This informational text discusses the finale of the American Indian Wars, a succession of official and unofficial wars and attacks between American Indian tribes, U.S. military, and individual American settlers west of the Mississippi River from the early 1600s to the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890. At the end of the American Indian Wars, all surviving Native Americans were assigned to reservations where they faced poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, poor farming land, depression, and the forced removal of children to Indian boarding schools where they were stripped of their culture and language. As you read, note what motivates multiple sides to compromise or not compromise with one another on how American Indians can live.

In the second half of the late 19th century, America’s westward expansion was meeting forceful resistance from native populations. Settlers seeking opportunity out West were eager for land and resources controlled by different Indian tribes. The U.S. government fell into a pattern of forming and then breaking treaties with the Indians. This allowed settlers to take more and more Indian land, forcing Indians to respond with violence. The repeated cycle of stealth, resistance, and defeat that followed would eventually force the surviving Indian populations to bend to the will of the U.S. government.

Another Broken Treaty
America had a long history of forming treaties with tribes, and as western expansion continued, the government sought to use treaties to force Native Americans onto smaller and smaller tracts of land. Treaties did not promise peace though. In 1864, government troops massacred a peaceful Cheyenne village at Sand Creek in Colorado. Subsequently, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux warriors retaliated. By 1868, the upsurge of violence on the Great Plains forced the U.S. to amend the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie with these and other regional tribes.

Following the new Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which altered tribes’ territories in the northern Great Plains, the American military shared a delicate peace with the Sioux and the Cheyenne. Gold broke it. In 1874, a scientific exploration group led by General George Armstrong Custer discovered the precious metal in the heart of the Black Hills of South Dakota, a land sacred to the Lakota Sioux.

When word of the discovery leaked, nothing could stop the masses of prospectors looking to get rich quick, despite the treaty protections that awarded that land to the Sioux. Two local Indian leaders, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, decided to take up arms to defend their dwindling land supply.

Little Bighorn
Custer was perhaps the most flashy and brash officer in the United States Army. He was confident
his technologically superior troops could contain the Native American fighters. Armed with new weapons of destruction such as the rapid-firing Gatling gun, Custer and his soldiers felt that it was only a matter of time before the Indians would surrender and submit to life on a smaller reservation than promised in the Fort Laramie Treaty. Custer hoped to make that happen sooner rather than later.

His orders were to locate the Sioux encampment in the Bighorn Mountains of Montana and trap them until reinforcements arrived. But the prideful Custer sought to engage the Sioux on his own.

On June 25, 1876, he discovered a small Indian village on the banks of the Little Bighorn River. Custer confidently ordered his troops to attack, not realizing that he was confronting the main Sioux and Cheyenne encampment. About three thousand Sioux warriors led by Crazy Horse descended upon Custer’s regiment, and within hours Custer and his entire Seventh Cavalry were dead.

The victory was brief for the warring Sioux. Soldiers arrived and chased them for the next several months. By October, much of the Native American resistance had ended. Crazy Horse had surrendered, but Sitting Bull and a small band of warriors escaped to Canada. Eventually, in 1881, they returned to the United States and surrendered due to hunger.

Reactions Back East
The Battle of the Little Bighorn, or Custer’s Last Stand as it was called back East, caused massive debate. War hawks demanded an immediate increase in federal military spending and swift judgment for the noncompliant Sioux.

Critics of United States policy also made their opinions known. The most vocal detractor, Helen Hunt Jackson, published a blistering assault on United States Indian policy in her 1881 book A Century of Dishonor. It chronicled injustices toward Native Americans over the past hundred years.

The American masses, however, were unsympathetic or indifferent. A systematic plan to end all native resistance was approved, and the Indians of the West would not see another victory like the Little Bighorn.

In spite of the Sioux’s fighting, Custer’s vision for gold-mining the Black Hills came true. In 1877, Congress seized the land in violation of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. (To add insult to injury, 50 years later the U.S. government would commission the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in the Black Hills.)

The End of Resistance
The crackdown on Native Americans went far beyond those involved in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Settlers and federal troops now relentlessly hunted any tribes resisting American advancement. Tribes that wished to survive were thus slowly forced onto reservations.

The Lakota Sioux were decimated by yet another American tactic of war: an attack on their food

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supply. Travelers heading westward were encouraged to kill any buffalo they encountered. Buffalo robes became fashionable in the East, so profit-seekers slaughtered thousands of bison simply for their hides. Others shot them for sport, leaving their remains for the local vultures.

The army was even known to use Gatling guns on the herds to reduce their numbers. The plan was effective. At the end of the Civil War, an estimated 15 million buffalo roamed the Great Plains. By 1900, there were only several hundred, as the species was nearly extinct. The Sioux and other Plains tribes lost their chief means of subsistence and mourned the loss of the animal, which was revered as sacred according to many tribal religions.

**Chief Joseph and The Nez Percé**
The year after Custer’s infamous defeat, the Nez Percé Indians of Idaho fell victim to western expansion. When gold was discovered on their lands in 1877, demands were made for over 90 percent of their territory. After a stand-off between tribal warriors and the United States Army, their leader Chief Joseph directed his followers toward Canada to avoid capture. He hoped to join forces with Sitting Bull and plan the next move from there.

Army officials chased the Nez Percé 1700 miles across Idaho and Western Montana. As they neared the border, the army closed in and Chief Joseph was forced to surrender in the Bear Paw Mountains, where he famously said:

> “Tell General Howard that I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead, Tu-hul-hi-sote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who now say yes or no. He who led the young men [Joseph’s brother Alikut] is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people — some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets and no food. No one knows where they are — perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more against the white man.”

The entire tribe was relocated to Oklahoma where nearly half of them perished from disease and despair. Chief Joseph went to Washington D.C. in 1879 where he said, “I have heard talk and talk, but nothing is done. Good words do not last long unless they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men…. I am tired of talk that comes to nothing.”

**Carving Up Oklahoma**
Homesteaders had taken over much of the land that Indians once roamed in search of game or cultivated for crops. The last land to be claimed by homesteaders was in Oklahoma. Previously dubbed “Indian Territory” by the federal government, Oklahoma had been used as a state-sized reservation of many tribes around the country, ranging from the Nez Percé of Idaho to the Cherokee of Georgia.
Not all of the land in Oklahoma had been assigned to a specific tribe though. So, in 1889, the United States Government decided to break Oklahoma up from one reservation into many, with all the land left unassigned to a tribe up for grabs. Two million acres of Indian land would be available to homesteaders.

At noon on April 22, 1889, the land was legally opened to claim under the provisions of the Homestead Act. Thousands rushed across Oklahoma to grab a piece. Land once promised to the Indians was gobbled up in a matter of hours.

By nightfall, Oklahoma City qualified as a city of 10,000 tent inhabitants. Those who staked a claim before it was legal were called “Sooners,” giving the state its future nickname. Successful homesteaders rested that night in triumph, leaving the Indians of the area to despair over yet another grand theft and reduction of their land.

After being forced off their native lands, many American Indians found life to be most difficult. Beginning in the first half of the 19th century, federal policy dictated that certain tribes be confined to fixed land plots to continue their traditional ways of life. There were many problems with this approach. Besides the moral issue of depriving a people of life on their historic land, many economic issues plagued reservations. Nomadic tribes that followed animal migrations lost their entire means of subsistence by being constricted to a defined area. Farmers found themselves with land unsuitable for agriculture. Many lacked the know-how to implement complex irrigation systems. Hostile tribes were often forced into the same proximity. The results were disastrous.

The Dawes Act

Faced with disease, alcoholism, and despair on the reservations, federal officials changed directions with the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. Each Native American family was offered 160 acres of tribal land to own outright. Although the land could not be sold for 25 years, these new landowners could farm it for profit like other farmers in the West.

Congress hoped that this system would end the dependency of the tribes on the federal government, enable Indians to become individually prosperous, and assimilate the Indians into mainstream American life. After 25 years, participants would become American citizens, effectively ending the tribal way of life.

Tribes widely resisted what the government saw as a fair proposal. Tribal leaders foretold the end of their ancient folkways and a further loss of communal land. When individuals did attempt this new way of life, they were often unsuccessful. Farming the West takes considerable expertise. Lacking this knowledge, many were still dependent upon the government for assistance, revealing a flaw in the federal plan.

The Dawes Act was an unmitigated disaster for tribal units. Native American tribes lost half their land in less than two decades. When the Dawes Act was repealed in 1934, alcoholism, poverty, illiteracy, and suicide rates were higher for Native Americans than any other ethnic group in the United States. As America grew to the status of a world power, the first Americans were reduced to hopelessness.
Many 19th century Americans saw the Dawes Act as a way to “civilize” the Native Americans. Visiting missionaries attempted to convert the Indians to Christianity, although they found few new believers. Since it was no longer possible to resist forced assimilation through armed resistance, many American Indians turned to spiritual resistance. The Ghost Dance emerged in the northern Great Plains as a new spiritual gathering of Native Americans committed to their ancestral ways of life. Like the armed warriors before them, these peaceful natives would be swept up in a violent end at the hands of the U.S. government: the 1890 Massacre of Wounded Knee.