**WESTERN INDIAN WARS**

After the Civil War, thousands of Americans poured into the Great Plains on a collision course with western Indian tribes. Homesteaders, ranchers, and miners encroached on Indian lands and threatened native game and ways of life. They called on the U.S. Army to crush Indian resistance and confine tribes to government-controlled reservations.

In the decades following the Civil War, the U.S. Army fought dozens of engagements with Indians in the West. Lakota Chief Sitting Bull asked, “If the white men take my country, where can I go?”

The Fort Laramie treaty between the United States and the Lakota Indians was signed in 1868. Designed to bring long-lasting peace, it promised the Lakota that the Black Hills, which they considered sacred, would become a permanent part of the Lakota Indian reservation.

In 1874, however, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer led an expedition of 1,000 men and 110 wagons to explore the Black Hills. His stated goal was to identify a site for a fort to protect this Indian land. In fact, he was also interested in rumors that the Black Hills contained gold deposits. Custer found the rumor was correct. Prospectors quickly began staking illegal claims on the land, and then demanding that the army protect them from Indian attacks. This set the stage for another clash of arms.

**Little Bighorn**

At Little Bighorn (known to Indians as Greasy Grass), the U.S. Army suffered its greatest loss during the western Indian Wars.

On June 25, 1876, the army sent some 1,600 troops, including the Seventh Cavalry, to trap a large group of roaming Lakota Indians and force them onto a reservation. The plan was to attack simultaneously from three sides. However, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer, who led one body of troops, thought he had enough men to defeat the Indians alone. He divided his 600 troops into thirds and attacked. The Indians greatly outnumbered Custer, and defeated each group in turn, killing Custer and more than 200 others. The loss so outraged the government that it mounted a new offensive that finally crushed armed Lakota resistance.

**Buffalo Soldiers**

In 1866 and 1867, the army recruited six regiments of African Americans for regular service, about 6,000 men. Organized as four infantry and two cavalry regiments, they participated in many actions against Indians. Because of their thick curly hair and fighting spirit, the Indians called them buffalo soldiers.

**Geronimo**

Geronimo and his band of Chiricahua Apache fought government domination longer than any other group of Indians. In the 1870s, the United States forcibly moved the Chiricahua to an arid reservation in eastern Arizona. Geronimo resisted at first, but was caught and seemingly became resigned to reservation life. In 1881, however, he and his band escaped and began raiding settlements in the United States and Mexico.

Until his final surrender in 1886, Geronimo would at times agree to stay on the reservation, and then flee with marauding warriors. He became infamous in sensational press reports. In the final campaign against him, the army needed Apache scouts plus more than 5,000 soldiers to hunt him down. General Nelson A. Miles led the force that finally captured Geronimo. Miles had served bravely in the Civil War, when he was wounded four times and accorded the Medal of Honor. He received the medal shown here for service in the Indian Wars, during which he defeated Crazy Horse of the Lakota and captured Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce.

**Wounded Knee**

Stirred by a spiritual revival centering on the “Ghost Dance,” a group of Lakota left their reservation in South Dakota. On December 29, 1890, as they returned to surrender, a scuffle broke out. Hearing a shot, soldiers fired, killing more than 200 men, women, and children—the last to die in the Indian Wars.

**The Reservation**

By 1890, the army had defeated armed resistance and resettled Indians on government-controlled reservations. Many reservation Indians were reduced to a subsistence life, dependent on the federal government for food and supplies. They used tickets to claim their rations. In the late 19th century, federal policy changed from supporting separate Indian reservations to accelerating assimilation.

The U.S. government wanted Indians to learn skills and attitudes deemed necessary for successful American citizenship. Indian children, seen as the key to assimilation, were forcibly taken from their homes and sent to school. In 1887, the government instituted the Dawes Act to accelerate assimilation by dissolving the reservations and allotting land to individual Indians. Most tribes resisted, refusing to give up their culture and unique ways of life. As part of the policy to integrate Indians into the general population, many children were removed from the reservation and sent to Indian schools. There they were to learn fundamental skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and also new social attitudes that would make them successful “Americans.”

In 1889 the federal government opened unassigned lands in the Oklahoma Territory that were formerly reserved for Indians, to white settlement, triggering a massive land grab.