



Interrogating Sources

"Kill the Indian, Save the Man": The Carlisle Indian Industrial School Sets the Precedent for Assimilation

Historical Context

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was the first federally funded off-reservation boarding school for Indigenous American children. Its founding marked the beginning of a widespread effort by the US government to forcibly assimilate Indigenous peoples into white American society. The school was created by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, who is infamously known for his philosophy: "Kill the Indian, and save the man." This phrase reflected the core mission of the school which was to erase Indigenous culture, language, and identity, and replace them with Euro-American norms, values, and labor habits. Native children were taken from their families, sometimes by force, and brought to Carlisle and other boarding schools across the country. Upon arrival, students were given English names, dressed in military-style uniforms, had their hair cut short, and were forbidden from speaking their native languages or practicing their cultural traditions. The school emphasized industrial and domestic training over academic learning, based on the belief that Native children should be taught to serve white society in roles deemed appropriate. Boys were trained for manual labor and farm work, while girls were trained for domestic service. This system deliberately sought to dismantle tribal sovereignty and assimilate Native children into a settler colonial vision of citizenship, one that denied the validity and richness of Indigenous lifeways. Students at Carlisle often suffered physical punishment, emotional trauma, cultural dislocation, and even death due to disease, poor living conditions, and abuse. Hundreds of children never returned home. Many who did return found themselves estranged from their communities and families, no longer fluent in their languages or connected to their cultural roots. The trauma of this system left deep and lasting scars, ones that continue to affect Indigenous families and nations today. The Carlisle model became the blueprint for over 350 Indian boarding schools across the United States. These schools were central to the broader federal policy of assimilation, a strategy that attempted to resolve what the government saw as the "Indian problem" by absorbing Native peoples into white America, thereby eliminating them as distinct cultural and political entities. However, some parents sent their children, so they would have regular access to food and shelter, and some children had positive experiences. Today, the Carlisle Indian School stands as a symbol of cultural erasure, forced assimilation, and intergenerational trauma. At the same time, Native communities are actively working to reclaim their languages, cultures, and histories while honoring the resilience of those who survived.

Connection to Habit

Using this habit students can critically examine how the history of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was often presented as a benevolent effort to "civilize" Indigenous children. At the time, government reports, school pamphlets, and mainstream newspapers framed assimilation as helpful or humanitarian, reinforcing the false belief that Indigenous cultures were inferior. By interrogating these sources and comparing them to Indigenous people's testimonies, photographs, and oral histories, students can uncover the truth that assimilation was a tool of cultural erasure, rooted in colonial fears of Indigenous sovereignty and identity. This habit of mind teaches students to ask who created a source, whose voices are missing, and how power shapes the telling of history.

Discussion Questions

- What was the purpose of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and how did it reflect the goals of US assimilation policies?
- How did daily life at Carlisle attempt to erase Indigenous identity and culture?
- Why do you think the government and school officials believed assimilation was a solution to the “Indian problem”?
- How might a government source describing Carlisle differ from an Indigenous student’s account?
- What questions should we ask when we read historical sources about assimilation?
- What were some of the short- and long-term impacts of Carlisle on Indigenous children and their communities?
- How are Indigenous communities today working to reclaim what was lost due to assimilation policies?
- Why is it important for us today to study places like Carlisle through multiple perspectives?

Suggested Activity

Materials:

- Printed or digital copies of randomly assigned excerpts of Pratt’s words (1 per pair)
- Student Analysis Worksheet
- Highlighters or digital annotation tools
- Chart paper or Google Slides (optional, for share-outs)

Step 1: Before and After - The Impact of Indigenous Assimilation Warm-up Activity

Silent Viewing & Observation [3 mins]

Project or distribute the before and after photo pairs from the following list:

- Tom Torlino at the Carlisle School 1882–1885
- Wounded Yellow Robe, Timber Yellow Robe, and Henry Standing Bear, 1883
- Navajo Students with Richard Henry Pratt, 1882
- Four Pueblo Children from Zuni, NM, c. 1880
- White Buffalo, c.1881–1882
- Chiricahua Apaches from Fort Marion, 1886–1887

Prompt for Students: Now that you’ve viewed the “before” and “after” images, jot down your immediate thoughts to these questions [4 mins]:

- What changes do you notice in clothing, hair, posture, or expression?
- What do these changes suggest about the goals of assimilation?
- What questions or emotions come up as you look at these photos?

Brief Debrief [3 mins]

Have a few students share their responses with the class. Close out the warm-up with the following statement or something similar: “These photos were used to promote the success of Indian boarding schools, but when we look closely, we can see signs of cultural loss, forced change, and resistance. Today, we’ll continue exploring what assimilation really meant for Indigenous children and their communities.”

Step 2: Student Pair Document Analysis and Discussion [20 mins]

Divide the class into pairs and randomly assign each pair one excerpt from Pratt’s writings. Students complete the worksheet together and underline specific phrases in the text that support their answers. Encourage students to identify bias, loaded language, and the silencing of Native perspectives.

Step 3: Whole Class Reflection and Share Out [15–20 mins]

Have each pair give a brief 1-minute summary:

- Their excerpt’s main argument
- One problematic belief or contradiction they found
- A reflection on whose story was left out

Optional: Create a classroom chart titled Patterns of Assimilation in Pratt’s Thinking and add notes about recurring themes (ie. forced separation from culture, anti-tribalism, anti-missionary, white superiority)

Step 4: Exit Ticket or Homework Prompt [5–10 mins]

Based on your excerpt and our discussion, explain how Richard Pratt’s writings supported the erasure of Indigenous identity. Why is it important to interrogate sources like these instead of taking them at face value?

Primary Sources

Before - Tom Torlino, 1882



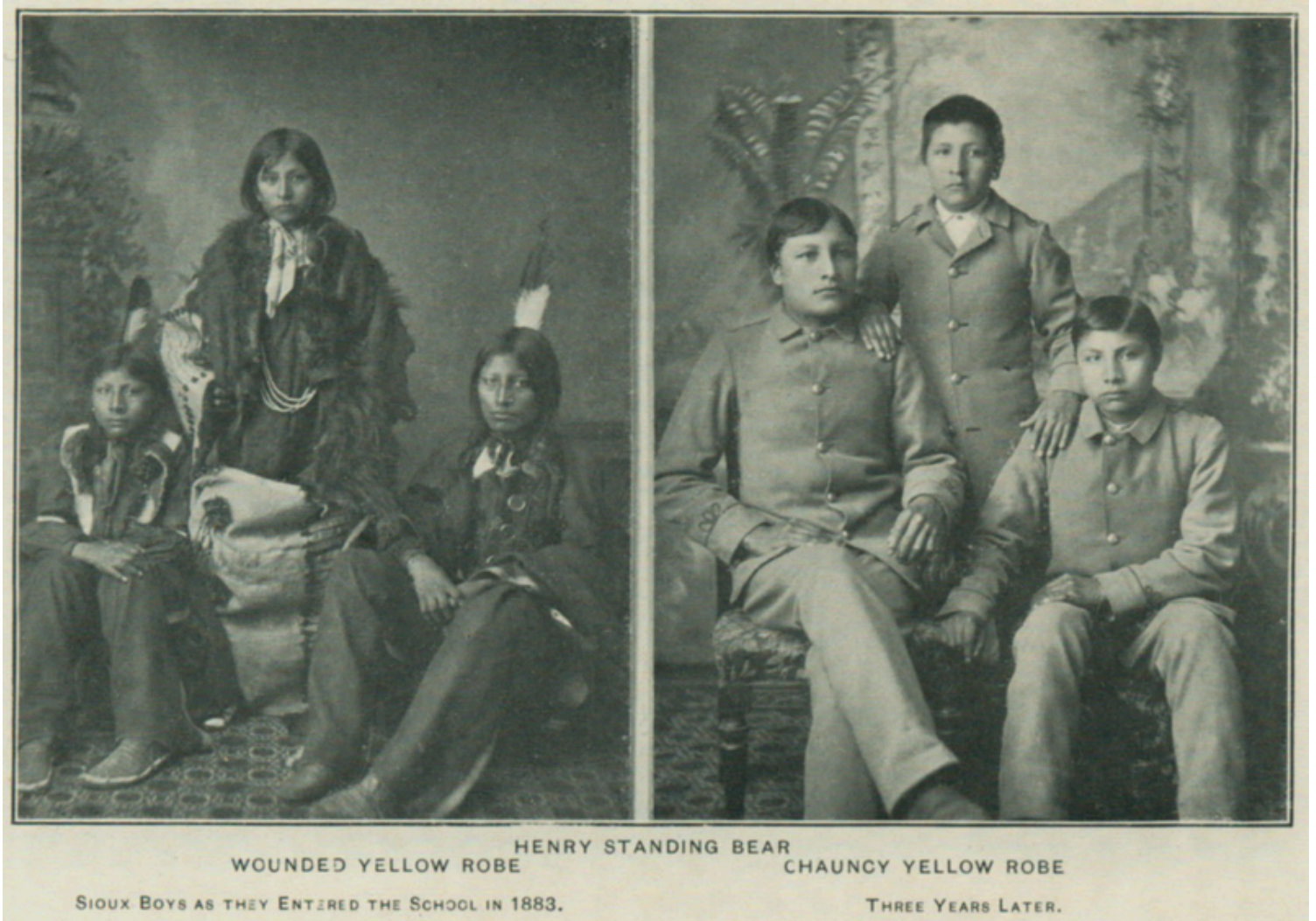
After - Tom Torlino, 1885



Primary Sources

Before and After

Wounded Yellow Robe, Timber Yellow Robe, and Henry Standing Bear, 1883



Primary Sources

Before - Navajo Students with Richard Henry Pratt, 1882



After - Navajo Students, 1882



Primary Sources

Before - Four Pueblo Children
from Zuni, NM, c. 1880



After - Four Pueblo Children
from Zuni, NM, c. 1880



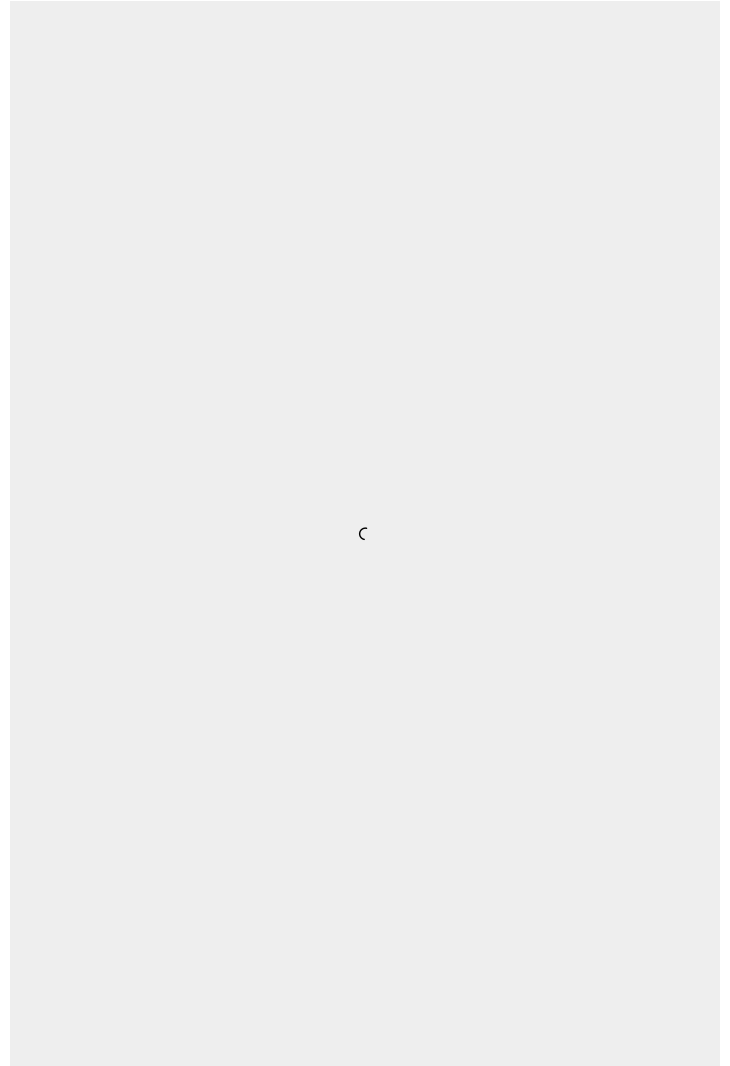
Source: [Four Pueblo Children from Zuni, NM, c. 1880 \[Before\]](#) and [Four Pueblo Children from Zuni, NM, c. 1880 \[After\]](#)

Primary Sources

Before - White Buffalo, c.1881



After - White Buffalo, c.1882



Primary Sources

Before - Chiracahua Apaches from Fort Marion, 1886



After - Chiracahua Apaches from Fort Marion, 1887



Source: [Chiracahua Apaches from Fort Marion, 1886 \[Before\]](#) and [Chiracahua Apaches from Fort Marion, 1887 \[After\]](#)

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 1

A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.

We are just now making a great pretence of anxiety to civilize the Indians. I use the word "pretence" purposely, and mean it to have all the significance it can possibly carry. Washington believed that commerce freely entered into between us and the Indians would bring about their civilization, and Washington was right. He was followed by Jefferson, who inaugurated the reservation plan. Jefferson's reservation was to be the country west of the Mississippi; and he issued instructions to those controlling Indian matters to get the Indians there, and let the Great River be the line between them and the whites. Any method of securing removal - persuasion, purchase, or force - was authorized.

Jefferson's plan became the permanent policy. The removals have generally been accomplished by purchase, and the evils of this are greater than those of all the others combined. . . .It is a sad day for the Indians when they fall under the assaults of our troops, as in the Piegan massacre, the massacre of Old Black Kettle and his Cheyennes at what is termed "the battle of the Washita," and hundreds of other like places in the history of our dealings with them; but a far sadder day is it for them when they fall under the baneful influences of a treaty agreement with the United States whereby they are to receive large annuities, and to be protected on reservations, and held apart from all association with the best of our civilization. The destruction is not so speedy, but it is far more general. The history of the Miamis and Osages is only the true picture of all other tribes.

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 2

“Put yourself in his place” is as good a guide to a proper conception of the Indian and his cause as it is to help us to right conclusions in our relations with other men. For many years we greatly oppressed the black man, but the germ of human liberty remained among us and grew, until, in spite of our irregularities, there came from the lowest savagery into intelligent manhood and freedom among us more than seven millions of our population, who are to-day an element of industrial value with which we could not well dispense. However great this victory has been for us, we have not yet fully learned our lesson nor completed our work; nor will we have done so until there is throughout all of our communities the most unequivocal and complete acceptance of our own doctrines, both national and religious. Not until there shall be in every locality throughout the nation a supremacy of the Bible principle of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, and full obedience to the doctrine of our Declaration that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created free and equal, with certain inalienable rights,” and of the clause in our Constitution which forbids that there shall be “any abridgment of the rights of citizens on account of race, color, or previous condition.” I leave off the last two words “of servitude,” because I want to be entirely and consistently American.

Inscrutable are the ways of Providence. Horrible as were the experiences of its introduction, and of slavery itself, there was concealed in them the greatest blessing that ever came to the Negro race—seven millions of blacks from cannibalism in darkest Africa to citizenship in free and enlightened America; not full, not complete citizenship, but possible—probable—citizenship, and on the highway and near to it.

There is a great lesson in this. The schools did not make them citizens, the schools did not teach them the language, nor make them industrious and self-supporting. Denied the right of schools, they became English-speaking and industrious through the influences of association. Scattered here and there, under the care and authority of individuals of the higher race, they learned self-support and something of citizenship, and so reached their present place. No other influence or force would have so speedily accomplished such a result. Left in Africa, surrounded by their fellow-savages, our seven millions of industrious black fellow-citizens would still be savages. Transferred into these new surroundings and experiences, behold the result. They became English-speaking and civilized, because forced into association with English-speaking and civilized people; became healthy and multiplied, because they were property; and industrious, because industry, which brings contentment and health, was a necessary quality to increase their value.

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 3

The Indians under our care remained savage, because forced back upon themselves and away from association with English-speaking and civilized people, and because of our savage example and treatment of them. . . .

We have never made any attempt to civilize them with the idea of taking them into the nation, and all of our policies have been against citizenizing and absorbing them. Although some of the policies now prominent are advertised to carry them into citizenship and consequent association and competition with other masses of the nation, they are not, in reality, calculated to do this. We are after the facts. Let us take the Land in Severalty Bill. Land in severalty, as administered, is in the way of the individualizing and civilization of the Indians, and is a means of holding the tribes together. Land in severalty is given to individuals adjoining each other on their present reservations. And experience shows that in some cases, after the allotments have been made, the Indians have entered into a compact among themselves to continue to hold their lands in common as a reservation. The inducement of the bill is in this direction. The Indians are not only invited to remain separate tribes and communities, but are practically compelled to remain so. The Indian must either cling to his tribe and its locality, or take great chances of losing his rights and property. The day on which the Land in Severalty Bill was signed was announced to be the emancipation day for the Indians. The fallacy of that idea is so entirely demonstrated that the emancipation assumption is now withdrawn.

We shall have to go elsewhere, and seek for other means besides land in severalty to release these people from their tribal relations and to bring them individually into the capacity and freedom of citizens.

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 4

Just now that land in severalty is being retired as the one all-powerful leverage that is going to emancipate and bring about Indian civilization and citizenship, we have another plan thrust upon us which has received great encomium from its authors, and has secured the favor of Congress to the extent of vastly increasing appropriations. This plan is calculated to arrest public attention, and to temporarily gain concurrence from everybody that it is really the panacea for securing citizenship and equality in the nation for the Indians. In its execution this means purely tribal schools among the Indians; that is, Indian youth must continue to grow up under the pressure of home surroundings. Individuals are not to be encouraged to get out and see and learn and join the nation. They are not to measure their strength with the other inhabitants of the land, and find out what they do not know, and thus be led to aspire to gain in education, experience, and skill,—those things that they must know in order to become equal to the rest of us. A public school system especially for the Indians is a tribal system; and this very fact says to them that we believe them to be incompetent, that they must not attempt to cope with us. Such schools build up tribal pride, tribal purposes, and tribal demands upon the government. They formulate the notion that the government owes them a living and vast sums of money; and by improving their education on these lines, but giving no other experience and leading to no aspirations beyond the tribe, leaves them in their chronic condition of helplessness, so far as reaching the ability to compete with the white race is concerned. It is like attempting to make a man well by always telling him he is sick. We have only to look at the tribes who have been subject to this influence to establish this fact, and it makes no difference where they are located. All the tribes in the State of New York have been trained in tribal schools; and they are still tribes and Indians, with no desire among the masses to be anything else but separate tribes.

The five civilized tribes of the Indian Territory—Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles—have had tribal schools until it is asserted that they are civilized; yet they have no notion of joining us and becoming a part of the United States. Their whole disposition is to prey upon and hatch up claims against the government, and have the same lands purchased and repurchased and purchased again, to meet the recurring wants growing out of their neglect and inability to make use of their large and rich estate. . . .

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 5

Indian schools are just as well calculated to keep the Indians intact as Indians as Catholic schools are to keep the Catholics intact. Under our principles we have established the public school system, where people of all races may become unified in every way, and loyal to the government; but we do not gather the people of one nation into schools by themselves, and the people of another nation into schools by themselves, but we invite the youth of all peoples into all schools. We shall not succeed in Americanizing the Indian unless we take him in in exactly the same way. I do not care if abundant schools on the plan of Carlisle are established. If the principle we have always had at Carlisle—of sending them out into families and into the public schools—were left out, the result would be the same, even though such schools were established, as Carlisle is, in the centre of an intelligent and industrious population, and though such schools were, as Carlisle always has been, filled with students from many tribes. Purely Indian schools say to the Indians: “You are Indians, and must remain Indians. You are not of the nation, and cannot become of the nation. We do not want you to become of the nation.

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 6

Before I leave this part of my subject I feel impelled to lay before you the facts, as I have come to look at them, of another influence that has claimed credit, and always has been and is now very dictatorial, in Indian matters; and that is the missionary as a citizenizing influence upon the Indians. The missionary goes to the Indian; he learns the language; he associates with him; he makes the Indian feel he is friendly, and has great desire to help him; he even teaches the Indian English. But the fruits of his labor, by all the examples that I know, have been to strengthen and encourage him to remain separate and apart from the rest of us. Of course, the more advanced, those who have a desire to become civilized, and to live like white men, who would with little encouragement go out into our communities, are the first to join the missionary's forces. They become his lieutenants to gather in others. The missionary must necessarily hold on to every help he can get to push forward his schemes and plans, so that he may make a good report to his Church; and, in order to enlarge his work and make it a success, he must keep his community together. Consequently, any who care to get out into the nation, and learn from actual experience what it is to be civilized, what is the full length and breadth and height and depth of our civilization, must stay and help the missionary. The operation of this has been disastrous to any individual escape from the tribe, has vastly and unnecessarily prolonged the solution of the question, and has needlessly cost the charitable people of this country large sums of money, to say nothing of the added cost to the government, the delay in accomplishing their civilization, and their destruction caused by such delay.

If, as sometimes happens, the missionary kindly consents to let or helps one go out and get these experiences, it is only for the purpose of making him a preacher or a teacher or help of some kind; and such a one must, as soon as he is fitted, and much sooner in most cases, return to the tribe and help the missionary to save his people. The Indian who goes out has public charitable aid through his school course, forfeits his liberty, and is owned by the missionary. In all my experience of twenty-five years I have known scarcely a single missionary to heartily aid or advocate the disintegration of the tribes and the giving of individual Indians rights and opportunities among civilized people. There is this in addition: that the missionaries have largely assumed to dictate to the government its policy with tribes, and their dictations have always been along the lines of their colonies and church interests, and the government must gauge its actions to suit the purposes of the missionary, or else the missionary influences are at once exerted to defeat the purposes of the government. The government, by paying large sums of money to churches to carry on schools among Indians, only builds for itself opposition to its own interests. . . .

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 7

We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization. America has different customs and civilizations from Germany. What would be the result of an attempt to plant American customs and civilization among the Germans in Germany, demanding that they shall become thoroughly American before we admit them to the country? Now, what we have all along attempted to do for and with the Indians is just exactly that, and nothing else. We invite the Germans to come into our country and communities, and share our customs, our civilization, to be of it; and the result is immediate success. Why not try it on the Indians? Why not invite them into experiences in our communities? Why always invite and compel them to remain a people unto themselves?

It is a great mistake to think that the Indian is born an inevitable savage. He is born a blank, like all the rest of us. Left in the surroundings of savagery, he grows to possess a savage language, superstition, and life. We, left in the surroundings of civilization, grow to possess a civilized language, life, and purpose. Transfer the infant white to the savage surroundings, he will grow to possess a savage language, superstition, and habit. Transfer the savage-born infant to the surroundings of civilization, and he will grow to possess a civilized language and habit. These results have been established over and over again beyond all question; and it is also well established that those advanced in life, even to maturity, of either class, lose already acquired qualities belonging to the side of their birth, and gradually take on those of the side to which they have been transferred.

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 8

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Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 9

As we have taken into our national family seven millions of Negroes, and as we receive foreigners at the rate of more than five hundred thousand a year, and assimilate them, it would seem that the time may have arrived when we can very properly make at least the attempt to assimilate our two hundred and fifty thousand Indians, using this proven potent line, and see if that will not end this vexed question and remove them from public attention, where they occupy so much more space than they are entitled to either by numbers or worth.

The school at Carlisle is an attempt on the part of the government to do this. Carlisle has always planted treason to the tribe and loyalty to the nation at large. It has preached against colonizing Indians, and in favor of individualizing them. It has demanded for them the same multiplicity of chances which all others in the country enjoy. Carlisle fills young Indians with the spirit of loyalty to the stars and stripes, and then moves them out into our communities to show by their conduct and ability that the Indian is no different from the white or the colored, that he has the inalienable right to liberty and opportunity that the white and the negro have. Carlisle does not dictate to him what line of life he should fill, so it is an honest one. It says to him that, if he gets his living by the sweat of his brow, and demonstrates to the nation that he is a man, he does more good for his race than hundreds of his fellows who cling to their tribal communistic surroundings. . . .

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 10

No evidence is wanting to show that, in our industries, the Indian can become a capable and willing factor if he has the chance. What we need is an Administration which will give him the chance. The Land in Severalty Bill can be made far more useful than it is, but it can be made so only by assigning the land so as to intersperse good, civilized people among them. If, in the distribution, it is so arranged that two or three white families come between two Indian families, then there would necessarily grow up a community of fellowship along all the lines of our American civilization that would help the Indian at once to his feet. Indian schools must, of necessity, be for a time, because the Indian cannot speak the language, and he knows nothing of the habits and forces he has to contend with; but the highest purpose of all Indian schools ought to be only to prepare the young Indian to enter the public and other schools of the country. And immediately he is so prepared, for his own good and the good of the country, he should be forwarded into these other schools, there to temper, test, and stimulate his brain and muscle into the capacity he needs for his struggle for life, in competition with us. The missionary can, if he will, do far greater service in helping the Indians than he has done; but it will only be by practising the doctrine he preaches. As his work is to lift into higher life the people whom he serves, he must not, under any pretence whatsoever, give the lie to what he preaches by discountenancing the right of any individual Indian to go into higher and better surroundings, but, on the contrary, he should help the Indian to do that. If he fails in thus helping and encouraging the Indian, he is false to his own teaching. An examination shows that no Indians within the limits of the United States have acquired any sort of capacity to meet and cope with the whites in civilized pursuits who did not gain that ability by going among the whites and out from the reservations, and that many have gained this ability by so going out.

Primary Sources

Richard H. Pratt - Excerpt 11

Theorizing citizenship into people is a slow operation. What a farce it would be to attempt teaching American citizenship to the negroes in Africa. They could not understand it; and, if they did, in the midst of such contrary influences, they could never use it. Neither can the Indians understand or use American citizenship theoretically taught to them on Indian reservations. They must get into the swim of American citizenship. They must feel the touch of it day after day, until they become saturated with the spirit of it, and thus become equal to it.

When we cease to teach the Indian that he is less than a man; when we recognize fully that he is capable in all respects as we are, and that he only needs the opportunities and privileges which we possess to enable him to assert his humanity and manhood; when we act consistently towards him in accordance with that recognition; when we cease to fetter him to conditions which keep him in bondage, surrounded by retrogressive influences; when we allow him the freedom of association and the developing influences of social contact—then the Indian will quickly demonstrate that he can be truly civilized, and he himself will solve the question of what to do with the Indian

Student Analysis Guide: Interrogating Pratt's Words on Assimilation

Names: _____ & _____

Excerpt #: _____

What is the main argument Pratt is making in this excerpt? Summarize in your own words.

What assumptions does Pratt make about Native people and/or Black people? What does he believe about their value, culture, or capacity?

What methods of assimilation or "civilization" does Pratt promote in this excerpt? List any actions, policies, or systems he supports.

How does this excerpt reflect the goals of boarding schools like Carlisle? Make connections to what you've learned about forced assimilation.

Interrogating the Source: Use this habit of mind to ask: Who wrote this? Why? Whose voices are missing?

- Pratt's purpose in writing this was to:

- This source reflects the perspective of:

- What perspectives are missing from this document?