

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 5: How Should Americans Treat the Land?

The Issue

Indian and white cultures have sharply contrasting views of nature and the uses of land. These differences in cultural outlook have affected the way each group thinks about and reacts to the other. Many of the conflicts between Native Americans and white Americans—both historical and current—can be traced to a clash of cultural values.

Background

To the American Indian, the earth was a living being. Nature provided Indians with their spiritual well-being, cultural identity, and economic survival. They lived as earth's caretakers, in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world. To take advantage of nature's bounty, most Indians lived a mobile existence, following natural hunting and planting cycles. Indians did not think in terms of owning land; instead, they claimed the right to what the land produced in shifting seasonal patterns. Many Indian place names are related, not to possession of land, but rather to what the land provided for the Indian.

The Europeans who settled North America considered nature to be chaotic, something to be controlled, tamed, cleared, and made productive. In their eyes the frontier presented vast opportunities to those who could "master" it. Land, and everything nature provided, was considered a factor of production—a commodity to be bought and sold, improved and made profitable.

As white settlers moved into and developed the American frontier, Native Americans were forced to stop living as their ancestors had done. Some Indian nations made dramatic adjustments—the crop-raising Pueblo, for example,

became skilled shepherds. But most Indians fell victim to disease, war, and the gradual destruction of their way of life.

The Readings

In the debate that follows, Chief Seattle, leader of the Dwamish Indians, offers his view of Indian and white attitudes toward nature in an 1855 letter to President Franklin Pierce. This famous chief once described Indians and whites as "two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies."

Helen Hunt Jackson's book, *A Century of Dishonor*, was a powerful criticism of government policy toward the Indian. In an 1889 article, "False Sentimentality about the Indians," future President Theodore Roosevelt responds to Jackson's book and offers a different interpretation of the history of Indian-white relations. Jesup W. Scott, a journalist who specialized in stories about the West, offers his vision of the region's future in an 1853 article entitled "The Great West."

Update

Today about 800 Indian nations still live in North America, sharing a common concern for the preservation of their cultures, communities, and ancestral lands. In recent years many Indian communities have confronted the government in treaty disputes over Indian lands, fishing and hunting rights, and control of Indian economies and schools. Differences in cultural outlook lie at the heart of many of these disputes and continue to raise barriers that separate many Indians from white society and institutions.

How Should Americans Treat the Land?

Chief Seattle, leader of the Dwamish Indians, wrote this letter to President Franklin Pierce in 1855.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his fathers' graves, and his children's birthright is forgotten. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect's wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand, the clatter only seems to insult the ears. The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a mid-day rain, or scented with a pinon pine. The air is precious to the red man. For all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, the man. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench.

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the

beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.

It matters little where we pass the rest of our days; they are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters, and none of the children of the great tribes that once lived on this earth, or that roamed in small bands in the woods, will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours.

The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of

the forest heavy with the scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt, the end of living and the beginning of survival? We might understand if we knew what it was that the white man dreams, what he de-

scribes to his children on the long winter nights, what visions he burns into their minds, so they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us.

"The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on."

Chief Seattle

Source: Peter Nabokov, ed. *Native American Testimony* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Publishers, 1978).

How Should Americans Treat the Land?

Theodore Roosevelt, *President of the United States from 1901–1909, wrote this article in 1889.*

It was wholly impossible to avoid conflicts with the weaker race, unless we were willing to see the American continent fall into the hands of some other strong power; and even had we adopted such a ludicrous policy, the Indians themselves would have made war upon us. It cannot be too often insisted that they did not own the land; or, at least, that their ownership was merely such as that claimed often by our own white hunters. . . .

To recognize the Indian ownership of the limitless prairies and forests of this continent—that is, to consider the dozen squalid savages who hunted at long intervals over a territory of 1,000 square miles as owning it out-right—necessarily implies a similar recognition of the claims of every white hunter, squatter, horse thief, or wandering cattleman . . .

The tribes were warlike and bloodthirsty, jealous of each other and of the whites; they claimed the land for their hunting grounds, but their claims all conflicted with one another; their knowledge of their own boundaries was so indefinite that they were always willing, for inadequate compensation, to sell land to which they had merely the vaguest title; and yet, when once they had received the goods, were generally reluctant to make over even what they could.

"It was wholly impossible to avoid conflicts with the weaker race, unless we were willing to see the American continent fall into the hands of some other strong power."

Theodore Roosevelt

Jesup W. Scott, *writer and social thinker, wrote this article in 1853.*

The West is no longer the West; nor even the great West. It is the great center. It is the body of the American eagle whose wings are on the two oceans. The center of population seeking the center of territorial productiveness . . .

The central plain, including Texas and Canada, contains not less than 1,600,000 square miles, equal to 1 billion acres of land, fit for cultivation. Divided equally among the 16 million now living on it, every man, woman, and child would have 64 acres, and the population average 10 to the square mile; with 50 to the square mile, like Ohio, it would contain 80 million; or, like Massachusetts, 132 to the square mile, it would number 212 million; or if, like England, it had 327 to the square mile, it would have 523 million. All these millions and more will one day find here an ample and happy home. . . .

For commercial and social purposes, it [the central plain] is the more one whole because of its lakes and rivers. By these channels are its people bound together. Even if steam had not begun its race on the land, its triumph on our interior waters, in cementing the bonds of union among its various parts, would have been complete. From the remotest regions, men and the products of their labor are transported by steam to the central marts of trade. . . .

All the changes in business and social relations which will grow directly out of the general extension of railroads it is not given to anyone to foresee. That it will promote the growth of leading centers of commerce and manufacture is already made manifest by the experience of the old states and England . . . In our central plain will probably grow up the hugest aggregations of people in the world.

Source: *De Bow's Review*, July 1853: "The Great West."

Source: *The Annals of America*, Volume 12 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1968).

GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 5

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 5 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. How does Chief Seattle feel about cities?

2. What is Theodore Roosevelt's interpretation of Indian land claims?

3. What criticisms does Chief Seattle make regarding the white settlers' treatment of the land?

4. In Jesup Scott's view, will the population of the West increase slowly or rapidly in the last half of the nineteenth century?

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Drawing Conclusions:** How do you think Indian and white cultures would react to each of the following:
 - a. the Mt. Rushmore Memorial
 - b. the fencing of open land
 - c. a formal English garden

2. **Recognizing Ideologies:** Locate statements made by Chief Seattle that are in agreement with the contemporary ecology movement.

3. **Making Comparisons:** How does Jesup Scott's view of the land differ from Chief Seattle's view of the land?

4. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

