
The Boarding School Project in America: Kill the Indian and Save the Man

The end of the wars for the West during the 1800's signaled an abrupt halt in the physical attacks against Indian tribes, and finally awakened Americans to the very real danger of the 'vanishing Indian,' which had long been an issue yet had only just been realized. This prompted an array of various groups and mobilization efforts that called for Indian reform on the tribal and individual level. The dominant theory arising from this flurry of change was an odd goal in retrospect: to save the Indians by assimilating them into American society. The term 'kill the Indian and save the man' derives from this growing concern for Indian rights at the end of the 19th century. The plight of Indians at this time was indeed bleak as tribes were forced onto reservations in order to regroup and begin the process of adapting to white society.

In the end however, this plan turned out to be a failure as the reservations increasingly became a symbol of poverty and an increased Indian dependency on rations and supplies from the U.S. government. Indians were headed on a downward spiral to extinction at an alarming rate. It required the radical ideas of such people as Captain Henry Pratt to realize the most efficient method of change for the natives would be to educate them, so as to forever separate them from the reservations, and subsequently blend them into white society. The mandated education for all Indian children had its share of advantages and disadvantages, yet the latter far outweighed the positive aspects. Although some Indians were indeed successful and able to form a bridge between their two cultures, others moved back to their reservations, or remained forever trapped between two groups, unable to reclaim their native heritage, or to blend in with the everyday white man. The implementation of the boarding school system for Indians, though a seemingly progressive idea, nevertheless had many negative aspects that continue to be felt today by the natives who lost even more of their cultural and tribal identity as a result of it.

After the failure of such policies as the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, which sought to take 'surplus' Indian lands and encourage farming, only continued to consolidate native lands and continue the pattern of poverty that had been growing for generations. The first major attempt at finding a more efficient way to assimilate Indians into American society was implemented by Captain Richard Pratt, who took captured Plains Indians and attempted to introduce them into white society by giving them 'proper' clothes, shaving their heads, and essentially removing any physical vestige of their old culture. This idea of change soon spread down to Indian children beginning in the 1870's with the opening of the first Indian boarding school: the Carlisle Indian School, which would become the model for native reform and assimilation. The goals of these schools were simple: "to isolate children from the "contaminating" influences of parents,

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friends, and family,” (Calloway 384) and to draw the Indians into white society, so that they would serve as model for others to join. For the whites, this may have seemed like reform, yet for the large majority of Indians, this marked a further desecration of their core values and beliefs.

The methods laid down by the teachers and administrators at this school were uniform and straightforward. Upon arriving, Indian children were forced to discard their old clothes, and wear their hair and new clothes in a way that they would appease the white man’s standards. From the perspective of Luther Standing Bear, a critic of the reform system, these first changes marked the plunge into an entirely foreign society and way of life: “Our accustomed dress was taken and replaced with clothing that felt cumbersome and awkward . . . Of course, our hair was cut . . . and in some mysterious way long hair stood in the path of our development.” (Calloway 418) Indians were also forced to adopt Christianity, and as such, were also given Anglo-Saxon names in an attempt to remove their pagan beliefs. As portrayed in *The American Experience* film, children were forced to adhere to Christian principles such as daily prayer, and obedience to authority, which slowly but inexorably separated them from the basic beliefs that had been the norm of their tribes for centuries. Religion was only one of many steps taken by the schools to effectively convert the natives. It was language that proved to be the greatest blow, forever separating children from their parents in a way that has been trickling down through the last few generations.

Reading and writing were basic essentials of the curriculum at these schools, and served as a double-edged sword for Indians. On the positive side, it allowed natives to converse with potential employers and fellow Americans. For some Indians such as Wolf Chief, he was able to utilize his writing skills to advocate for native rights on behalf of his Hidatsa tribe. (Calloway 390) For the vast majority of Indians, learning English created a barrier between their old tongues that persists today as many tribes have lost their old languages that have defined who they are as an individual tribe. Other important methods of Indian education in boarding schools involved the teaching of American history from a perspective that pushed for “a version of American history that distorted or ignored the Indians’ role.” (Calloway 389) It is ironic to note that this warped view of American history taught to Indians over a century ago is still presented in very much the same way in schools today, where Indians are barely mentioned or held in high regard. Further to their education, Indians were also instructed on the basis of gender division, where males were taught standard vocational skills, and women were raised to follow the standards of domestic duties as a housewife or maid. When combined, this physical and intellectual education seems to have had a drastic impact on the natives and their sense of identity in America. For a select few, some natives were able to combine the skills learned in school to assist their tribes, while for the vast majority, the effects of a progressive education had a drastically negative effect on the natives and their families.

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Examining the positive aspects of the whole boarding school experience, it can be noted that some Indians were indeed able to make the successful transition from 'savage' to 'civilized,' which had been the main goal from the perspective of their teachers and administrators. More importantly for the natives, many of them were able to return to their reservations and apply their skills so as to help other within their family, and even to educate other Indians. The aforementioned Wolf Chief successfully incorporated his language and writing abilities to protest against U.S. policies and seek change for his fellow tribesmen. As it is so fittingly put: "Indian intellectuals used popular images and stereotypes for their own purposes." (Calloway 391) Another prime example of this balance between cultures is best represented through Charles Eastman, the son of a Wahpeton Dakota who had himself been changed by white reform. The younger Eastman was encouraged by his father to adapt to white society and education with the same ferocity as if he was entering armed combat: "It is the same as if I sent you on your first warpath, I shall expect you to conquer." (Calloway 392) Eastman successfully made it through boarding school, earned his way through college, and upon returning to his old tribe, became a staunch supporter of a cultural exchange, believing that Americans had much to learn from Indians, and vice-versa. Not to overshadow the success of these boarding schools, it remains a hard fact that the majority of natives sent to the schools either used their abilities to criticize this method of reform, or else become lost between two cultures without any means to escape.

From the beginning, schools were plagued with disease, a common aspect of Indian society that had been prevalent since European contact several centuries before. Especially in the early years of the boarding schools, both on and off the reservations; waves of tuberculosis, smallpox, and other diseases had a devastating effect on both students and their families. "Between 1885 and 1913, 100 Indian students, from 37 different tribes, were buried in the cemetery at the Haskell Indian School." (Calloway 388) Suicides and dropouts were also common as students found the new way of life being imposed on them as unbearably harsh and a far cry from their old ways. Possibly the most troubling outcome for children unable to stand the boarding schools was the inability to adapt into either society.

The term 'blanket Indian' came to apply to those natives that adhered to the 'old ways,' or the increasingly dying customs that had been their norm for centuries. Indians that returned to their tribes after their formal education sought to return to this 'blanket.' (Calloway 416) However for some, such as Plenty Horses, this was a near impossibility. Plenty Horses was accused of having shot an army officer during the height of the Ghost Dance revival in 1890. He stated at his trial that he shot the officer "so I might make a place for myself among my people. Now I am one of them." (Calloway 413) Plenty Horses believed that his time at Carlisle had created a cultural divide between his old culture, and that an act of violence against the white man was the only way to find redemption among his people. For both Plenty Horse and the countless other natives who returned to their reservations after school, their lives resumed to an extent on the reservations as the outside world of the white man continued to shut down every

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possible connection they had to their old ways and customs.

The boarding school policies of the 19th to 20th centuries, though seemingly well intended in their basic aims, forever created a barrier between that particular generation of Indians and their old language and customs, which are still trying to be reclaimed today. Although the goals of these schools in regards to the mantra “kill the Indian and save the man,” worked for some natives such as Wolf Chief and Charles Eastman, it also produced great discontent from those it sought to convert. Natives such as Luther Standing Bear adapted his formal education to protest the boarding school system, claiming that this was only killing the Indians’ heritage off, and that a mutual cultural assimilation would be the ideal type of ‘school.’ As Luther so aptly put it: “So we went to school to copy, to imitate; not to exchange languages and ideas.” (Calloway 419) White reformers sought to isolate, educate, and assimilate the natives.

Every Indian child during this time was inexorably taken away from their tribes, and upon their return after several years under white influence, they fell into a sort of catch-22: too advanced and detached to return to their tribes, and at the same time not civilized or educated enough to find a decent way of life in everyday American society. Indians were forced not only to learn English and disregard their own language, but to convert to Christianity, and learn an ‘Americanized’ view of history that excluded the native’s influence on domestic affairs.

Today, the results of the boarding school system can still be seen as tribes struggle to maintain links to their old customs and languages. It can be argued that the late 19th century marked the end of large-scale Indian resistance against the loss of their lands, yet boarding schools marked a more sophisticated, modern continuation of the loss of Indian identity, something that can never be fully reclaimed.

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