

Native Americans WWII → the Present

Ironically, just as the federal government abandoned its attempts to acculturate Native Americans, the Indians themselves began moving off the reservations and into mainstream American society. What prompted such a dramatic change was World War II. Many found jobs in urban areas or joined the armed forces. Those remaining on the reservations formed all-Indian self-help groups to further improve the socioeconomic conditions faced by native peoples.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s prompted many Native Americans to become more assertive about ensuring equal opportunities for their people in American society. Beginning in the late 1960s, several Native American rights groups began lobbying both the government and the public to recognize the plight of Native Americans, particularly those still living on the reservations.

Following the lead of African Americans, Native American social activists initiated a red power movement and formed such organizations as the American Indian Movement to bring their efforts to the public's attention and garner support from other Indians. Leaders such as Dennis Banks organized several high-profile protests, most notably the Alcatraz Occupation in San Francisco Bay in 1969 and the Wounded Knee siege in 1973. The growing strength of the environmental movement also contributed to raising Native Americans in the public eye, as Indians have long been viewed as an environmentally responsible people.

Both through the media and in the courts, Native American activists continued to challenge their place in American society throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The federal government and the courts responded by passing and upholding a series of laws on a wide range of Indian-related topics, from the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978) to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. In general, these laws have attempted to improve conditions on the reservations, protect traditional Native American culture, and stamp out discrimination against Native Americans in society at large.

Some Native Americans continue to object to the use of Indian images as mascots for sports teams, an ongoing and highly controversial debate. Another topic recently under discussion is the movement to return Native American bones and artifacts from museums and scientific laboratories to the originating tribes. While some Americans believe that such artifacts can contribute to general anthropological and sociological knowledge, others feel that such scrutiny shows a lack of respect for early Native American societies.



The growth of pan-Indianism, intertribal pow-wows, and legalized gambling on reservations in the 1980s and 1990s enacted a remarkable social and economic renaissance among Native American groups. The construction of enormously profitable casinos in particular has resulted in great changes on the reservations, allowing Native Americans to build luxurious homes and state-of-the-art community facilities. Today, Native American communities show every sign of growing in strength and affluence, with more than 1.3 million Americans claiming affiliation with a Native American tribe.

Native Americans have increasingly made their marks in American society in recent years. In 2002, Cherokee Carol Gallagher became the U.S. Episcopal Church's first Native American female bishop. That same year, Hopi Patty Talahongva became the first American Indian to host a national news program, "The Calling," a multicultural journal airing on PBS, and Chickasaw John Herrington became the first Native American in space.