

Reclaiming Culture



Red Fancy Dancer, Arlee Celebration,
Montana. 2006 by Sue Reynolds

There is a long and complex history of U.S. Government repression of Native American cultural and religious practices, the foundation of which rests on “The Doctrine of Discovery.” This doctrine evolved into international law legitimizing the taking of lands “discovered” where the inhabitants were not Christian. In America, this evolved into the belief of “Manifest Destiny,” which paved the way for Europeans to settle across the United States.

Note: the practice of “Manifest Destiny” as well as the basic Federal Indian Policy Eras can be researched by older students to add to the conversation.

In 1883, the Secretary of the Interior began a systematic attack on American Indian traditions when he directed the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to forbid dances and feasts, many of which were central to Native religious practices. The following year it became illegal for Native Americans to actively promote Indian beliefs or participate in traditional ceremonies. The punishment for disobeying this law was 30 days in prison. The Bureau of Indian Affairs went on to deny rations to American Indian men who refused to cut their hair or wore face paint.

Reclaiming Culture

Note: the rules of the Court of Indian Offenses can be researched by older students for writing or discussion.

The Government's justification for these actions was "Kill the Indian to save the man," and was a policy of assimilation. Its intention was to re-make the Indian in the European-American mold and its rationale was that it would be better for Native Americans if they looked and acted more like European-American citizens.

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs began establishing boarding schools for American Indian children, often forcing them away from their families for years as an effort of assimilation. At boarding schools, Native children were given European-style clothing and haircuts and they were physically punished for using their native languages or taking part in any traditional religious practices.

Following decades of complaints and demonstrations by American Indians and their supporters, the U.S. Congress passed two important laws that began to reverse the Federal government's practice of forcing Indians to adopt European culture while abandoning their own traditions.

Note: the basic Federal Indian Policy Eras can be researched by older students for assignments and discussion.

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 returned power to tribal governments to keep Native American children in Native homes within the tribe. This law recognized that the high rate of removal of Indian children from Indian homes and culture and into non-Native foster care and adoptions was threatening the existence of American Indian tribes and emotionally damaging Indian children.

Also in 1978, The American Indian Religious Freedom Act was initiated to protect and preserve traditional practices, including religious ceremonies and dances, access to sacred sites, and the possession and use of sacred objects. This law protected the rights of Eskimos, Aleuts and Native Hawaiians as well.

Reclaiming Culture

Other Sections Inside this Chapter:

Reclaiming Culture Introduction
Reclaiming Language
Reclaiming Ceremonies
Interpretation Strategies

Additional Chapters:

Mother Earth Introduction
Reservation Life Introduction

Other Resources

"Blackfeet Researcher Leads Her Tribe Back to Traditional Foods." *Indian Country Today*, 13 July, 2017.

Put Sey (Good Enough), by Victor A. Charlo.