyclopedia, accessed 10/6/2009.)

“The Termination Policy’s intent was to terminate the nation-to-nation relationship between tribes and the federal government. It resulted in withdrawal of federal support, guaranteed through the treaty process, to affected tribes whether or not they wanted or were prepared for this. Responsibility for tribes was transferred to the states in which the tribes were located. In all, termination was imposed on about 12 tribes and bands before lawmakers were convinced by tribes and their allies to abandon the policy altogether. This time period included a close call for American Indians in that the special status of American Indians and their position as sovereign nations was almost done away with.” (Quote from *Indian Education for All, Connecting Cultures and Classrooms: K 12 Curriculum Guide*, (Helena, MT, 2006): 163, available online at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494322.pdf>.)

Additional Resources

For more information on topics addressed in this episode, see *Montana: Stories of the Land*, Chapter 20, “Building a New Montana, 1945–1965” (<https://mhs.mt.gov/education/textbook/chapter20/Chapter20.pdf>).

Indian Education for All, Connecting Cultures and Classrooms: K 12 Curriculum Guide, (Helena, MT, 2006): 163, available online at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494322.pdf>, has good information and ideas for lessons. See particularly pages 108–112 and 160–67.

Content Standards

This chapter of *Montana Mosaic* aligns to the Montana Social Studies Content Standards and the Essential Understandings regarding Montana Indians (EU) as follows: 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 4.2, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7, 6.1, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, EU 2, EU 3, EU 5, EU 6, EU 7