Native American Assimilation

From the 1880s to the 1890s much of the governmental policies toward the Native Americans were focused on the assimilation of the American Indians. The Dawes Act, created by Congress in 1887, aimed to assimilate American Indians into mainstream American life, by introducing them to agriculture and American culture. The federal government divided communal tribal lands into 160-acre parcels -- known as allotments -- and gave them to individual tribal members. The U.S. Government, with seemingly little faith in the American Indians, withheld the land for 25 years, ensuring that the Indian would not be "swindled" by Americans. The Act went on to offer Indians the benefits of U.S. citizenship, but under very particular conditions. These conditions included the acceptance of an allotment, living separate from their tribe and becoming "civilized."

As the Dawes Act was allocating tribal lands to individuals and selling other land to whites, Sen. Dawes was also instrumental in a system of Indian schools that were consciously designed to take the Indian out of Native American children. The idea was that Indian children could be educated and taught the social habits of white Americans, thus completing the process of assimilation. The most well known Indian School was in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Gathering 82 Indian children, an uneducated General Pratt took children who wanted education. Others were from poor families or had been orphaned. Pratt demonstrated his success to white supporters by using "before and after" photographs. Over 10,000 Indian children went through the Carlisle program in the 39 years it was open.

Of course, the Indian School and Native American assimilation drew a number of critics. Many children died at school because they were exposed to diseases they had no immunity to, such as small pox or cholera. There were harsh punishments for the children who tried to run away or who could not follow a set of militaristic rules. Many of the rules were harsh. For instance, children were not allowed to speak in their native language, meaning that until they knew English, they were forced to live in silence. Many Indians were unhappy in the Indian Schools because they were forced to separate themselves from their culture. In the 1930s, many of the Indian Boarding Schools closed and were replaced by schools on reservations because the cost of shipping children across was expensive and the system was deemed inefficient.

Adapted from: http://www.edb.utexas.edu/faculty/salinas/students/student_sites/Fall2006/summer_chandler/
Kristen Schreck and Summer Chandler, University of Texas at Austin
Assignment Activities: “Native American Assimilation”

**Directions:** After reading the article, complete the following activities to show you understand the central ideas.

1. This article explains how Americans attempted to assimilate Native Americans into their society. Based on the information from the article, create your own definition for assimilation.

2. The second paragraph states that Senator Dawes created schools “that were consciously designed to take the Indian out of Native American children”. Explain the meaning of that statement.

3. Critique (evaluate) the actions taken by the U.S. government regarding Native Americans.