



Primary Source Reading 8



The Native American Question

About the Selection Carl Schurz was secretary of the interior from 1877 to 1881. His department included the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Schurz did much to clean up corruption in the bureau. In 1881 he wrote a magazine article calling for fairer treatment of Native Americans. Ironically, his call for greater justice came at a time when most Native Americans were being restricted to reservations. Moreover, much of the Schurz solution to the "American Indian Problem"—which foreshadowed the later Dawes Act—did not appeal to many Native Americans.

Answers
these
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1. How does Schurz feel about the government's dealing with Native Americans?
2. Why are the Native Americans running out of places to live?

That the history of our Indian relations presents, in great part, a record of broken treaties, of unjust wars, and of cruel spoliation [plundering] is a fact too well known to require proof or to suffer denial. But it is only just to the government of the United States to say that its treaties with Indian tribes were, as a rule, made in good faith, and that most of our Indian wars were brought on by circumstances for which the government itself could not fairly be held responsible.

Of the treaties, those were the most important by which the government guaranteed to Indian tribes certain tracts of land as reservations to be held and occupied by them forever under the protection of the United States, in the place of other lands ceded by the Indians. There is no reason to doubt that in most, if not all, of such cases those who conducted Indian affairs on the part of the government, not anticipating the rapid advance of settlement, sincerely believed in the possibility of maintaining those reservations intact for the Indians, and that, in this respect, while their intentions were honest, their foresight was at fault. . . .

The Western country is rapidly filling up. A steady stream of immigration is following the railroad lines and then spreading to the right and left. The vacant places still existing are either worthless or will soon be exposed to the same invasion. The plains are being occupied by cattle raisers, the fertile valleys and bottomlands by agriculturists, the mountains by miners. What is to become of the Indians? . . .

What we can and should do is, in general terms, to fit the Indians, as much as possible, for the habits and occupations of civilized life by work and education; to individualize them in the possession and

appreciation of property by allotting to them lands in severalty [individual possession], giving them a fee simple title individually to the parcels of land they cultivate, inalienable for a certain period, and to obtain their consent to a disposition of that part of their lands which they cannot use, for a fair compensation, in such a manner that they no longer stand in the way of the development of the country as an obstacle, but form part of it and are benefited by it. . . .

But we should not indulge in the delusion that the problem can be solved by merely conferring upon them rights they do not yet appreciate and duties they do not yet understand. Those who advocate this seem to think that the Indians are yearning for American citizenship, eager to take it if we will only give it to them. No mistake could be greater. An overwhelming majority of the Indians look at present upon American citizenship as a dangerous gift, and but few of the more civilized are willing to accept it when it is attainable. And those who are uncivilized would certainly not know what to do with it if they had it. The mere theoretical endowment of savages with rights which are beyond their understanding and appreciation will, therefore, help them little. They should certainly have that standing in the courts which is necessary for their protection. But full citizenship must be regarded as the terminal not as the initial point of their development.

The first necessity, therefore, is not at once to give it to them but to fit them for it. And to this end, nothing is more indispensable than the protecting and guiding care of the government during the dangerous period of transition from savage to civilized life.

Source: Carl Schurz, "Present Aspects of the Indian Problem," *The North American Review*, July 1881.

