Dawes Act Activity

Directions: During the playing of the song underline or highlight the powerful lines or write down images that come to mind. This will be important for the task that will be required at the end of the activity.

Don’t Drink the Water ~ Dave Mathews Band

Come out come out
No use in hiding
Come now come now
Can you not see?
There’s no place here
What were you expecting
Not room for both
Just room for me
So you will lay your arms down
Yes I will call this home
Away away
You have been banished
Your land is gone
And given me
And here I will spread my wings
Yes I will call this home
What’s this you say
You feel a right to remain
Then stay and I will bury you
What’s that you say
Your father’s spirit still lives in this place
I will silence you
Here’s the hitch
Your horse is leaving
Don’t miss your boat
It’s leaving now
And as you go I will spread my wings
Yes I will call this home
I have no time to justify to you
Fool you’re blind, move aside for me
All I can say to you my new neighbor
Is you must move on or I will bury you
Now as I rest my feet by this fire
Those hands once warmed here
I have retired them
I can breathe my own air
I can sleep more soundly
Upon these poor souls
I’ll build heaven and call it home
’Cause you’re all dead now
I live with my justice
I live with my greedy need
I live with no mercy
I live with my frenzied feeding
I live with my hatred
I live with my jealousy
I live with the notion
That I don’t need anyone but me
Don’t drink the water
Don’t drink the water
There’s blood in the water
Don’t drink the water
Dawes Act & Reactions to the Dawes Act

Congressman Henry Dawes of Massachusetts sponsored a landmark piece of legislation, the General Allotment Act (The Dawes Severalty Act) in 1887. It was designed to encourage the breakup of the tribes and promote the assimilation of Indians into American Society. It will be the major Indian policy until the 1930s. Dawes' goal was to create independent farmers out of Indians — give them land and the tools for citizenship.

Reactions to Senator Dawes' Act were quite varied. Alice Fletcher, an Eastern woman who was a leader of a group called "Friends of the Indians," was one of the architects of the new law.

"The Indian may now become a free man; free from the thralldom of the tribe; freed from the domination of the reservation system; free to enter into the body of our citizens. This bill may therefore be considered as the Magna Carta of the Indians of our country."

— Alice Fletcher

A Nez Perce Indian expressed a quite different reaction.

"We do not want our land cut up in little pieces... A groan of assent ran along the dark line of Sphinxes."

Congressman Henry Dawes expressed some rather startling views in the following statement.

"... expressed his faith in the civilizing power of private property with the claim that to be civilized was to 'wear civilized clothes ... cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whiskey [and] own property.'

While Senator Dawes may have been well meaning in his intentions, the results were less than satisfactory for the Indians. It provided for each head of an Indian family to be given 160 acres of farmland or 320 acres of grazing land. The remaining tribal lands were to be declared "surplus" and opened up for whites. Tribal ownership, and tribes themselves, were simply to disappear. The story would be much the same across much of the West. Before the Dawes Act, some 150 million acres remained in Indian hands. Within twenty years, two-thirds of their land was gone. The reservation system was nearly destroyed. Standing Bear, Tibbles, and other who participated in the lecture to the East to gain support for the Ponca cause specifically, and the Indian cause in general, did not foresee the problems that legislation like the Dawes Act would create. Land allotted to individual Indians was soon controlled by non-Indians. Indian lost much of their land and received very inadequate payment for the land they gave up. Indians, who received compensation for giving up their land, also quickly spent the money. They were unused to managing money. Few contemporary historians would judge the allotment policy of acts like the Dawes Act, successful.

End Task:
Respond in writing:
1. The meaning of the song. (1 Paragraph ~ 5 Sentences Minimum)
2. Compare and Contrast the words of the song to the views of U.S. government officials of the late 1800s and early 1900s and with the text of the Dawes Act. (2 Paragraphs ~ 5 Sentences Minimum for Each)