

[How the US Stole Thousands of Native American Children](#)

Video Transcript

Background: This video is about the impact of Indian Boarding Schools, a governmental system meant to **assimilate** Native children into white American society, leaving their traditional lifeways and families behind. Though this brutal practice ended over 50 years ago, it still traumatizes generations of Indian families today—even those who never attended boarding school. This is called **generational trauma**.

Directions:

Step 1: **Highlight** or **identify** examples of

- generational trauma
- resiliency and survival
- racism
- ethnocentrism (believing one cultural, racial or ethnic group is superior to others)

Step 2: **Write** margin notes on why you highlighted or identified certain passages.

Step 3: As you annotate, **consider** possible reasons why you think the United States has yet to apologize or even acknowledge the traumatic impact of their boarding schools. Make notes in the margins. You will write about it later.

Introduction <i>I was adopted by a white missionary couple.</i> <i>I was adopted...immediately placed for adoption.</i> <i>I was in foster care with one family for 18 years. They were white.</i> <i>My parents loved us and I understand that. But at the same time...</i> <i>They took the idea that they were saving me. Saving us from ourselves.</i> <i>Being saved and I should be grateful for the life that I've been given because any child on the reservation would give anything to live as I was living.</i> <i>They took us away from our mom. They came marching right in and literally took us and thousands of other children from their home.</i> <i>It's a way to eradicate us. And to go to our nation's children is one of the sure ways to do that.</i>	
01:07 The US has a long and brutal legacy of attempting to eradicate Native Americans. For centuries, they colonized Native American lands and murdered their populations. They forced them west and pushed them into small, confined patches of land. But, Native Americans resisted. A Board of Indian Commissioners report said: "instead of dying out under the light and contact of civilization" the Indian population "is steadily increasing." And that was an obstacle to total American expansion. So the US found a new solution: to "absorb" and "assimilate" them. It all started with an experiment, and a man named Richard Henry Pratt. He had in his charge some prisoners of war and he taught these men how to speak English, how to read and write, and how to do labor. He dressed them in military uniforms and basically ran an assimilation experiment. And then he took his results to the federal government and said they're capable of being civilized. So he was able to get this project funded.	

02:16 In 1879, the government funded Pratt’s reservation boarding project, the first ever off school for Native American children. His motto was to "kill the Indian and save the man." What started there, at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, was nothing short of genocide disguised as American education. Children were forcibly taken from reservations, and placed into the school, hundreds — even thousands — of miles away from their families. They were stripped of their traditional clothing. Their hair was cut short. They were given new names and forbidden from speaking their Native languages.	
02:59 “To take our children and to indoctrinate them into Western society to take away their identity as indigenous peoples, their tribal identity, I think it's one of the most effective and insidious ways that the US did do harm to indigenous peoples here because it targeted our children, our most vulnerable.” “And they tried to make us ashamed for being Indian and they tried to make us something other than Indian.”	
03:30 There are also accounts of mental, physical, and sexual abuse. Of forced manual labor, neglect, starvation, and death. “My great grandfather went to Carlisle and nobody in my family ever talked about it. So if you google Indian boarding schools, the majority of the pictures that you will see will be actually from Carlisle.” Colonel Pratt created propaganda. He hired a photographer to create those before and after photos to show that his experiment was working. So it was intentional propaganda.	
04:03 And it worked. The Carlisle model of education swept the country — and led to the creation of over 350 boarding schools to assimilate Native American children. <i>(Historical footage) On the one hand, we have the Navajo as we find him in the desert. Few of these boys and girls have ever seen a white man. Yet, through the agencies of the government they are being brought from their state of comparative savagery and barbarism to one of civilization.</i>	
04:38 In 1900, there were about 20,000 Native American children in these schools. By 1925, that number more than tripled. Families that refused to send their kids to these schools faced consequences like incarceration at Alcatraz, or the withholding of food rations. Some parents, who did lose their children to these schools, even camped outside to be close to them. Many students ran away. Some found ways to hold on to their languages and cultures. Others, though, could no longer communicate with family members. And some never returned home at all. By stripping the children of their Native American identities — the US government had found a way to disconnect them from their lands. And that was part of the US strategy. During the same era in which thousands of children were sent away to boarding schools, a number of US policies infringed on their tribal lands back home. In less than five decades, two thirds of Native American lands had been taken away.	

05:44 The whole thing was purposeful. And the fact that it has been buried in the history books and not acknowledged is also intentional. And in fact the same tactics were used in New Zealand, Australia, Canada. All of these countries have acknowledged, apologized, or reconciled in some way except for the United States.	
06:04 Over time, the brutality of boarding schools started to surface. And after a 1928 report detailed the horrific conditions at the schools — many began to close. In the 1960s, indigenous activism rose alongside the Civil Rights Movement. And by the 1970s, that activism forced more schools to shut down. The government handed over control of the remaining boarding schools to tribes, to be run in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.	
06:35 But just as the boarding school era started fading, another assimilation project took shape. Adoption. The main goal of this pilot project was to “stimulate the adoption of American Indian children,” to “primarily non-Indian adoptive homes.” They claimed it was to promote the adoption of the "forgotten child" but it was essentially a continuation of the boarding school assimilation tactics. And the strategy came with a financial advantage for the government too. Adoption was cheaper than running boarding schools. But first, adoption officials had to sell white America on the idea of adopting Native American children.	
07:20 Feature stories, like this one in Good Housekeeping, marketed them to white families. They were described as “unwanted,” and adoption gave them a chance at “new lives.” In the end, their media campaign worked. White families “wanted Indian Adoption.” But the problem was, many of these children, were not “orphans that nobody wanted.” They were kids, often ripped apart from families that wanted to keep them.	
07:46 “You still will hear stories today of people my age, older, saying I remember as a child the social worker was coming. And people would hide their children.”	
08:00 On reservations, social workers used catchall phrases like “child neglect” or “unfit parenting” as evidence for removal. But their criteria was often questionable. Some accounts describe children being taken away for living with too many family members in the same household. Extended family is a big thing for Native people. That means being judged for a house that’s overcrowded. So it’s always that whiteness is the standard for success. And everything else is judged by that standard.	
08:33 By the 1960s, about one in four Native children were living apart from their families. The official Indian Adoption Project placed 395 Native children into mostly white homes. But it was just one of many in an era of Native American adoptions. Other state agencies and private religious organizations began increasingly making placements for Native American children, too.	

09:03 “My mother giving me up was a white person telling her if she didn't, she would never see her other kids again. In one of the documents I have, it's addressed to my biological father Victor Fox. That he was trying to look us up to get ahold of us. But Hennepin County wrote, ‘Daniel and Douglas are adapting very well in their new family.’ This was totally, it was a false statement.”	
09:39 “When you’re adopted, you know you're missing something. I think I've likened it to having like, when someone has a 500 piece puzzle and they have all the pieces to make this pretty picture except one.”	
09:54 “My adoptive mother was not well. Verbally, physically, and sexually and spiritually abusive. By the time I was 14 I started drinking. 15, drugs were added and I became an addict to numb. I didn’t realize I was numbing pain.”	
10:11 “I tried suicide. I tried slicing my wrists one time.”	
10:17 “Children were taken. And believed like I believed for a long time, that there was something wrong with me, versus something wrong with the system.”	
10:35 The Indian Adoption Project was considered a success by the people who set it in motion. Officials claimed, “generally speaking, we believe the Indian people have accepted the adoption of their children by Caucasian families and have been pleased to learn the protection afforded these children.” But, the truth was unsettling.	
10:55 “These hearings on Indian children’s welfare are now in session.” “I was pregnant with Bobby and the welfare woman kept asking if I’d give him up for adoption.” “Before he was even born?” “Yeah” “They picked up my children and placed them in a foster home. And I think they were abused in the foster home.”	
11:19 Four years after Native people organized in this Senate hearing — Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act — known as ICWA. It gives tribes a place at the table in court. States would be required to provide services to families to prevent removal of an Indian child. And in case removal was necessary, they would have to try to keep the child with extended family, or another Native American family. Without our relatives we cease to exist. So with native people, part of our wealth, is in our family. It's in who we’re connected to.	
11:56 But the legacy of family separation in Native communities has been difficult to fully undo. Today, Native American children are four times more likely to be placed in foster care than white children — even when their families have similar presenting problems. In these cases, ICWA is often the best legal protection they have. And it’s been under attack, repeatedly.	

Use additional paper if needed.