

# WHAT ROLE DID THE US ARMY PLAY IN THE DEFEAT OF THE PLAINS INDIANS?

## Negotiate or exterminate?

FROM THE 1840s ONWARDS the Plains Indians were seen as a problem, the 'Indian Problem'. They occupied land that was wanted by travellers, settlers, ranchers, miners and the railroad companies. They stood in the way of the United States' 'Manifest Destiny'. Opinions differed as to the best solution to this problem.

### The 'negotiators'

On the one hand there were the people who wanted a negotiated solution to the Indian problem. These were mainly people living in the East. They did include some Westerners, government officials such as Indian agents who by working with the Indians had gained some understanding of them and their way of life. These people believed that aggressive tactics would only make matters worse. After the four bloody years of the Civil War they had had enough of fighting. They believed that responsibility for Indian affairs should be kept with the Bureau of

Indian Affairs and not given to the US army. Once a negotiated solution had been achieved, they wanted to follow a policy of cultural assimilation. In other words, they hoped through education and missionary work to transform the Plains Indians into good Christian farmers.

### The 'exterminators'

On the other hand there were the exterminators. These were mainly people living in the West: settlers, ranchers, miners and the soldiers sent to protect them. They were both the people with most to gain if the Indians were removed, and those most likely to have suffered from Indian hostility. These people believed that the only solution was to destroy the Plains Indians, a solution that we would call genocide today. As far as they were concerned the Indians were savages. They believed that the soldiers had experience of and were firm with the Indians. They believed that the Bureau of Indian Affairs should be under the control of the army. They wanted a military solution to the Indian problem, the destruction of the Indians. This group also included some of those who profited by selling beef and other supplies to the US army.

### SOURCE INVESTIGATION

How should the government deal with the Indians? Study Sources 1–8. With your partner discuss which sources you would use to support your argument in a debate if you were either:

- a) a 'negotiator', or
- b) an 'exterminator'.

You need to prepare your argument and list the points you wish to make to back it up.

You may wish to use other sources from elsewhere in this book.

**SOURCE 1** A description of the Sand Creek Massacre by Major E. W. Wynkoop, taken from his testimony before the military tribunal in November 1864

*"From the evidence of officers at this post, I understand that on 28 November 1864, Colonel J.M. Chivington, with the third regiment of Colorado cavalry, attacked the camp of friendly Indians, the majority of whom were women and children. Everyone whom I have spoken to agrees that the most fearful atrocities were committed; women and children were killed and scalped; children shot at their mothers' breast, and all the bodies mutilated in the most horrible manner."*

**SOURCE 2** An extract from a speech by Senator Morrill to Congress in 1867

*"We have come to the point in the history of the country that there is no place beyond the white population to which you can remove the Indian, and the precise question is will you exterminate him, or will you fix a lasting place for him."*

**SOURCE 3** From a speech by Sitting Bull

*"We want no white men here. The Black Hills belong to me. If the whites try to take them, I will fight."*

**SOURCE 4** An engraving showing an Indian attack on homesteaders



**SOURCE 5** An editorial from the *New York Times* commenting upon a speech by Red Cloud

*"The clear view that this unlettered savage has of what he claims as his rights, and what he resents as the wrongs against him, shows very plainly the need for negotiating with the leaders of the aboriginal 'nations', on some straightforward and intelligible principle."*

*The attempt to flatter and fool the Indians as if they were stupid, ought to be abandoned, as should the policy of hunting them down like wild beasts."*

**SOURCE 6** A speech attributed to Red Cloud

*"The white man made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it."*

**SOURCE 7** A comment by General William Tecumseh Sherman

*"We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children."*



**SOURCE 8** A print from an engraving by Frederic Remington showing cavalrymen discovering the bodies of their fallen comrades. Their dead bodies have been shot full of arrows