

Experiences of Multiculturalism in the United States

An Inquiry Pack to Accompany [LegalTimelines.org](https://www.legaltimelines.org)

Inquiry Question: Based on the experiences of Native Americans in these sources, what are some of the ways that European colonial powers and the U.S. government have shown appreciation or disregard for multiculturalism in America's history?

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Introduction: Multiculturalism and the Experiences of Native American Communities

It is sometimes said that America is a multicultural society. But what does this mean? Multiculturalism is the belief that multiple different cultures can exist peacefully together in a society. This means that people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds can form a society together without anyone having to give up their own identities, beliefs, values, and traditions. Each group's culture is valued and treated with respect. Think about a school with students from different backgrounds. If the school wants to be a multicultural community, it may offer students the chance to share their cultures, such as how they celebrate their religious holidays or the food, clothing, or other traditions from their racial or ethnic backgrounds. It may have students participate in lessons that highlight achievements of people from many backgrounds. It may focus on teaching students to respect and value differences.

Multiculturalism is one way to organize a society that has many different groups within it. But it is not the only way. Another way that society sometimes handles diversity is to have one unified culture into which people from different groups can assimilate. To assimilate means to become part of a culture by taking on its customs, beliefs, and values. This can be seen in the concept of America as a melting pot. In this view, people from many backgrounds melt into American society. Doing so creates a society where people come together to create a single shared culture. A multicultural society has been described as a tossed salad instead. In the salad you can recognize individual members and groups within the salad because they keep their original form, but they come together to make a larger society.

Both in history and today, there is often disagreement about what is best. Those who favor assimilation today may worry that without a unified culture, society will be too fractured and experience conflict. They may believe that assimilation provides stability and encourages society to treat everyone the same. But those who favor multiculturalism today may worry that treating everyone the same erases the fact that different groups in a society have different experiences and needs. They may believe that multiculturalism offers a chance to address these different needs. They argue that a multicultural society can create equality by treating people differently according to what they need.

A society's laws and policies can have a major impact on whether that society is a multicultural one. For example, the government of Bangladesh recognizes major holidays from four different religions as official public holidays. On the other hand, a society may make assimilating to parts of its culture required by law. A famous example is the Burqa Ban in France. This 2010 law forbids people in France from wearing clothing that covers their face in public. It is meant to forbid anyone from wearing a burqa or niqab (articles of clothing, traditional to some Muslim communities, that cover all or most of the face) in order to enforce a traditional French value of secularism (separation of religion from the state).

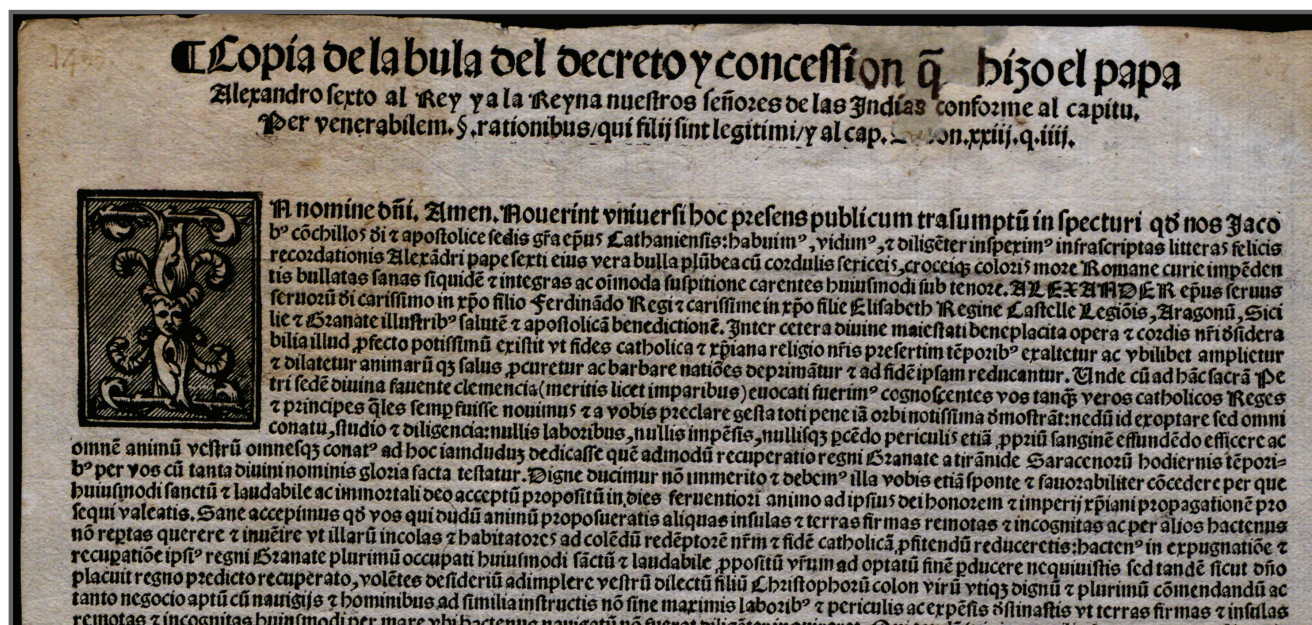
To what extent is America a multicultural society? The experiences of Native American communities can help us understand the ways in which America has treated the idea of multiculturalism. As people who have had many different experiences with American society and government since before the country's founding, they have a unique perspective. Because America is a nation that contains many different groups, understanding Native American experiences can help us understand America as a whole more deeply.

So what are some of the ways that the United States government has treated Native American cultures? What can the experiences of the people native to the land now part of the United States of America teach us about multiculturalism in the United States? In what ways do we see multiculturalism either being respected or disregarded in the United States? What does multiculturalism mean to you? Is the United States a multicultural society?

Early Encounters

Native American communities began coming into contact with Europeans when Europe's Christian rulers began to explore the world beyond their continent and landed in what they called the Americas. These European rulers were often guided by the Catholic Church. The Church issued rulings called "papal bulls," which are direct orders from the Pope. The Pope is the head of the Catholic Church. The Church and its rulings were key in how Europeans viewed what they called "the New World," meaning the Americas— North, Central and South—and the people who lived there. An important collection of papal bulls that shaped how Europeans viewed the lands they explored are the bulls that make up the "Doctrine of Discovery." The Doctrine of Discovery said that any land that was not under the rule of a Christian was available to be claimed by whichever Christian ruler first discovered the land. They had this right, so the Doctrine of Discovery said, because it would help save the souls of the non-Christians who lived there.

Source A: Pope Alexander VI's "Inter Caetera" (May 4, 1493)¹



Translation of Source A Excerpt: "Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."²

Source A Information: This is an excerpt of the famous papal bull "Inter Caetera," written by Pope Alexander VI on May 4, 1493. This bull was part of the Doctrine of Discovery. ([See source at Gilder Lehrman Collection.](#))

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *assuredly*: surely, without a doubt
- *barbarous*: barbaric, vicious
- *Divine Majesty*: God
- *exalted*: placed in the highest regard, promoted

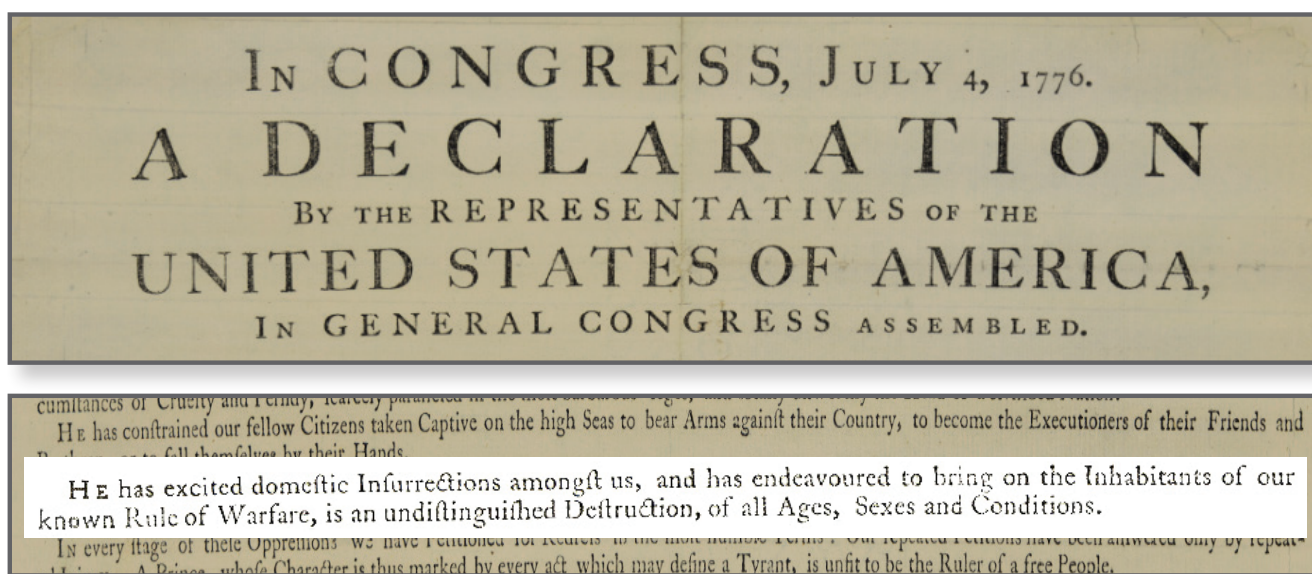
Questions to Consider for Source A:

- 1. Observe:** What do you notice first about this source?
- 2. Reflect:** In what ways, if any, do you see appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in this source? In what ways, if any, do you see a lack of appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in this source?
- 3. Question:** Write at least one question you still have about this source.

The Nations Interact

During the time of British colonization in North America and the early days of the newly independent American state, Native American tribes were typically treated as nations that were fully separate from the United States. The tribes and the government of the United States generally interacted as separate nations do, including waging war and making treaties with one another. While separate nations may often compete with each other and even go to war, they may also cooperate and learn from one another, sharing resources and even ideas about how to best organize their governments and societies. Whether nations interact on cooperative or competitive terms can depend on many factors, including perceived respect or disregard for each others' cultures, whether or not they are competing with one another for resources, or whether or not they share a common enemy.

Source B: Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)³



Transcription of Source B Excerpt: “He has excited domestic Insurrections amongst us, and has [endeavored] to bring on the Inhabitants of our Frontiers, the [merciless] Indian Savages, whose known Rule of Warfare, is an [undistinguished Destruction], of all Ages, Sexes, and Conditions.”

Source B Information: This excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, in which the American colonists declared their independence from Britain, lists one of the grievances that the Declaration's writers had against the King of Great Britain. This grievance was one of the reasons the colonists declared independence. ([See source at Library of Congress.](#))

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *domestic*: local, not international or foreign
- *endeavored*: tried to do or achieve something
- *frontier*: border region between two countries or nations, or between a country/nation and wilderness
- *insurrections*: uprisings against a government or other authority
- *undistinguished*: not making a distinction between different things, treating everything the same

Source C: Senate Concurrent Resolution 76 (December 2, 1987)⁴

Whereas the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was explicitly modeled upon the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself; and,

...

(1) the Congress, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges the historical debt which this Republic of the United States of America owes to the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian nations for their demonstration of enlightened, democratic principles of Government and their example of a free association of independent Indian nations;

Source C Information: In 1987, the Senate Indian Affairs Committee wrote Senate Concurrent Resolution 76, which is excerpted above. The resolution formally acknowledges the ways in which the U.S. Constitution borrows ideas from the Haudenosaunee (hoh-DEE-noh-SHOH-nee) Confederacy, more commonly known in English as the Iroquois (EAR-uh-KWOY) Confederacy. ([See source at GovInfo.gov.](#))

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *acknowledges*: recognizes, gives credit to
- *explicitly*: in a clearly stated way, on purpose
- *incorporated*: included, added to

Questions to Consider for Sources B and C:

1. **Observe:** What do you notice first about these sources?
2. **Reflect:** In what ways, if any, do you see appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in these sources? In what ways, if any, do you see a lack of appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in these sources?
3. **Question:** Write at least one question you still have about this source.

Removal and Assimilation

In the century between the early 1800s and the early 1900s, Native American communities experienced two main policies from the U.S. government. The first policy aimed to remove Native American communities from land that European American communities wanted for themselves. From the 1830s to the 1880s, the United States pushed Native Americans out of their homelands and into special areas called reservations. There, the Native American tribes were told they would have more control over their own societies, though still under the overall control of the U.S. government. Native Americans were often brutally forced into these reservations. One of the most well-known examples is the infamous Trail of Tears ethnic cleansing campaign. This involved 46,000 members of the Choctaw (CHOCK-taw), Seminole (SEH-mih-nohl), Creek, Chickasaw (CHIK-ə-saw), and Cherokee (CHEH-roh-kee) nations being forced by the U.S. government to travel, often by foot, to faraway areas and resettle there, with thousands dying along the way. Yet not long after most reservations were created, the United States started to push a new policy of assimilation (becoming fully part of and adopting the customs of a society) instead. In 1887, the United States passed the Dawes Act. It was meant to break up the reservations and make Native Americans assimilate into American society, including abandoning their reservations and cultures.

Source D: Photograph of a Church on the Tejon Ranch Indian Reservation (circa 1888–1990)⁵



Source D Information: This photograph was taken by American wilderness photographer Carleton E. Watkins between the years 1888 and 1900. It is set on the Sebastian Indian Reservation, more commonly known as the Tejon (TEE-hon) Ranch Indian Reservation in California. The reservation was established in 1853 and became home to peoples native to California. The photo depicts a church on the reservation. ([See source at Library of Congress.](#))

Source E: Photograph of Native American Students at Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1901)⁶

Source E Information: This photograph depicts Native American students at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania attending a clothes mending class in 1901. The Carlisle School is one of the most infamous of the nearly 150 Indian boarding schools in the United States. Thousands of Native American children were forced to attend these schools against their and their families' will. The founder of the Carlisle School is famous for his philosophy that for the good of Native Americans, it is necessary to "kill the Indian in him, and save the man."⁷ ([See source at Library of Congress.](#))

Questions to Consider for Sources D and E:

- 1. Observe:** What do you notice first about these sources?
- 2. Reflect:** In what ways, if any, do you see appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in these sources? In what ways, if any, do you see a lack of appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in these sources?
- 3. Question:** Write at least one question you still have about this source.

Modern Times

Native American communities have continued to fight to have their sovereignty (power to govern themselves) and cultures recognized and respected in the United States and beyond. This has included playing significant roles in broader American movements for civil rights, racial justice, and climate action. It has also included specific work pushing for Native American rights. Native groups have held large protests against projects such as oil pipelines, uranium mines, and more that they say threaten the environment, their sacred land, and their sovereignty. Additionally, there is a growing Land Back movement, which aims to return land to tribal control as a way to begin repairing the harm that was done to the tribes and the land. Many also argue that returning land to native peoples will help all people, given the track record that native communities have in protecting and restoring natural ecosystems that have been threatened. These movements continue to see significant successes as well as significant resistance.

Source F: Esther Martinez Native American Preservation Act (December 14, 2006)⁸

Public Law 109–394
109th Congress

An Act

To amend the Native American Programs Act of 1974 to provide for the revitalization of Native American languages through Native American language immersion programs; and for other purposes.

Dec. 14, 2006
[H.R. 4766]

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006”.

SEC. 2. EXPANSION OF PROGRAM TO ENSURE THE SURVIVAL AND CONTINUING VITALITY OF NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES.

Section 803C of the Native American Programs Act of 1974 (42 U.S.C. 2991b–3) is amended—

(1) in subsection (b)—

(A) in paragraph (5) by striking “and” at the end,

(B) in paragraph (6) by striking the period at the end and inserting “; and”, and

(C) by adding at the end the following:

“(7)(A) Native American language nests, which are site-based educational programs that—

“(i) provide instruction and child care through the use of a Native American language for at least 10 children under the age of 7 for an average of at least 500 hours per year per student;

“(ii) provide classes in a Native American language for parents (or legal guardians) of students enrolled in a Native American language nest (including Native American language-speaking parents); and

“(iii) ensure that a Native American language is the dominant medium of instruction in the Native American language nest;

“(B) Native American language survival schools, which are site-based educational programs for school-age students that—

“(i) provide an average of at least 500 hours of instruction through the use of 1 or more Native American languages for at least 15 students for whom a Native American language survival school is their principal place of instruction;

“(ii) develop instructional courses and materials for learning Native American languages and for instruction through the use of Native American languages;

Esther Martinez
Native American
Languages
Preservation Act
of 2006.
42 USC 2991
note.

Source F Information: In 2006, Congress passed the Esther Martinez Native American Preservation Act of 2006. It sets aside money for three years to be given to Native American language educational programs and Native American language survival schools. The law was named in honor of Esther Martinez, whose Tewa (TAY-wa) name was P'oe Tsáwă. She was a survivor of the Indian Boarding School system and was a leader in the preservation of her native Tewa language and culture. She was the author of the celebrated *San Juan Pueblo* (PWEB-loh) *Tewa Dictionary*. ([See source at Congress.gov.](#))

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *immersion*: a state of being completely surrounded by something; ex. language immersion programs in which only the immersion language is used
- *preservation*: the process of keeping something from being destroyed
- *principal*: primary, main
- *revitalization*: bringing new life and strength to something
- *vitality*: a state of being active and strong

Source G: Photo Showing Land Ownership of Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation (May 6, 2022)⁹



Transcription of Elements from Source G:

Map Title: Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe

Map Key Title: Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Land Ownership

Source G Information: Leroy Staples Fairbanks III, a representative of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe (oh-JIB-way), shows a map of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation, located in Cass Lake, Minnesota. The map shows the many different groups (such as private citizens and the federal government) who own the land that makes up the reservation. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe fought for decades to have the federal government return thousands of acres of land that it had stolen in the 1940s and 1950s. They won their fight in 2020. This required decades of organized action from the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, including spending years building connections and cooperation with their local county government for support. ([See source photo at MPR News](#); [explore maps of the Leech Lake Reservation on the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe website](#).)

Questions to Consider for Sources F and G:

- 1. Observe:** What do you notice first about these sources?
- 2. Reflect:** In what ways, if any, do you see appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in these sources? In what ways, if any, do you see a lack of appreciation for multiculturalism and Native American culture in these sources?
- 3. Question:** Write at least one question you still have about this source.

Inquiry Question

Multiculturalism is the belief that multiple different cultures can exist peacefully together in a society, with people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds able to form a peaceful society together without anyone having to give up their own identities, beliefs, values, and traditions.

Based on the experiences of Native Americans in these sources, what are some of the ways that European colonial powers and the U.S. government have shown appreciation or disregard for multiculturalism in America's history?

You may wish to consider the following additional question in your answer:

Are there ways in which these sources show a change in how Americans view multiculturalism over time? Are there ways in which these sources show consistency in American views of multiculturalism over time?

Use the sources above and the timeline to support your answer.

Inquiry Extension Question

As of January 2024, the United States has new rules for museums on repatriating (returning to their nation of origin) certain Native American artifacts and human remains.

What are some of the possible benefits and drawbacks to such a rule? To what extent does such a rule contribute to a multicultural society?

Read the articles in the suggested resources below, and conduct your own research to learn about the repatriation rule and help you answer the questions above.

Suggested Resources:

- WBUR (a radio station based in Boston, MA) offers this [introduction to the new rule](#), with perspectives from a Native American leader.
- *Business Insider* offers this [introduction to the new rule](#), with perspectives from both museum leaders and Native American leaders.
- The Federal Register offers the [full text of the new rule](#). While this is very long, it may be helpful to read through the public comments and the government's responses, as these may shed light on possible benefits and drawbacks of the rule.
- This *American Indian Magazine* story, "[Promises Kept](#)," shares the story of Suzan Shown Harjo, an important figure in the efforts to repatriate Native American artifacts, and includes perspectives on her motivations and her famous poem about repatriation, "Child of Time."

Notes

- ¹ [Demarcation bull, granting Spain possession of lands discovered by Columbus] Pope Alexander VI . (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04093)
- ² Pope Alexander VI, "Inter Caetera," translation provided by Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, May 4, 1493, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/T-04093.pdf>.
- ³ United States, "In Congress, July 4, 1776, a declaration by the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled," Broadside printed by John Dunlap, 1776. From Library of Congress Printed Ephemera Collection, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2003576546>.
- ⁴ Iroquois Confederacy of Nations, S. Con, Res. 76, 100th Congress, 1st sess., December 2, 1987, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988. From GovInfo, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-100shrg83712/pdf/CHRG-100shrg83712.pdf>.
- ⁵ Carleton E. Watkins, "Tejon ranch. Indian reservation ; the church," Photograph, [between 1888 and 1900]. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <https://www.loc.gov/item/93511807/>.
- ⁶ Frances Benjamin Johnston, "[Carlisle Indian School, Carlisle, Pa. Clothes mending class]," Photograph, [1901]. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008675523/>.
- ⁷ Richard H. Pratt quoted in "'Kill the Indian, and Save the Man': Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans," History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>.
- ⁸ U.S. Congress, House, Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006, HR4766, 109th Congress. From Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/109/plaws/publ394/PLAW-109publ394.pdf>.
- ⁹ Monika Lawrence, "LeRoy Fairbanks points out the patchwork of land ownership on a map of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation on May 6 [2022] in Cass Lake, Minn. Yellow marks Secretarial Transfers," Photograph, MPR News, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/05/18/decades-after-taking-it-feds-set-to-return-minnesota-land-to-leech-lake-band>.