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## RESERVATION SYSTEM

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Reservations were small areas of unwanted land on which Indigenous Peoples were forced to live after the United States seized their original homelands. The conditions of their confinement are another ugly chapter in U.S. history because they lived in poverty with virtually no human rights granted by the government. Some Native Americans continue to live on reservations

today though the system that once kept them there has largely ended. This entry looks at the reservation system and its impact on Native Americans.

### A Policy of Expansion

Almost as soon as the thirteen British colonies became the United States, the new nation began to spread out across the North American land mass. Through a process of conquest that lasted until about 1900, the United States seized most of the lands and wealth that once belonged to Indigenous Peoples. To support its actions, the U.S. government constructed a complex philosophy of conquest that became a national myth called “Manifest Destiny.”

White Americans who adopted this view believed that God meant them to take over all the lands and wealth of the Indigenous Peoples. Supporting this policy was the then-prevailing worldview among European Americans, which classified non-Whites as inherently inferior. This view was then codified into the legal and juridical system of the United States. Using this foundation, Indigenous People who could not militarily defeat the United States were forced to sign treaties in which they ceded land in exchange for their lives.

Treaties with Native Americans made it appear that these enormous cessions of land were legitimate market transactions between equals, when in reality these agreements were largely coerced or dictated by the United States. Indeed, treaty negotiators sometimes used fraud, corruption, threats of extermination, liquor, and outright lies to obtain a signed treaty. As part of each treaty, the United States offered to deliver goods and services, as well as a piece of land—a reservation—on which the indigenous nation had to reside.

Having confined Indigenous People on reservations, the federal government refused to recognize their human rights. The Bill of Rights and Constitution were viewed as not applying to Native people, who were not even considered human beings under U.S. law until 1879. A government agent was appointed for each reservation, and this person had almost absolute power over the lives of its residents. Thus, Native people were virtual prisoners on reservations for most of the 19th century. They needed the agent’s permission to leave the reservation, and if they went without it, they could be hunted down and executed or returned to the reservation by the U.S. military.

In September 1878, the Northern Cheyenne fled their Oklahoma reservation, and many died in an

attempt to return to their traditional homelands in the Powder River country of Montana and Wyoming. They were pursued by more than 15,000 U.S. troops. One band of women, children, and old people, and a handful of men were captured and held in an unheated guardhouse in the dead of winter at Camp Robinson, Nebraska. The captives declared that they would rather die than return to the reservation.

In an attempt to force their compliance, the officer in charge deprived them of proper clothing, blankets, fuel for fires, and food for five days. On the fifth night, the captives escaped—men, women, and children fled for their lives into the cold, dark prairie. Mounted U.S. troops chased them and shot and killed more than forty of the American Indians. Six days later, the troops surrounded the survivors and opened fire. Without ammunition, the Indigenous People could defend themselves only with a few camp knives, and all but nine were slaughtered. Those nine were sent back to the reservation.

### Life on the Reservation

The U.S. Indian agent controlled all aspects of reservation life. Native Americans were not allowed freedom of speech or freedom of assembly, and they could be searched and their property seized at any time the agent ordered such action. Native Americans had no right to bear arms and could be deprived of life, liberty, and property at any time. They had no freedom of religion and were specifically prohibited from any manifestation of indigenous spiritual beliefs. They had no right to trial by jury and no recourse under the law. If they failed to obey the U.S. agent, they were punished in any way the agent saw fit. Most often, this took the form of deprivation of all food for the offender and his family. The children of indigenous parents could be taken away at any time. The basic freedoms and inalienable rights granted in the Constitution to U.S. citizens were not extended to Indigenous Peoples.

Until about 1870, U.S. Indian agents were political appointees who frequently used their offices for personal aggrandizement. The government sent annuities each year, which were supposed to compensate the indigenes for ceding their homelands, but in practice, the U.S. Indian agent controlled the funds. This system led to massive corruption; cash might be turned to other purposes or food and other supplies sold at discounted prices to neighboring Whites instead of being delivered to the indigenes.

Agents often worked in league with traders, who cheated the indigenes and charged them grossly inflated prices for supplies. Underweight cattle and condemned food supplies were delivered, and the agent and contractor split the difference in cost. Worst of all, annuities often simply never came. The land chosen for reservations was often agriculturally poor, so that crops frequently failed; hunting also yielded little food. Some historians view the reservations as death camps where Indigenous Peoples had brief lives characterized by poverty and ill health.

### Attacks on Native Culture

In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant tried to address the horrors of the reservation system by instituting a new program he called the "Peace Policy." He sought the assistance of several Christian denominations, which divided the reservations and appointed religious men as U.S. Indian agents. The change did not end corruption, however, and many of the new agents were Christian zealots, determined to eradicate indigenous culture and belief systems and to force indigenes to become Christians. The aim of these agents was to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Religious groups promoted the separation of children from their homes and families in boarding schools; children were forcibly removed and often not allowed to see their parents again for years.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, numerous White philanthropists and do-gooders concerned with the plight of the indigenes developed formidable influence on U.S. Indian policy. Even though they were unfamiliar with Native Americans and their culture, these philanthropists attempted to determine the direction of U.S. Indian policy. They came to believe that tribal relations had kept Indigenous Peoples from assimilating to White ways, and the blamed the reservation system for sustaining a sense of community among Native Americans, despite their poverty.

These agents believed that the United States should break up the reservations and force Indigenous Peoples to live separately, "independent" of their communities. White culture and its economic relations were based on the premise that individuals should accumulate and hold wealth as individuals. Thus, the alleged benefactors decided that the communally owned lands of the indigenes—the reservations—should be broken up into individual plots of land that would be owned by individual indigenes. Each indigenous family was

given about 160 acres; the remainder of the reservation lands was released for purchase by White settlers, thus bringing the last domains of the indigenes into the market.

In 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act, which called for the allotment of all reservation lands and the end of all tribal relations. Indigenous nations demanded the United States honor its treaty obligations and leave their lands alone. However, in 1903, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Congress had the power to repudiate treaties. By 1920, almost all indigenous lands had passed into the hands of non-Indigenous Peoples.

### Modern Improvements

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration began to change U.S. Indian policy dramatically by restoring some basic human rights to Indigenous Peoples. Allotment of reservations was ended as a policy, although by then most of the reservations had already been broken up and sold off. Anti-Indian policies at the American Indian schools were modified.

Today, reservations have become home to many Indigenous People. Most, however, have migrated to urban areas. In many cases, conditions on the reservations have continued, resulting in poverty, disease, reduced life expectancy, and increased infant mortality rates and unemployment. In a few cases, casinos or other business enterprises have begun to lead some indigenous nations out of poverty.

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**See also** Blood Quantum; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Colonialism; Dawes Act of 1887; Hopi; Native American Health Care; Native Americans; Navajo; Racism; Sacred Sites, Native American; Trail of Broken Treaties; Wounded Knee (1890 and 1973)

### Further Readings

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