

# Self-Determination – American Indian Perspectives

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade Level: High School  
Suggested Duration: Two-three 50-minute class periods

Instructional Note: This could be an on-going discussion throughout the school year but, is particularly relevant during US History/Civil Rights units and when studying contemporary Native American issues. Ideally, you would teach the [IEFA lesson on termination and relocation](#) prior to this lesson.

## Stage 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals

(1) The civics and government content standards for ninth through twelfth grade are that each student will:

- (e) evaluate how citizens and institutions address social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international levels;
- (g) explain the foundations and complexity of sovereignty for federally recognized tribes in Montana;
- (i) evaluate government procedures for making decisions at the local, state, national, tribal, and international levels.

(4) The history content standards for ninth through twelfth grade are that each student will:

- (e) explain events in relation to both their intended and unintended consequences, including governmental policies impacting American Indians;
- (j) analyze perspectives of American Indians in US history.

### Understandings

- The US Government has been influencing tribes through various federal policies, and the policy of self-determination has been a positive shift in federal policy. (EU 5, 7)
- The previous federal policy eras were “paternalistic” and did not allow American Indian people to evolve, expand, and thrive in a way guaranteed to other Americans living in the United States.
- Basic understanding of the federal Indian policy of self-determination.
- An awareness of how federal laws/policies impact American Indian nations.
- The impact of the Assimilation and Termination eras particularly disenfranchised American Indian people and the long-term effects of these policies impact generational poverty, emotional trauma/health concerns, and other contemporary issues today.
- Self-determination is important because it provides legal and political opportunities for tribal nations to lead their communities in ways they determine most appropriate.



## Essential Questions

- How do tribal nations exercise true self-determination today?
- To what extent does the policy of self-determination lead to less federal governmental control over internal American Indian affairs?
- What are some contemporary tribal issues that tribal governments are confronting/changing today?

## Students will be able to...

- research some of the unique issues regarding the history of American Indians and how interactions with the federal government have evolved over time.
- report out on how contemporary American Indian people are making positive impacts on their people and communities today.
- understand some contemporary sovereignty issues tribal governments are faced with and are confronting today.

## Students will know...

- key factual information about the policy of self-determination.
- examples of how tribes interact with local, state, and federal systems.
- definitions of essential vocabulary: paternalism, civil rights, self-determination, sovereignty, tribal government, American Indian Movement.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Students will research a particular contemporary issue/event pertaining to self-determination and American Indians.
2. Students will gather evidence and present their findings in a formal presentation and/or research paper.

## Stage 3 Learning Plan

### Learning Activities/ Suggested Activities

#### Day 1

For an introduction to this topic show students [this brief video](#) and use a 3 – 2 – 1 prompt to review the film. There are currently 574 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States and every one of them has the right to govern themselves and their lands. This informational video produced by BESE looks at the impact that US policies have had on tribal nations. Ask students to write down three things they saw in the video that caught their attention, two questions about information presented in the video, and one thing they learned.

Facilitate a brief class discussion about the main ideas put forth by the speaker.

This video will provide the class with some general background regarding the concept of sovereignty as they begin their study of Federal Indian policy and self-determination.

Next, ask the following question to introduce the topic of self-determination: “Who was one of the most progressive US Presidents in redefining federal Indian policy and supporting tribal sovereignty?” Allow time for them to share their ideas and ask them to support their statement. Did anyone guess Richard Nixon?

Read the Recommendations for Indian Policy - Special Message from President Richard Nixon to the Congress, July 8, 1970 (full text of speech is included in this lesson). Read this statement out loud to the students or perhaps prep one of the students in advance for reading this to the class. Set the stage by saying this is formal Presidential speech and have students practice active listening skills.

Have copies of the speech ready and direct students to do a close analytical read of the document.

Allow ample class time for reading and then have students do a think-pair-share. Have students pair up and ask them to share their reaction to the speech with each other and then report their analysis of the speech with the rest of the class. Facilitate a brief class discussion about the main ideas put forth in the speech.

Close out the class with this [brief video](#) describing President Nixon’s policies regarding American Indians.

#### Day 2 - Providing an historical context

Begin the class by showing this [video produced by the Minnesota Historical Society](#). It provides background regarding the American Indian Movement (AIM) and its role in advocating for civil rights for American Indians. AIM, founded by grassroots activists in Minneapolis in 1968, first sought to improve conditions for recently urbanized Native Americans. It grew into an international movement whose goals included the full restoration of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights. Have students create a Venn Diagram and compare and contrast the Civil Rights Movement and AIM.

It is necessary for students to familiarize themselves with American Indians today and the contemporary issues they face. Changing demographics, identity, sovereignty, and unique tribal cultures are important considerations for understanding American Indian people.

#### Assignment:

Students will research contemporary issues pertaining to self-determination and American Indians. Students will gather evidence and present their findings in a formal presentation and/or research paper. This assignment could be completed individually or in small groups depending on class size and teacher preference. Ask them to identify five different ways tribes currently exercise self-determination. Emphasis on Montana nations is encouraged, but students could identify broad issues that apply to many tribes. Also, students will identify five ways the federal government exercised control over tribes prior to self-determination. Groups will also be asked to identify five issues where tribes and other governments share/overlap with responsibility.

Before students identify potential topics to study, utilize the following guiding activities and questions to facilitate a whole class discussion or small group discussions. Use of cooperative learning models is encouraged to ensure all students participate in their small groups.

- How did the Civil Rights Movement of the African Americans lead to the Self-Determination Era for American Indians?
- How does the US Constitution strengthen the necessity of self-determination?
- Why is self-determination important to tribal governments?
- How is “paternalism” harmful to democracy and the evolution of society?
- How does self-determination contribute to an individual’s “pursuit of happiness?”
- Have them find an example of either an indigenous page/ contemporary picture/ or image relating to sovereignty.
- Students can either share or print the image and explain how it is an example of self-determination or of contemporary relevance to American Indian tribes/individuals and why they believe this was posted.

### Suggested Research Topics

- Native Language Revitalization
- Tribal Sovereignty
- Indian Gaming/Casinos
- Cultural Revitalization
- Tribal Schools/Tribal Colleges
- Climate Change
- Jurisdiction
- Treaty Rights
- Indian Mascots
- Bison Restoration
- Hunting/Fishing Rights
- Tribal Economic Endeavors
- Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP)
- Tribal Actions to Combat the Pandemic

Have students use the following questions to help guide their research:

- What is the issue (redefine it in their own words)?
- What do you currently know about this topic? List out a brief answer (save to compare with information gathered as the lesson progresses).
- What are some particular questions you have regarding this particular topic?
- What are some of the multiple perspectives surrounding this topic?
- Has your perspective changed as a result of your research or do you feel more informed about this particular issue?
- What resources did you use to reach your conclusions?

In addition to the suggested on-line resources, have research/reference materials available in the classroom. Check with the school librarian to obtain American Indian reference books sent out to all libraries by the Office of Public Instruction.

## Materials/Resources Needed

These on-line resources provide an excellent starting point for research and general background information.

[Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians](#), Montana Office of Public Instruction

[Essential Understandings Key Concepts](#), Montana Office of Public Instruction

[History and Foundation of American Indian Education](#), Montana Office of Public Instruction (see pages 40-44)

[Montana Tribal Histories: Educators Resource Guide](#) and [Companion DVD](#), Montana Office of Public Instruction

[Public Law 93-638 – Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act \(1975\)](#)

[Montana Indian Law](#)

[US Department of the Interior – Indian Affairs FAQ](#)

[US Department of the Interior Self-Determination information](#)

[Self-determination and Activism Among American Indians in the United States 1972-1997](#), Cultural Survival

[American Indian Self-Determination - The Political Economy of a Successful Policy](#)

[The Self-Determination Era \(1968 - Present\)](#), Howard University School of Law

[Tribal Self-Governance Program](#), Indian Health Service

[Tribal Energy: Powering Self-Determination](#), Energy.gov

[Nixon’s Policies Empowered Tribes](#) (video), Chickasaw TV

[President Nixon: Champion for Native Americans](#), Richard Nixon Foundation

[Beyond Sovereignty: New Solutions for Self-Determination](#), Bioneers

[Civil Rights for Indigenous Groups: Native Americans, Alaskans, and Hawaiians](#), Course Hero

[The radical history of the Red Power movement's fight for Native American sovereignty](#), National Geographic

[American Indian Responses to Environmental Challenges](#), Native Knowledge 360, National Museum of the American Indian

[United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), United Nations

[Sovereignty, A Brief History in the Context of U.S. “Indian law”](#), University of Massachusetts

[American Indian Movement \(AIM\)](#), Minnesota Historical Society

### **Tribal Specific Resource**

- ✓ [theREZweLIVEon](#) Developed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes provides information on contemporary sovereignty issues for the tribes on the Flathead Reservation

### **Online Indigenous News Sources**

Direct students to these on-line resources and have students read, summarize, and describe current events among tribal communities that either affect/infringe on their civil rights OR are examples of tribal communities/people thriving in the Self-Determination Era. This works great for short responses/essays and allows students to articulate the contemporary issues being experienced today.

- ✓ Have students regularly access free online resources such as [ITC News](#) and [Indians.com](#). Students can practice their listening skills by the Native American produced radio program [Native America Calling](#).
- ✓ National organizations such as the [National Congress of American Indians](#) and the [National Indian Education Association](#) have a wealth of information on their websites pertaining to contemporary issues all across Indian Country.
- ✓ Indigenous news sources are ideal resources for conducting research projects concerning contemporary American Indian issues. Students can develop their critical literacy skills by comparing and contrasting how other news outlets report similar stories as well.

## Recommendations for Indian Policy

### Special Message from President Richard Nixon to the Congress, July 8, 1970

To the Congress of the United States:

The first Americans - the Indians - are the most deprived and most isolated minority group in our nation. On virtually every scale of measurement employment, income, education, health - the condition of the Indian people ranks at the bottom.

This condition is the heritage of centuries of injustice. From the time of their first contact with European settlers, the American Indians have been oppressed and brutalized, deprived of their ancestral lands and denied the opportunity to control their own destiny. Even the Federal programs which are intended to meet their needs have frequently proved to be ineffective and demeaning.

But the story of the Indian in America is something more than the record of the white man's frequent aggression, broken agreements, intermittent remorse and prolonged failure. It is a record also of endurance, of survival, of adaptation and creativity in the face of overwhelming obstacles. It is a record of enormous contributions to this country - to its art and culture, to its strength and spirit, to its sense of history and its sense of purpose.

It is long past time that the Indian policies of the Federal government began to recognize and build upon the capacities and insights of the Indian people. Both as a matter of justice and as a matter of enlightened social policy, we must begin to act on the basis of what the Indians themselves have long been telling us. The time has come to break decisively with the past and to create the conditions for a new era in which the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions.

#### SELF-DETERMINATION WITHOUT TERMINATION

The first and most basic question that must be answered with respect to Indian policy concerns the history and legal relationship between the Federal government and Indian communities. In the past, this relationship has oscillated between two equally harsh and unacceptable extremes.

On the other hand, it has - at various times during previous Administrations - been the stated policy objective of both the Executive and Legislative branches of the Federal government eventually to terminate the trusteeship relationship between the Federal government and the Indian people. As recently as August of 1953, in House Concurrent Resolution 108, the Congress declared that termination was the long-range goal of its Indian policies. This would mean that Indian tribes would eventually lose any special standing they had under Federal law: the tax exempt status of their lands would be discontinued; Federal responsibility for their economic and social wellbeing would be repudiated; and the tribes themselves would be effectively dismantled. Tribal property would be divided among individual members who would then be assimilated into the society at large.

This policy of forced termination is wrong, in my judgment, for a number of reasons. First, the premises on which it rests are wrong. Termination implies that the Federal government has taken on a trusteeship responsibility for Indian communities as an act of generosity toward a disadvantaged people and that it can therefore discontinue this responsibility on a unilateral basis whenever it sees fit. But the unique status of Indian tribes does not rest on any premise such as this. The special relationship between Indians and the Federal government is the result instead of solemn obligations

which have been entered into by the United States Government. Down through the years through written treaties and through formal and informal agreements, our government has made specific commitments to the Indian people. For their part, the Indians have often surrendered claims to vast tracts of land and have accepted life on government reservations. In exchange, the government has agreed to provide community services such as health, education and public safety, services which would presumably allow Indian communities to enjoy a standard of living comparable to that of other Americans.

This goal, of course, has never been achieved. But the special relationship between the Indian tribes and the Federal government which arises from these agreements continues to carry immense moral and legal force. To terminate this relationship would be no more appropriate than to terminate the citizenship rights of any other American.

The second reason for rejecting forced termination is that the practical results have been clearly harmful in the few instances in which termination actually has been tried. The removal of Federal trusteeship responsibility has produced considerable disorientation among the affected Indians and has left them unable to relate to a myriad of Federal, State and local assistance efforts. Their economic and social condition has often been worse after termination than it was before.

The third argument I would make against forced termination concerns the effect it has had upon the overwhelming majority of tribes which still enjoy a special relationship with the Federal government. The very threat that this relationship may someday be ended has created a great deal of apprehension among Indian groups and this apprehension, in turn, has had a blighting effect on tribal progress. Any step that might result in greater social, economic or political autonomy is regarded with suspicion by many Indians who fear that it will only bring them closer to the day when the Federal government will disavow its responsibility and cut them adrift.

In short, the fear of one extreme policy, forced termination, has often worked to produce the opposite extreme: excessive dependence on the Federal government. In many cases this dependence is so great that the Indian community is almost entirely run by outsiders who are responsible and responsive to Federal officials in Washington, D.C., rather than to the communities they are supposed to be serving. This is the second of the two harsh approaches which have long plagued our Indian policies. Of the Department of Interior/s programs directly serving Indians, for example, only 1.5 percent are presently under Indian control. Only 2.4 percent of HEW's Indian health programs are run by Indians. The result is a burgeoning Federal bureaucracy, programs which are far less effective than they ought to be, and an erosion of Indian initiative and morale.

I believe that both of these policy extremes are wrong. Federal termination errs in one direction, Federal paternalism errs in the other. Only by clearly rejecting both of these extremes can we achieve a policy which truly serves the best interests of the Indian people. Self-determination among the Indian people can and must be encouraged without the threat of eventual termination. In my view, in fact, that is the only way that self-determination can effectively be fostered.

This, then, must be the goal of any new national policy toward the Indian people to strengthen the Indian's sense of autonomy without threatening this sense of community. We must assure the Indian that he can assume control of his own life without being separated involuntary from the tribal group. And we must make it clear that Indians can become independent of Federal control without being cut



off from Federal concern and Federal support. My specific recommendations to the Congress are designed to carry out this policy.

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The recommendations of this administration represent an historic step forward in Indian policy. We are proposing to break sharply with past approaches to Indian problems. In place of a long series of piecemeal reforms, we suggest a new and coherent strategy. In place of policies which simply call for more spending, we suggest policies which call for wiser spending. In place of policies which oscillate between the deadly extremes of forced termination and constant paternalism, we suggest a policy in which the Federal government and the Indian community play complementary roles.

But most importantly, we have turned from the question of whether the Federal government has a responsibility to Indians to the question of how that responsibility can best be furthered. We have concluded that the Indians will get better programs and that public monies will be more effectively expended if the people who are most affected by these programs are responsible for operating them.

The Indians of America need Federal assistance—this much has long been clear. What has not always been clear, however, is that the Federal government needs Indian energies and Indian leadership if its assistance is to be effective in improving the conditions of Indian life. It is a new and balanced relationship between the United States government and the first Americans that is at the heart of our approach to Indian problems. And that is why we now approach these problems with new confidence that they will successfully be overcome.

[[Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1970](#), pp. 564-567, 575-76.]