

The Indian Reorganization Act (The Indian New Deal)



Tribal leaders from the Flathead Indian Reservation take a look at the White House as they visit Washington D.C. to be the first tribe to submit a constitution under the terms of the Wheeler-Howard Act.

Photo Credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing, [LC-H2-B-8426].

Fast Facts

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

Context: This lesson plan would work well when studying about the New Deal legislation enacted during the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidency.



Stage 1 Desired Results

Established Goals

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

(a) analyze and evaluate the ideas and principles contained in the foundational documents of the United States, and explain how they establish a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits;

(b) analyze the impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements on the maintenance of domestic and international relationships;

(g) explain the foundations and complexity of sovereignty for federally recognized tribes in Montana.

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

(d) analyze multiple, and complex causal factors that have shaped major events in US and world history, including American Indian history;

(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

- Prior to European contact all tribes had structured forms of government to manage their affairs.
- Historically, US government laws and policies have done much damage to American Indian cultures.
- The US government has been influencing tribes through various federal policies, and the policy of tribal reorganization in the 1930s helped to establish modern tribal governments. (EU 5, 7)

Essential Questions

- What factors influenced the passage of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act?
- What was the historical context for this policy period?
- To what extent did the Meriam Report influence US government officials?
- To what extent are Montana tribal governments similar and how do they differ in certain aspects?

Students will be able to...

- demonstrate an understanding of the rationale and results of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act.

Students will know...

- each Montana tribal nation has a unique form of government, and many tribal constitutions are a direct result of federal Indian policy.

Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks

1. Students will analyze and summarize the Meriam Report and the Indian Reorganization Act.
2. Students will demonstrate an awareness and understanding of how contemporary tribal governments were formed.

Stage 3 Learning Plan

Learning Activities

Lesson One

Introduce the lesson by posing the question “When you hear the words – new deal – what comes to mind? Why? What was the “new deal”? When was it enacted?”

Explain to students they will be learning about similar new deal legislation that was directed toward improving the lives of American Indians. Provide students with a historical context for this lesson and utilize the sample slide show included in this lesson to highlight key concepts.

To provide a tribal context and perspective share this [clip of Vernon Finley \(Kootenai\)](#) discussing his thoughts regarding the Indian Reorganization Act. Facilitate a brief discussion regarding the statements made by Vernon. This would be a great opportunity to insert some Montana tribal trivia. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes were the first tribes to sign onto the Indian Reorganization Act. There are several historic photographs on record regarding this event, such as the photo of the traditional leaders from the Flathead Reservation visiting the Capitol. Display the photograph included in the slide show and facilitate a class discussion about it. (Note: if you are using this lesson with students from the Salish and Kootenai Tribes, it would be fun to see if anyone’s relatives are in the photograph).

Assignment: Analyzing the Meriam Report and the Indian Reorganization Act.

Have students pair up and direct them to read various sections of the Meriam Report. Links to the entire report are included in the resource section. Tell them they will be presenting their summary to a legislative committee on Indian affairs and their job is to convince committee members a shift in federal Indian policy needs to be made based on findings in the Meriam Report. Allow class time for reading and research. Their brief oral presentation needs to be at least two-three minutes. Students should summarize their report section and not just read it verbatim. Select quotes could be used to help make their case. They will have to provide their testimony during the next class period and must also submit their comments in writing.

Day 2

Have students share their testimony. After all student groups have presented, facilitate a class discussion about some of the key ideas shared during the testimony. Based on the findings in the report, is a change in policy needed? Why?

Next, have them read and analyze the Indian Reorganization Act. This could be done via small groups or individually.

Hand out the Indian Reorganization Act in its original form. Assign students sections of the Act to read in a jigsaw form: that is, two-three students will read a single section, and two-three more will read another, and so on. Ask students to summarize their section in a reasonable amount of space (20 words or less, for example). Students can work in small groups, or they can perform this task individually and then check in with their groups for understanding. Conduct spot-checks of understanding as you work the room. Finally, have students share their summary of the sections they read.

Lesson Two

Share the following information regarding Essential Understanding 7.

Essential Understanding 7

American Indian tribal nations are inherent sovereign nations, and they possess sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. However, under the American legal system, the extent and breadth of self-governing powers are not the same for each tribe.

KEY CONCEPTS

- Tribal sovereignty stems directly from the fact that tribal nations constitute distinct political communities that have the right to determine their own laws and form of government.
- Tribal self-governing powers predate the existence of the United States and are not delegated powers granted by Congress or any other entity; they are inherent powers of sovereign nations that have never been extinguished.
- Some limitations have been placed on tribal sovereignty throughout the past two centuries by Supreme Court rulings and Congressional statutes, which is why tribes are sometimes referred to as “limited” sovereigns today.
- In general, tribes are free to exercise any of their sovereign powers unless Congress has specifically limited or modified them in some way.
- The extent and breadth of self-governing powers is not the same for every tribe.
- Despite the complex evolution of tribal sovereignty in America, it remains one of the most important attributes of tribal independence.

Share the following [clip from Everall Fox \(Gros Ventre\)](#) as he discusses how the tribal government at Fort Belknap is organized.

Assign students a particular tribal government to research. Ask them to describe basic features and functions of the tribal government as well as any interesting historical facts about its evolution over time. Students could also conduct interviews with current/former tribal council members asking them questions about the role and functions of tribal councils/governments. Students will then present their findings to the rest of the class as part of a brief oral presentation. Links to each tribal constitution can be found in the OPI lesson plan *Montana Tribal Governments*.

Background Information

Essential Understanding 5

There were many federal policies put into place throughout American history that have affected Indian people in the past and continue to shape who they are today. Many of these policies conflicted with one another. Much of Indian history can be related through several major federal policy periods: Colonization/Colonial Period (1492 - 1800s), Treaty-Making and Removal Period (1778 – 1871), Reservation Period - Allotment and Assimilation (1887 – 1934), Tribal Reorganization Period (1934 – 1953), Termination and Relocation Period (1953 – 1968), Self-Determination Period (1975 - Present).

Tribal Reorganization Period

The realization that allotment and other assimilation policies were not working prompted a reform movement during the 1920s. The direction of this movement was influenced by numerous studies on the appalling living conditions on reservations; one of the most important was “The Problem of Indian Administration,” or the Meriam Report. The shocking findings reported in these publications led to the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1934.

Under the IRA, allotment of Indian reservations ended, and Indian allotments were put into permanent trust status, not alienable or taxable. Tribal nations were also encouraged to reorganize their traditional governing structures by creating formal governments or business committees fashioned after models developed by the BIA in Washington, D.C. Tribes developed constitutions, charters, and by-laws, all of which were subject to the ultimate authority of the federal government. Although the IRA made steps towards returning some self-governing powers to tribes, it was not designed to confer complete autonomy and not all tribes were inclined to adopt it. Each tribe had to specifically vote against the IRA for it not to be implemented. Because many of the Indians who were against the IRA were traditionalists, they avoided voting at all. This lack of votes against the IRA was counted as votes for it. Ultimately, 181 tribes voted to accept the IRA, including the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, which were the first in the nation to reorganize under its terms. Seventy-seven tribes, including the Crow Tribe, voted against it.

Materials/Resources Needed

[1934 Indian Reorganization Act and its effect on Leadership - Vernon Finley](#) (video), Montana Office of Public Instruction

[1934 IRA and Gros Ventre Government - Everall Fox](#) (video), Montana Office of Public Instruction

[1928 Report on "Problem of Indian Administration"](#), Alaskool

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

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

[Franklin Delano Roosevelt: A New Deal for Indians](#), ITC News.

This article has some good background information and includes a short video clip of President Roosevelt meeting Blackfeet tribal leaders in East Glacier.

[History and Foundation of American Indian Education](#) Chapter Five: Tribal Reorganization Period (1934-1953), Montana Office of Public Instruction

[Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 \(IRA\)](#), Library @ Little Big Horn College

[Indian Reorganization Act pdf file](#)

[The Problem of Indian Administration \(Meriam Report\), 1928](#), Institute for Government Research

[Meriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration \(1928\)](#), National Indian Law Library, Native American Rights Fund (NARF)

[Montana Stories of the Land "Chapter 18 The Great Depression Transforms Montana – 1929-1941,"](#)
Montana Historical Society

Brief overview of the Indian Reorganization Act, pages 364-367

[Montana Tribal Governments](#) (lesson plan), Montana Office of Public Instruction

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

See chapter seven for further background information and sample lessons for teaching about Indian Reorganization.

[Native American – Reorganization](#), Britannica