

The Sand Creek Massacre, 1864

When Colonel Chivington reported the valiant destruction of a hostile Cheyenne camp in 1864, he was hailed as a hero by many. However, some troops that fought under Chivington's command later told a different story. The camp that was attacked was not hostile and was, in fact, full only of women and children. The camp had been flying an American flag to show their friendship and was preparing for peace negotiations between America and their chief Black Kettle. Chivington had ordered his men to kill all the inhabitants, many of whom were killed in a brutal fashion and then mutilated.

A captain named Silas Soule testified against Chivington and was then murdered by Chivington's men. Soule refused to allow his men to fire their guns during the massacre.



The Cheyenne War, 1863-67

The Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes began attacking white American miners, ranchers and settlers as they moved west. They were angry that these people were disrupting buffalo herds and damaging the plains. Full war broke out in 1863, as Americans were fighting the Civil War. Troops were stretched on both sides so militia forces were sent against the Indigenous peoples.

The war ended with negotiations that gave the Cheyenne a large reservation, a compromise that angered many Cheyenne. Those who were disaffected went to join Red Cloud's war that was happening in the Rocky Mountains.

Two Points of View

As the USA expanded westwards, there were two main schools of thought about how Indigenous peoples should be dealt with. Negotiators believed that the Indigenous peoples should be treated as foreign powers to be bargained with and contained in their own areas. Exterminators took the stronger opinion that all Indigenous peoples should be killed to make room for western expansion.

The Fort Laramie Treaty, 1851

The Fort Laramie Treaty was signed by the USA and representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains (Plains Indian tribes). It agreed that subsidies would be paid to the tribes and hunting rights given to huge areas of the Great Plains in return for the rights of the USA to build roads to the west and military forts.

At this time, most people did not feel threatened by the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains; between 1840-60, of the 250,000 Americans to cross the plains, only 400 were killed by Indigenous people.

Tensions rose in later years as Americans started crossing the plains in greater numbers in order to join in the California gold rush or settle in the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska.

The treaty was signed by some Indigenous peoples, but not all – there was no united Indigenous nation – so some tribes felt left out or did not agree with the free movement of Americans from the east.



Red Cloud's War, 1865-68

Red Cloud, an Oglala Lakota Sioux, led an alliance of different Sioux tribes, Cheyenne and Arapaho to attack the Americans in response to migration and destruction from the Rocky Mountain gold rush. The USA built forts to defend themselves and Red Cloud's men besieged them, killing any forces that they could lure away from the fort's protection.

The war ended with the US setting up a reservation for the tribes and allowing the Indigenous people to destroy their forts in the area. Red Cloud retired to live on the reservation.

Post-Civil War Attitudes

After the Civil War ended, attitudes towards the west and Indigenous peoples changed. As homesteaders spread across the Great Plains, some Americans called for total war against the Indigenous peoples: not only should they be fought in battle, but their supplies and homes should be destroyed. More troops were deployed to the plains and forts were built. The US started using the tactic of attacking camps in winter – Indigenous peoples were then forced to go to the reservations as their winter supplies were destroyed.

Buffalo Hunters

The 1870s saw the price of buffalo hide rise in the US. This, and a desire to starve the Indigenous peoples of their traditional nomadic lifestyles, led to the destruction of the buffalo first on the southern plains and then later in the north.

General Sheridan said that '[Buffalo hunters] have done more in the last two years... to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done on the last 30 years.'

The death of the buffalo forced thousands of Indigenous peoples away from the plains onto reservations where their lifestyles and culture were systematically destroyed.

The Great Sioux War, 1867-77

Angry and desperate following the death of the buffalo herds, Indigenous chief Sitting Bull went to war with the USA in 1867. Things were made worse when General George Custer encouraged a gold rush in the Black Hills of Dakota in 1874. The US government tried to buy the Black Hills from the Sioux at this time for \$6,000,000 but the area was sacred to the Sioux and no deal could be reached. Sitting Bull gathered 7,000 Indigenous people together and General Sheridan, the man in charge of US forces, declared that any Indians outside of the reservations were to be treated as hostile enemies. Sheridan planned to destroy Sitting Bull's army by using a three-pronged attack. He sent Generals Gibson, Terry and Crook to attack the Indigenous peoples, but the generals did not communicate well and did not realise how many Indigenous people stood against them.

The Battle of Rosebud in June 1876 saw the Indigenous chief Crazy Horse attack Crook's American forces with the result of 91 American casualties and 99 Indigenous casualties. This battle led to General Terry giving Custer orders to take his men and prepare an attack on Crazy Horse.



The Battle of Little Bighorn

General Custer disobeyed the orders of General Terry to skirt around the Indigenous forces to prepare for an attack and instead led his 7th Cavalry straight into Crazy Horse's camp at Little Bighorn.

He was expecting support from other army forces but do not receive them, possibly because he had not communicated his idea to launch a frontal assault. Crazy Horse surrounded Custer's troops and killed them all, with the exception of Curly, Custer's Indigenous guide who disguised himself as a Sioux warrior in order to escape.

Aftermath of Little Bighorn

The death of Custer and the 7th Cavalry was received with shock and anger by the American public. Calls for harsher treatment of Indigenous peoples were common. Sitting Bull's forces were divided as US pressure on them grew. Sitting Bull fled to Canada and Crazy Horse surrendered and agreed to live on a reservation. The speed of the destruction of the northern buffalo herd was increased and Indigenous peoples on reservations had their guns, horses and land taken from them. The power of the Indigenous chiefs was also eroded as the reservations were put under US law rather than their traditional tribal systems.

Dawes General Allotment Act, 1887

This Act aimed to degrade Indigenous culture on the reservations. It did this by:

- Breaking up the reservations into smaller, separate areas.
- Taking legal authority from chiefs.
- Banning the religious ceremony known as the Sun Dance.
- Not allowing any buffalo in the reservations.
- Sending thousands of Indigenous children to residential (boarding) schools where they would be taught to hate Indigenous culture.
- Forcing Indigenous people to live on rations from the government that could be withheld due to bad behaviour, such as refusing to send your child to boarding school.

Wounded Knee, 1890

In 1889, a medicine man by the name of Wovoka dreamed of the American settlers leaving the Great Plains and Indigenous culture being restored. He began the Ghost Dance movement; a spiritual belief that soon things would get better.

The movement spread quickly through the reservations, giving many Indigenous people hope of a brighter future. The Ghost Dance movement was seen as dangerous by the US and police and military forces were sent to the reservations to quash it. Sitting Bull, returning from exile in Canada to live on the reservation, joined the Ghost Dance but was shot by Indian police on 15th December 1890.

The 7th Cavalry, possibly still angry at their defeat at Little Big Horn, massacred 146 Sioux at the camp of Wounded Knee, most of whom were women and children. This massacre seems to have ended Indigenous faith in the Ghost Dance and marks the end of the Indian Wars.

