

## US Civil War and Reconstruction – Relations between the Nez Perce and the United States Government during the Treaty Era

*“Hear me my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I shall fight no more forever” – Chief Joseph*

In the time of American expansion following the Civil War, perhaps no story is as indicative of the fractured relationship between Indian Tribes and the United States Government as that of Chief Joseph's (In-mut-too-yah-lat-lat) campaign against a hostile US Government which ended in the loss of most of the Nez Perce's land.

The Nez Perce, or Nemi'ipuu, had a long, and relatively constructive, history with white people dating to their first interactions with French traders in the early 1700's. The name Nez Perce originated because the French were unable to speak with the Nez Perce, but identified the tribe by using a sign to indicate the Nemi'ipuu's pierced noses – Nez Perce in French, and the name remained. Later, Lewis and Clark came upon the Nez Perce when they stumbled out of the Bitterroot Mountains, barely alive, on their journey to the Pacific Ocean. The Nez Perce had an opportunity to easily dispose of the expedition, yet they instead showed Lewis and Clark great hospitality. Members of the expedition commented on the friendliness of the tribe towards them.

With continued American settlement of the Oregon Territory, relations between whites and the Nez Perce became strained. According to Chief Joseph, Governor Stevens held a council with the Nez Perce chiefs and declared the need for land to be divided to separate the new white settlers from the Indian people. Stevens said that the Indians must remain on the land designated for them. Many of the chiefs signed this agreement – Chief Joseph's father, Old Joseph, also a Chief, did not acquiesce.

However, in 1855 Chief Joseph's father, along with other Nez Perce Chiefs, signed the Treaty of Walla Walla preserving most Nez Perce land. While receiving assurances that whites would respect the terms of the treaty, Old Joseph continued to believe that Nez Perce land would not be protected from the seemingly unending stream of white settlers.

Chief Joseph's father was proven right in the 1860's when gold was discovered on Nez Perce land. Streams of settlers rushed to claim their piece of the fortune and the US Government moved to reduce the size of Nez Perce lands from approximately 5,000 square miles to barely 500 square miles. The Nez Perce continued to fight an uphill battle to preserve their lands against encroachment by whites. Tired and defeated, Old Joseph told his son upon his death bed, “This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and mother.”

The Nez Perce became entangled in the continued expansion of US Settlement in the West. In 1877 Nez Perce Indians were told by General Oliver Howard that within 30 days they must all relocate from their beautiful lands in the Willowa valley in Oregon to the Lapwai reservation, in Idaho, where a portion of the Nez Perce already resided. Some Nez Perce, angered by this development, attacked and killed a number of white settlers. The United States Army, in retaliation, attacked a Nez Perce encampment.

Chief Joseph was joined by Looking Glass, the son of a respected Chief, and the Nez Perce headed towards Montana on their way to the Canadian border. These two Nez Perce led a remarkable retreat in which 200 warriors were able to outmaneuver 2000 US Soldiers and elude capture despite numerous encounters. Finally, after three months of fleeing, the tribe was attacked by US troops at Jackson Hole, Wyoming and suffered heavy casualties. Chief Joseph saw no resolution and surrendered his rifle, while Looking Glass headed towards the Canadian border, only to be killed by a Cheyenne scout.

Time and time again, Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce had been promised access to their ancestral home. Promises were made and broken for two generations of Nez Perce, despite the best efforts of the Nez Perce to reach mutually agreed upon solutions. Following surrender in 1877, the Nez Perce were sent to Kansas and eventually present day Oklahoma where many became sick and died. In 1885 Chief Joseph's people were finally allowed to return to the Northwest, though Joseph was forced to reside in Eastern Washington, far from his own home.

Chief Joseph stands as a powerful figure in our history. His constant vigilance in the fight to maintain the sovereignty of his people coupled with his eloquence in describing their plight stands as an important reminder of the struggle native people have continued to endure.

Reflection Questions – checking for understanding:

1. When did the Nez Perce first encounter Europeans? What European group did the Nez Perce first encounter?
2. What is the actual name of the Nez Perce? Why do we refer to them as the Nez Perce instead?
3. What famous American explorers established friendly relations with the Nez Perce?
4. What instructions did Washington Governor Stevens give to the Nez Perce regarding travel?
5. What discovery led to the US Government reducing the Nez Perce reservation from 5,000 square miles to less than 500 square miles?
6. Why was the Nez Perce escape from US soldiers so remarkable?
7. To what location(s) were the Nez Perce sent following their surrender? What happened to many Nez Perce when forced onto the reservation in Oklahoma?
8. Why is Chief Joseph such a well respected figure in our history?