

Federal Assimilationist Policy and California's Indigenous Peoples

Introduction: Slides 1 - 4

Time: approximately 5 minutes

Essential Vocabulary:

- Indian, Indigenous, Native American, assimilation, colonization

Slide 1: Show the Title Slide and read the topic title.

- Ask students if they have heard the word “assimilation” before.
 - What does it mean? Has anyone ever experienced assimilation before? Why might some people see assimilation as a good thing? When might people resist assimilation?
- Tell students that Native Americans have experienced many periods of *forced* assimilation in US history, and that will be what we are exploring in this lesson.
 - Remind students that it's important to talk about this history, because it continues to have lasting impacts on people today. For Native communities, assimilation is directly tied to land dispossession.
 - Native Americans across the country are fighting to reclaim their ancestral lands, revitalize their traditional practices and reawaken their religions, but it is an uphill battle in a society that does not understand the extent to which Indigenous peoples have been wronged.
- Inform students that we are in a unique position in history to help right these wrongs, but we must first educate ourselves about how we got here, so that we are fully equipped with the knowledge needed to move forward together.

Slide 2:

- Read the objectives of the day for students.

Slide 3:

- Tell students that today's lesson will aim to answer the following questions.

Slide 4:

- Introduce some of the vocabulary that will be included throughout the lesson.
 - **NOTE TO TEACHER:** Notice that there are 3 different terms for referring to the Indigenous people of the United States. When referring to a specific event or policy, it is alright to use the term “Indian.” The US Constitution refers to “Indian Tribes” as separate sovereign entities that have formal political, legal, and economic relationships with the US Federal and State governments. The term “Indian” is a misnomer and has been used to disenfranchise Indigenous people in some cases, particularly in decisions

regarding citizenship, schooling, and political and economic freedom within the United States. In the 20th and 21st centuries, Native people have used the term American Indian when advocating for political sovereignty and power.

- **Each individual may hold differing views on the most appropriate terminology to use. This is not the preferred term.** We recommend avoiding the term "Indian" in general use. When in doubt, using "Indigenous" or "Native American" interchangeably is acceptable.
 - Native people/communities are most accurately referenced by their Tribal names. Ancestral names often refer to specific geographic locations from which the community originates. Modern political names often use political titles given to the Tribe by the federal government of the United States. Modern Native people might refer to themselves by their ancestral community name and/or by the name of the sovereign political body of which they are citizens.
 - I.e. "I am *Pomo*, a citizen of Middletown Rancheria."
 - For an insightful and well-articulated explanation of terminology, we recommend exploring Ojibwe author Anton Treuer's perspective on the topic in this [YouTube video](#).
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Activity 1 (KWL Warm-up): Slides 5-6

Time: 5 minutes

Essential Vocabulary:

- Native American

Slide 5: First, let's see what students already know about Native American people and their history.

- Instruct students to take out a piece of paper and draw a chart with 3 columns.
 - At the top of column 1, write I know.... And take 60 seconds to write down some things you already know about Native people.
 - This can include things they've previously learned in school, maybe they know a Native person and some of their cultural practices, maybe they know about contemporary Native movements, etc.

Slide 6:

- Ask for volunteers to share some of the things they wrote down for column 1, and type them directly into the slide.
 - Are there any misconceptions students have about Native Americans? Depending on your level of knowledge and comfortability, you can take a

moment to address these misconceptions or give students time to correct them on their own as they learn new material.

- To enhance your understanding of common misconceptions about Native Americans, we recommend watching Redbud Resource Group's short [video](#) on *Stereotypes and Assumptions*. For a more in-depth exploration, consider adding Anton Treuer's book, [Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask](#) to your classroom resources.

Repeat this process for column 2 - what students want to learn about Native Americans.

- If students are having a hard time figuring out where to begin, remind them of the 6 questions of journalism (Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?).
- Encourage students to add to column 2 as new questions arise for them throughout the lesson.

Students will complete column 3 at the end of this lesson.

Activity 2 (Video Resource w/ Guided Notes): Slides 7 - 9

Time: 25 minutes

Essential Vocabulary

- Genocide, Indian, power, revitalization

Slide 7:

- Hand out the Guided Notes worksheet to students.
- Introduce the video (~13 minutes long): History of Native California.
 - This video features the voices of local Native community members and experts in the field of Native American Studies and the history of colonization in the state of California. It was produced by the Native American Studies program at Cal Poly, Humboldt.
- Review the questions on the guided notes as a class. Instruct students to do their best to answer the questions as they watch and listen.
 - For a detailed explanation of the S-I-T (Surprising, Interesting, Troubling) strategy, including implementation tips and examples, visit the Facing History and Ourselves resource on [S-I-T](#). This strategy is an excellent tool for helping students reflect on and analyze materials by identifying elements they find surprising, interesting, or troubling, fostering deeper engagement and critical thinking.
- Following the video, give students the opportunity to share back some of their notes. Focus on the SIT protocol for a few minutes. What were some of the things students found most surprising, interesting and troubling about what they learned from the video?

Slide 8: How did the US government abuse its power to acquire Indigenous lands during colonization?

- Remind students of the first essential question and present the provided definition of *power*.
- Tell students that power dynamics show up in different ways in our lives.
- Read through each of the bullet points, pausing to ask students to share how power is shaped by each factor in their own lives.
 - Cultural Norms:
 - Cultural values can influence **how** power is understood and valued.
 - Different cultures may emphasize hierarchy or consensus-building.
 - Social Structures:
 - Factors like class, gender, race, and ethnicity shape power dynamics.
 - Social groups have varying access to power and privilege.
 - Political Systems:
 - Democracy, authoritarianism, and Tribal governance impact power distribution.
 - Each system has its own mechanisms for leadership and decision-making.
 - Historical Context:
 - Past events like colonization and social movements affect power dynamics.
 - Historical injustices continue to shape contemporary power structures.
 - Economic Factors:
 - Economic systems and wealth disparities influence power relationships.
 - Economic power intersects with political and social influence.
 - Legal and Institutional Frameworks:
 - Laws and institutions reflect and shape power dynamics.
 - Legal systems uphold or challenge existing power structures.

Slide 9: Think-Pair-Share

- Have students pair up.
 - Instruct students to discuss each question as it relates to power.
 - Assess whether students are able to answer the first essential question at this point.
 - Tell students that though they may already have some answers to this question, they will continue to explore dynamics of power in the next activity.
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Activity 3 (Human Timeline): Slides 10-12

Time: 25 minutes

Essential Vocabulary

- Federal policy, forced assimilation, sovereignty

Slide 10: The Big Picture

- Explain to students that sometimes to understand power dynamics within a society, it helps to have a deeper understanding of history. Students are going to continue building on the historical overview presented in the video, and learn about some of the policies enacted for the purpose of assimilating Native Americans into Western society.
- Introduce each of the periods of assimilation introduced in the timeline.
 - **The Reservation period** forcefully moved Native people off their lands and onto reservations for the purpose of segregating Natives from settlers. Indian Tribes went from being considered independent sovereign Nations to wards of the state.
 - The **Allotment and Assimilation** period was marked by the implementation of numerous policies aimed at systematically acquiring more Indigenous lands for non-Native settlement and development. Central to this effort was the **Dawes Act of 1887**, which divided communal Tribal lands into individual allotments, with the surplus lands often sold to non-Native settlers. These policies sought not only to diminish Tribal land holdings but also to undermine traditional communal land stewardship and force Native people into an agrarian, individualistic lifestyle modeled after Western ideals. The period also included efforts to assimilate Native peoples into mainstream American society, such as placing Native children in government-run boarding schools, further eroding cultural and social ties to their ancestral lands. These combined efforts led to massive land loss and cultural disruption for many Tribes across the United States. lands.
 - **Reorganization** was an effort to address some of the harms caused by federal policies over the previous century with more federal policies. During this time, Native Americans gained U.S. citizenship. However, many Tribes remained skeptical of the federal government's initiatives to promote Native self-determination, given the long history of broken promises and the government's repeated interference in Tribal governance.
 - The **Termination and Relocation** period was a last ditch effort to acquire yet more Indigenous land and valuable resources. More than 100 Tribes lost federal recognition and so moved to urban areas in hopes to better support themselves and their families.
- Reintroduce the next essential question. Inform students that they are going to look at specific laws that have been passed throughout history in attempts to fully assimilate Native Americans into Western cultures.

TRIGGER WARNING: Many of these policies had and continue to have direct impacts on Native families today. Take precautions to prepare your learning space for responding to potential emotionally triggered responses.

Slide 11: Human Timeline

- Display the timeline in full.
- Tell students that we will be using Indian Boarding Schools as a focal point as we move through history, following the CA Indian Genocide and leading up to World War II.
 - Ask students what they already know about Indian Boarding Schools.
 - Inform them that the US government used these as a primary tool of assimilation of Native Americans.
 - Prompt students to reflect on the video shared at the beginning of the lesson. What insights or perspectives did the individuals interviewed share about their experiences or reflections on boarding schools?
 - Many of the policies students are about to explore mandated attendance at Indian Boarding Schools as a form of punishment for not adhering to their laws.
 - Tell students that by 1891, every Native child was required by law to attend a government school.
- *Optional:* Play this short [video](#) of Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) reporting on the legacy of boarding schools in the United States, and inform students that they will learn more about the experiences of Native American children at boarding schools following the activity.
- Divide the class up into 11 small groups. Each group will be given a Human Timeline policy card.

Slide 12: Human Timeline Activity Instructions

- Read the instructions for the class.
 - For a comprehensive guide to the Human Timeline activity, including step-by-step instructions, teaching strategies, and examples, visit the Facing History and Ourselves resource on [Human Timelines](#). This activity encourages students to actively engage with historical events, helping them understand chronology, connections, and the impact of key moments in a hands-on and collaborative way.
 - CHECK POINT: Give students an opportunity to ask clarifying questions about anything discussed so far.
 - Give students about 5 minutes to read their cards and discuss the reflection questions at the bottom of each description.
 - Ask for one volunteer from each group to represent their group. Instruct volunteers to work amongst themselves to create a “human timeline” of all of the events.
 - Each volunteer will share back their policy in their own words and read out loud the reflection question at the bottom. If time allows, have students discuss each question. Or simply offer it as food for thought.
 - Note: Students may wish to respond to one or more of the reflection questions in their final reflection paragraph.
 - Hand out the Human Timeline Policy Summary pages for students to keep.
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Activity 4 (Indian Boarding Schools Reading): Slides 13-15

Time: 25 minutes

Essential Vocabulary

- Boarding school, cultural genocide

Slide 13: Indian Boarding Schools in the United States

- Students are now working with much more context as you move into talking about what students experienced at Indian Boarding Schools.
- As the CA Indian Genocide physically decimated Native communities, the Boarding Schools had equally traumatizing repercussions for Native families.
- To better understand how Native people are still feeling the impacts of Indian Boarding Schools, students will be reading an excerpt on the experiences of Native children who attended Indian Boarding Schools.
- First, show the picture of the two nuns and the small Indian girl.
 - Ask students what they notice and what they wonder about this photo.
 - Someone may note that the nuns' names are displayed, while the young girl is unnamed.
 - Explain to students that the adults responsible for these children were oftentimes racist and violent. Indian children were not seen as children in need of love and care, but of stern discipline.
 - Students were not allowed to do anything related to their traditional cultures, like speaking in their native language, or singing their songs. Most of their days were spent working in the fields or doing hard labor.
 - These were militarized schools. Students were required to wear uniforms. They were forced to cut their hair and given new "Christian" names.
 - Inform students that hundreds of students died at these schools from malnutrition, disease, sexual abuse, torture, and neglect.
- Next, read the quote from the Office of Indian Affairs to Greenville Schools located up in Plumas County.
 - Reiterate that this was the dominant attitude towards Native children at the boarding schools.
 - According to the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report (2024), there were 417 federal Indian boarding schools across the U.S. The report highlights that at least 65 of these schools had marked or unmarked burial sites, representing the tragic loss of life among Native children during their time in these institutions. While the report doesn't specify the number of individuals who reported abuse, it documents widespread trauma inflicted by many of these schools.

Slide 14: Reading Activity

- Point out the 6 main schools that California Native children were sent to.
- Hand out the excerpt from Chag Lowry's book, "The Original Patriots: Northern California Indian Veterans of WWII."

- Instruct students to read the article and answer the comprehension questions on a separate piece of paper.
 - *If time allows*, have students do a think-pair-share discussion around the question provided on the bottom Slide 14.
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Activity 5 (Final Assessment): Slides 16 - 17

Time: 10-15 minutes OR assign as homework

Slide 15: In a single paragraph (or more), students will reflect on everything they have learned over the course of this lesson.

- Students may use the prompts given or focus on a topic of their choice.

Slide 16: Remind students to fill out the final column on their KWL charts. Return to Slide 6 and have 3-5 students share back something that stood out to them that they learned from this lesson.

- Were any of their questions answered from column 2? Do they have new questions that come up for them?
- Closing remarks:
 - **Highlight reconciliation efforts** - Discuss ongoing work in the U.S. and California focused on addressing the legacy of boarding schools and forced assimilation. For example, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland's initiative to investigate the impacts of Indian boarding schools represents a major step toward reconciliation and acknowledgment of historical trauma.
 - **Re-emphasize the recent Federal Indian Boarding School Report** - Inform students that this work is ongoing, as demonstrated by the 2024 report published by the Department of the Interior. This report underscores the federal government's acknowledgment of the harm caused and the need for transparency, healing, and support for Native communities.
 - **Key findings from the report** - Share significant data from the report to give students concrete examples of the lasting impacts:
 - The investigation identified 417 federal Indian boarding schools operating across 37 states or then-territories, with a significant concentration in present-day Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico.
 - The report uncovered marked or unmarked burial sites at 65 of these institutions, revealing that at least 973 children died while attending these schools. The actual number of deaths is likely higher due to incomplete records.
 - Approximately 210 of the identified boarding schools received support from religious organizations, highlighting the collaboration between federal authorities and religious groups in the operation of these institutions.
 - The U.S. government invested approximately \$23.3 billion

(adjusted for inflation) into the federal Indian boarding school system, underscoring the extensive resources allocated to these assimilation efforts.

- **Call to action for students** - Encourage students to think critically about how they can contribute to reconciliation and understanding, whether by amplifying Native voices, learning about Tribal sovereignty, or challenging stereotypes and misconceptions in their communities.

Slide 17: Offers potential prompts if teachers choose to assign an essay to help students bridge and expand knowledge gained in this lesson.