

Misguided Responsibilities  
and Disregarded Rights:  
**The Cultural Assimilation of American Indians**

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## Process Paper

Our project on the cultural assimilation of American Indians through education was inspired in part by our visit to the Museum of the American Indian and our meeting with State Senator Maria Cantwell in Washington, D.C. last summer. When narrowing down our options, we thought back to our trip and it seemed a natural choice. The U.S. government's perception of American Indians evolved over the years, and this idea of change fascinated us. One of our main concerns was the relation to this year's theme; we were not entirely sure what right was involved with our project. After considerable thought, we identified the right to culture: it is much more abstract and less tangible than rights that usually come to mind, yet no less important, and it immediately caught our attention. Having chosen this right, finding the corresponding responsibilities – the misguided responsibility to assimilate and the recognized responsibility to preserve culture – was easy.

To better understand the direction of our project, we began by reading secondary sources. It was not until examining primary student accounts that we realized the complexity of the subject. We could not simplify the many different perspectives all into one. This led us to consider different perspectives. The boarding schools, after all, affected more than just the students who attended. Legislation was integral to our project as well, providing insight on the government's view on culture and the American Indians. Together, student accounts and legislation formed the heart of our topic. Having conducted several interviews helped us connect this historical topic to ongoing issues.

The website format appealed to us because it allowed creativity with the display of information. We were able to convey our project not only with words, but with photographs, political cartoons, primary quotes, audio, and video. The freedom and interactivity websites give the creator, as well as the viewer, advances the understanding of the topic. Our project is organized to show the progression of ideas concerning the "Indian Problem" and American Indian education.

This project is a perfect example of *Rights and Responsibilities in History*. In the cultural assimilation of American Indians, the right to culture was both negated by misguided responsibilities and instituted by the recognition of the true responsibilities. As the European settlers, the United States government, and white citizens struggled to accept that culture was a right they should protect, not abolish, the American Indian cultural identity was degraded by original efforts, mainly through boarding schools. Although they later realized this was wrong and strived to teach culture, the destruction of many American Indian cultures is irrevocable. This changing perception of responsibility towards the American Indians and their rights forever altered the way we regard and teach culture.

Word Count: 449