

Similarities and differences between african and native americans history essay



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Both the African American and Native American communities in the United States suffered great hardships since the dawn of the Republic. Southern plantation owners held the black community in enslavement while greedy American settlers stole the Indians' land. After the Civil War, however, conditions radically changed for both: the slaves were freed at last, and the remaining free tribes were being herded onto reservations. In these years immediately following the war, blacks, due to a strong Republican influence in the federal and state governments, were far better off economically, politically, and socially than their Native American counterparts. While the Indians lost their land because of the ever-moving drive westward, blacks gained suffrage and equality under the law. However, as time went on, the African American community was robbed of its rights due to a coalition between white supremacists eager to keep freed blacks at the bottom of society and Democrats eager to gain a Southern power-base. Blacks began suffering the same hardships that their Indian cousins suffered. But, after World War I, the plight of the Native Americans was somewhat relieved because of pity for their wretched reservation life and attempts were made to give them both reparations for lost lands and representation in American politics. The African American community, conversely, was still being discriminated against by racist elements in both the North and South; blacks had to wait until the mid-1950's before their condition was alleviated and they were brought to the level Native Americans occupied.

African American

The years immediately following the Civil War were a time of hope for African Americans on all levels: politically, economically, and socially. The ratification

of the 13th Amendment freed them, for the first time ever, from the hands of their Southern masters. Blacks gained control of their own destiny and had chance to rise above their squalid condition. The Congress, dominated by anti-slavery Republicans, was determined to ram through sweeping civil rights legislation equalizing blacks and whites. Republicans passed through the Civil Rights Bill of 1866 over Democratic President Andrew Johnson's veto. This legislation granted citizenship to blacks, an immeasurably important prerequisite for gaining other important rights, such as suffrage. Under the Bill, discrimination because of race was made illegal. The Fourteenth Amendment, added to the Constitution two years later, ensured that the rights gained by blacks under the Bill would be protected from repeal by later Democratic Congresses. In a final blow to Southern Democrats, Republicans also legally guaranteed black male suffrage in the 15th Amendment, bypassing Democratic obstructions in Southern state legislatures. These sweeping pieces of legislation paved the way for blacks to live as equals with whites, making them citizens and supposedly protecting their citizenship against discrimination ("The Civil Rights Bill Should not be Enacted" 64-5), (Corbin 36).

Unfortunately, the amendments that supposedly gave blacks political power and social protection proved easier to write than to enforce. From the beginning, Southerners despised Northern attempts to "reconstruct" a new, more tolerant South. White supremacists, former slave-owners yearning for a return to "Dixieland," and Democrats hoping to gain a Southern power-base all worked against the reforms enacted by the Radical Republicans. In an attempt to keep blacks down, organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the

Knights of the White Camelia conspired to generate an environment of fear and oppression against the black community. They armed themselves and, with the tacit complicity of their Democrats in the Southern state governments, whipped “ upstart” blacks, lynched civil rights campaigners, and obstructed black voters. The fear that these groups created socially stigmatized the black community and made blacks endure willing to endure legalized discrimination for fear of their lives (“ The Ku Klux Klan is a Terrorist Organization” 122-3).

The Southern Democratic push to keep blacks in their “ rightful place” in society, namely at the bottom with the Indians, also pushed back recent gains. Empowered by Supreme Court decisions in *United States v. Cruickshank and Williams v. Mississippi*, Democrats established the poll tax and literacy requirements in order to vote. Because these requirements were applied to all races, they were declared “ constitutional” and allowed to go forward. Nonetheless, poll taxes and literacy standards had the effect of disenfranchising the lower classes and, because most blacks received neither money nor education from their former masters and could not pay the taxes or read, they were effectively removed from the political scene. Other Supreme Court decisions, especially *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which declared segregation constitutional as long as the facilities given to blacks were “ on par” to the facilities afforded whites, led to the complete social separation of blacks from whites. The African American community was now forbidden to even use the same restrooms as the Caucasian community. Segregated schools left many blacks bereft of a good education and thus, like their Indian cousins, unable to find a good job and move up the social

ladder. A mindset began to develop as a result of these actions, which allowed white supremacists to convince ordinary white citizens that blacks deserved to be at the bottom, thus retarding further civil rights progress and reversing important gains (Corbin 42-4).

The tide began to turn for the black community in the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Reversing many years of previous precedent, a more tolerant court declared that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. Besides the immediate social and economic ramifications that this decision brought, it also opened the way for the end to all segregation and the beginnings of equality. After all, if segregation in schools was unconstitutional, then why should segregation on buses still be legal? In 1954, the pendulum began to swing back again, opening up new possibilities for the black American (Corbin 49-50).

Native American

In contrast, the fall of the American Indian occurred just when the African American was gaining essential freedoms for the first time. Indians were not even considered American citizens at the time of Reconstruction; the 14th Amendment that gave blacks their citizenship specifically excluded Native Americans. Without this most basic acknowledgement, it was impossible for Indians to gain any of the freedoms or rights granted to blacks (Bernardo 5).

Post-bellum America was also the setting for the final defeat of the Indians at the hands of expansionist American policy. With the threat of dis-Union posed by the Confederacy removed by Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, the United States was once again able to continue

its inexorable march to the Pacific Ocean. Standing in the way of total American domination were several thousands Indians living in the Great Plains, the only members of a once-proud race still free from the reservations. However, the Army crushed resistance to expansion on December 29, 1890 in the Battle of Wounded Knee, and the last free Indians were herded like sheep onto the reservations (Nardo 113-4).

Indians, with their sprawling ancestral lands occupied by American settlers, had to make due with cramped and dirty reservations. Some tribes, such as the Great Plains Indians, lost their only means of sustenance when white settlers hunted the buffalo herds to near extinction. Others, forbidden to leave the reservations, were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyles. In one sweeping blow, the reservations destroyed the only means of survival for many Indians and completely shattered Native American society while white settlers filled in the vacuum created by “civilizing” Indians and encouraging them to adopt white lifestyles, further contributing to the social and cultural decay of this once-proud people (Nardo 116).

As if the complete destruction of Indian culture, social structure, and economy was not enough, Congress, with the General Allotment Act, began taking even the reservations away from them. The Act, passed in 1887, broke up the 285 federal reservations and allotted 160-acre pieces of them to heads of Indian families, making it easier for white developers to purchase and use the land (Nardo 116). By 1932, almost 65% of Indian land had been bought by American businessmen and settlers. Because of allotment, Indians were forced to live in more and more cramped conditions, posing a further strain on already taxed social structures and almost nonexistent health

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services. Furthermore, Indians now had even less land with which to build a future and a stable economic environment (Bernardo 6).

The turning point of American Indian life in the United States came after World War I. Feeling grateful to the large amount of able-bodied Indian men who volunteered to fight with Americans in battle, Congress passed two important bills. The first one, the Snyder Act, redefined the Bureau of Indian Affairs, no longer would it attempt to assimilate Indians into American society. Instead, the Bureau was now to teach Indians new irrigation and farming methods, giving Indians the possibility of economic self-sufficiency, and work to improve the living conditions on the reservations, addressing long-standing problems of under-education and inadequate healthcare which also plagued blacks. The second bill, the Indian Citizenship Act, granted to Indians what had been given to freed slaves after the Civil War by granting citizenship to all Indians born in America. With this important right, Indians were granted suffrage in most states and allowed for the first time free travel in America. Indians could now leave the reservations in search of jobs and a better life, something that had been granted even to the blacks (Nardo 118), (Bernardo 7).

Economic conditions for Native Americans improved under the Roosevelt Administration with the signing of the Indian Reorganization Act, reversing the policy set forth by the Indian Allotment Act. Under this new bill, reservation land was returned to tribal ownership and some white-owned land was returned to Indians, giving Indians protection from land-hungry businessmen. The bill also provided money for Indian education and encouraged the creation of tribal corporations to help manage Indian land for <https://assignbuster.com/similarities-and-differences-between-african-and-native-americans-history-essay/>

the Indian population (Nardo 119). Finally, in 1948 Congress created the Indian Claims Commission in response to a large Indian outcry. The Commission's mission was to settle disputes over lost Indian land and hundreds of treaties broken by the United States with regard to the Indians; it has awarded large sums of money to aggrieved Indians in an attempt to redress past wrongs (Bernardo 7).

Conclusion

African American and Native American life from post-bellum America to the mid-20th Century have followed different patterns. Though both were subjected to unimaginable cruelty at the hands of "civilized" Americans, the conditions of blacks began improving immediately after the Civil War, with African Americans being granted citizenship, protection from discrimination, and male suffrage. However, these gains turned out to be more fictional than fact, white supremacists wishing for a return to Dixieland, Southern Democrats thirsting for power, and a prejudiced Supreme Court made many of these victories hollow by "legally" disenfranchising most blacks and segregating the group to a second-class status. Despite these challenges and reversals, the African American did reap substantial gains at the hands of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which began to turn back the tide of segregation and hate.

In contrast to this pattern, the Native American condition declined sharply in post-bellum America. Eager for land and free of the threat posed by the Confederacy and dis-Union, settlers aided by the United States Army herded the last great tribes onto federal reservations. Reservation life brought with it horrible living conditions and a breakdown of Indian social and economic

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life. Attempts by the government to “Americanize” the group only succeeded in further tearing its social fabric. However, with the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924, which granted citizenship to Indians almost 60 years after it had been granted to blacks, the Indian condition began improving more rapidly than the black one. Congress, moved with pity, instituted important reforms to save Indian life and restore economic viability. Though both African American and Native Americans shared the bottom of the American social ladder and suffered from prejudice and discrimination, their lives were somewhat different. Both suffered at the hands of whites, but Native Americans suffered more with the almost total destruction of their society. On the other hand, it took much longer to begin improving the African American condition than it did for the Native American one. One thing is certain, however, America must always remember the hardships it forced these groups to endure for no other reasons than the greed, hatred, ignorance, and racism that allow discrimination to flourish.