

Educational Inequity: How We Got to Where We Are Today

Part 1. When Affirmative Action Was White

This timeline offers a summary of affirmative actions taken and investments made by the federal government of the USA or individual states to promote the advancement of white people by granting land, finances, or other resources and opportunities that were not made available to various communities of color. The timeline begins in 1776 and includes only a few of the historical decisions and actions that result in today's racial inequities.

1776 Thirteen of Britain's North American colonies declare independence. Among the sources of tension leading to this declaration are England's stance toward America's indigenous populations and African-American slaves.

- In 1772 England's Chief Justice Lord Mansfield had ruled that a slave automatically becomes free upon leaving the local area in which slavery is legal. *This "freedom principle" meant that American slaves who reach England, which had abolished slavery, are automatically free.* The United States Constitution explicitly rejects the freedom principle and protects the institution of slavery by ensuring that fugitive slaves do not become free upon entering free territory, and by guaranteeing that the slave trade will not be abolished for at least 20 years.
- The British crown reserved the right to negotiate treaties with the indigenous nations of North America. Many of the colonies wanted to be able to negotiate their own treaties with indigenous nations in order to gain more land for the growing number of whites who had worked off their indenture, were without property, or wanted to expand their holdings. White incursions into indigenous nations' territories incited armed conflict, which the British did not want to engage in. For this reason, *the British crown prohibited colonization of the land now known as the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the eastern part of Minnesota) and further expansion into Indian territory bordering the East Coast colonies.*

1780s At the conclusion of the Revolutionary War (Treaty of Paris of 1783), *Britain cedes the Northwest Territory to the newly independent American Continental Congress. Thomas Jefferson is ready to seize the opportunity.* Jefferson's *Land Ordinance of 1784* organizes the Northwest Territory, and the Continental Congress passed measures for surveying the territory, selling small plots of land to white Americans, and providing public schools in each township for the white settlers. *Over the next 12 years, the Continental Congress sponsors a series of military campaigns to eliminate or remove the 45,000 native Indians who lived on this land, so that the land could be colonized by the white settlers.*

In 1787, the Continental Congress allows white Revolutionary War veterans to use their Certificates of Indebtedness to purchase 1.5 million acres in what is now Ohio. The following year, the **US Constitution** is ratified; it *guarantees that the trans-Atlantic slave trade will continue at least 20 years, that fugitive slaves will be returned to their "owners," and that Southern whites would have disproportionately large representation in the House of Representatives* (2/3 rule).

1790s US Congress passes the **Naturalization Act**, which says only "free white" immigrants (i.e., of European descent) are eligible for naturalization. US Congress also passes the **Fugitive Slave Act** of 1793 to protect the property rights of slaveholders as guaranteed in Article IV of the US Constitution.

1819 Congress passes the **Indian Civilization Act to assimilate Native Americans**. This act authorizes financial support for religious groups or individuals to establish American-style schools for Indian communities, resulting in the establishment of many mission schools through the 1800s.

1820 Missouri is admitted as a state; its Constitution prohibits free blacks from entering the state to preserve it for white settlers.

1830s The US Congress passes the **Indian Removal Act**. The following year, ***Indian tribes are forcibly resettled west of the Mississippi River through many forced evacuations and forced marches***. The Cherokee Nation appealed the Indian Removal Act all the way to the US Supreme Court. The following year the US Supreme Court ruled that “The State of Georgia had no right to expel the Cherokee Indians from their land.” President Andrew Jackson defied the Supreme Court and continued to carry out the Indian Removal Act anyway. After discovery of gold on their land in 1838, the Cherokee Nation are force-marched 1000 miles to Oklahoma, with scant clothing and no shoes or moccasins; 4000 die from exposure, starvation, or disease.

1840s The US begins acquisition of significant landholdings including land we now know as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, and parts of Utah, Nevada and Wyoming. White Southern slave-holders already had seized land in Texas, which was Mexican territory. Mexico had abolished slavery in 1814 and refused to return fugitive slaves. ***The US annexed Texas in 1845 and invaded Mexico***. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) gave the US almost half of Mexico. Mexicans living in those areas were granted citizenship but denied the right to vote. Over time, their land deeds were nullified and much of their land taken by whites from the US.

The following year (1849), gold is discovered in California. White miners and suppliers rush into Indian country in pursuit of gold. California’s first governor, Peter Burnett, advocated Indian genocide: “A ***war of extermination*** will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct.” A San Francisco newspaper wrote: “It will be absolutely necessary to ***exterminate the savages***.” ***By 1870, California’s Indian population has dropped from about 500,000 to just 31,000.***

1850s The ***Republican Party platform*** declares in 1856 that “all unoccupied territories of the United States, and such as they may hereafter acquire, shall be reserved for the ***white Caucasian race***—a thing that cannot be except by the exclusion of slavery.” In 1857 Oregon becomes a state. ***Its constitution says: “No free Negro, or mulatto ... shall ever come, reside, or be within this state.”*** Similar language was enacted into law to exclude free blacks in the states of Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, California, Colorado, and New Mexico.

1860s ***The genocide of indigenous peoples continues***. After years of land theft, dispossession, massacre, intentional exposure to smallpox, and intentional starvation by US officials, Minnesota’s Dakota people engage in armed resistance. The Dakota who survive are taken captive. Over 300 men are sentenced to death. Over 1600 surviving women, children, and elders are force-marched 150 miles in winter storms, then imprisoned in a concentration camp on Pike Island (just below Fort Snelling), where many die. The public hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato on Dec. 26 is attended by many whites as a festive, celebratory event. It remains the ***largest mass execution in US history***. ***Minnesota Governor Alexander Ramsey declares: “The Sioux Indians must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state.”*** Governor Ramsey placed a bounty on Indian scalps. Union General John Pope says: “It is my purpose to utterly exterminate the Sioux.” Colonel John Chivington orders his troops to slaughter Indian babies as well as adults, stating “nits make lice.”

The US Congress passes the **Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862**. *This act revolutionized American higher education by providing a model of public funding of a university in every non-Confederate state*, providing education in agriculture, the mechanical arts, and military tactics. The first states to take advantage of this act were Iowa, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, resulting in Iowa State, Michigan State, and Pennsylvania State University, respectively. These provided a national model for public land-grant colleges and universities across the US. *In practice, this investment in public higher education served American students who were almost exclusively white until the 1970s.*

- 1870s** The US Supreme Court, in *US v. Cook*, rules that the US government, not the Indian tribes, own the reservation lands which the tribes occupy, including all natural resources such as timber or minerals.

The US government's Indian Office opens the first of over 100 off-reservation Indian boarding schools. The founder of the first such school, William Pratt, later recalled that the purpose of the school was to "kill the Indian and save the man" through *total annihilation of Indian culture and total assimilation into white culture. Over the next 100 years, it is estimated that as many as 80% of the American Indians spent at least some of their childhood in Indian boarding schools modeled after Carlisle.*

- 1880s** The US Congress passes the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, which prohibits Chinese from becoming naturalized citizens and bans further immigration of Chinese into the US. When this legislation was passed, *Chinese composed only .002 percent of the nation's population. Nonetheless, white workers on the West Coast saw the Chinese as a significant economic threat to both wages and "racial purity."* Chinese remained ineligible for citizenship until 1943.

The US Congress passes the **General Allotment Act (Dawes Act)** in 1887. Under this law, tribal land is taken over by the federal government and divided into small parcels for settlement by individual families. A portion of these plots are allotted to Indian families. The "surplus" Indian land is opened for settlement by whites. *As a result of the General Allotment Act, Indian-owned lands will be reduced from 138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million by 1934, much of it desert.*

- 1900s** *The population of American Indians in North American has been reduced by 98%, from an estimated 12,000,000 in 1500 to 237,000 in 1900.* US military records show at least 1470 official Army actions against Indians since the Declaration of Independence – an average of 11 actions every year for 130 years. Oklahoma Territory, which had been a safe haven for Indians and African Americans, becomes a state in 1907. Immediately whites take action to take control of the state and the oil that had been discovered in Oklahoma. White mobs destroy Tulsa's highly successful Black Wall Street.

- 1930s** In 1935 the US Congress passes the **Social Security Act**, designed to establish a basic level of economic security for American workers. *By excluding domestic and agricultural workers, however, the Social Security Act denied benefits to 75% of the US's African-American workers as well as a high percentage of Latinos and others of non-European descent.*

In 1937, the US Congress passes the **National Housing Act (FHA)**, which will provide *\$120,000,000,000 in government-funded mortgages* to qualifying families. *Less than 2% of these loans, however, went to non-white families.* Why? The FHA set itself up as the "protector of all white neighborhoods," using its field agents to "keep Negroes and other minorities from buying houses in white neighborhoods."

The FHA Underwriters Manual warned that even one or two black families would decrease property values. The FHA evaluated 260 communities across the US and “green-lined” communities preferred for mortgage investment and “red-lined” communities that were bad for mortgage investment. The “green-lined” communities were all-white. Consequently, the FHA program funded the explosion of all-white suburbs across America. These all-white suburbs became America’s white melting pot, where families from different European heritages were spatially and socially integrated into a solid, white middle-class.

As a consequence, whites moved out of the cities and bought homes in the suburbs. African Americans and other communities remained in the cities and rented rather than owned their property. Urban renewal razed family houses and replaced them with highly concentrated urban housing for the communities of color. ***White families built equity through home ownership; African American families, as renters, did not. This is a major contributor to today’s “wealth gap” between white and African-American families.*** These practices continued until the US Congress passed the U.S. Fair Housing Act of 1968, a new housing law that removed racial language.

1940s In the South, ***only 2% of the African Americans eligible to vote are registered to vote.***

The US Congress unanimously passes the **Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill)**. This legislation was sponsored by a segregationist Congressman, John Elliott Rankin, and administered by US Department of Veterans Affairs, which was strongly affiliated with the ***whites-only*** American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. ***As a result, 98% of the beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill are white men.***

Over the next 12 years, the G.I. Bill will provide ***\$14,500,000,000 in educational benefits*** to approximately 7.8 million veterans and ***\$33,000,000,000 in home loans*** to 4.3 million recipients. The number of degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities will more than double between 1940 and 1950, and the percentage of Americans with bachelor degrees, or advanced degrees, will rise from less than 5 percent in 1945 to 25 percent a half-century later. Veterans were responsible for buying 20 percent of all new homes built after WW II.

Again, 98% of the beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill are white men. Although 1 million African-Americans had served in WWII, their applications for GI benefits were routinely rejected. This was a source of advancement, upward mobility, and accumulation of financial equity for thousands of white working class families.

1960s ***American education remains highly segregated.*** By 1967, ***only 2% of America’s African American college students are enrolled in traditionally white colleges or universities.*** K-12 remains highly segregated as well, despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court ruling. By 1970, forced busing is undertaken to desegregate urban school systems.

1998 ***Schools in the north are as segregated as ever and school in the Gulf States, which had integrated in the 1980, are re-segregating.*** Even within integrated schools, racial segregation can be seen by “track” and type of classes. During the brief period of desegregation by forced bussing (1970-1998), the “achievement gap” between African-Americans and whites was cut in half.

Part 2. American Education for Indigenous Peoples

- 1879** The US government's Indian Office opens the first off-reservation Indian boarding school, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The federal government charges Army Capt. Richard Henry Pratt to head Carlisle. *Pratt's expertise and professional experience is not in education but in running a US prisoner-of-war camp to "break" Indian inmates. The school's purpose, Pratt later recalled, was to "kill the Indian and save the man" through total annihilation of Indian culture and total assimilation into white culture.* The schools were run like military schools. Children were taught to march, salute, and obey. Over the next 100 years, it is estimated that as many as 80% of the American Indians spent at least some of their childhood in Indian boarding schools modeled after Carlisle.
- 1883** The first of several annual "Friends of the Indians" conferences is held at Lake Mohonk, New York. Three themes emerge from these conferences and guide future federal policy:
1. The need to *inculcate individualism* among Indians.
 2. The need to *instill Euroamerican beliefs*.
 3. The need to *absorb Indians into US citizenship* (i.e., subject to US rather than tribal law).
- 1885** The US Congress passes the Major Crimes Act, which asserts US jurisdiction of Indian lands.
- 1887** The US Congress passes the General Allotment Act (the Dawes Act), which replaces tribal ownership of land with private ownership of family plots. Instead of tribal ownership, tribal land is subdivided into small parcels for settlement by individual families. A portion of these plots are allotted to Indian families. The "surplus" Indian land is opened for settlement by whites. As a result of the General Allotment Act, Indian-owned lands will be reduced from 138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million by 1934.
- 1891** The US Congress authorizes the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to "make and enforce... such rules and regulations as will ensure the attendance of Indian children of suitable age and health at school established and maintained for their benefit. *BIA agents literally "rounded up" Indian children as young as four and took them by force from their families and their communities. Two years later the US Congress authorizes the BIA to withhold rations, clothing and other annuities from Indian parents or guardians" who do not surrender their children to the BIA schools. Some Hopi parents were imprisoned at Alcatraz for refusing to give up their children.*

At the schools, the children's clothing and possessions were all taken from them, they were stripped naked and scrubbed in kerosene, their hair was cut short military-style, they were given Anglo names, and they were forbidden to speak their native languages. If they did speak their native language, their mouths would be washed out with lye soap, or they would be beaten, or they would have a needle put through their tongue.

The schools were characterized by barbaric discipline, corporal punishment, malnutrition, overwork, and disease. The schools also had "prison industries" – e.g., farms, bakeries, laundries, clothes manufacturing shops, metal manufacturing shops, or lumbering operations – that were staffed by the children working long hours and under conditions that violated the child labor laws of the day.

Children were kept in these schools for as long as 10 years. The schools kept them in custody year-round to prevent their returning home and getting "re-infected" with Indian culture. During the summers, they would be rented out to do domestic work, farm work, or other manual labor.

Most schools devoted only two hours per day to academic studies, and those were basic skills.

The fatality rates in the schools were around 50%, which is a higher death rate than occurred at Dachau or Buchenwald concentration camps (36% and 19%, respectively). The rates of sexual abuse may have been closer to 100%. When discovered, the offending BIA employee was often simply transferred to another BIA school.

- 1899** One BIA inspector (William McConnell) called out: “The word ‘murder’ is a terrible work, but we are little less than murderers if we follow the course we are now following after the attention of those in charge has been called to its fatal results. Hundreds of boys and girls are sent home to die.”
- 1907** The *Bryce Report* summarized the situation in Canadian schools: “Indian boys and girls [were] dying like flies” because of an “absolute inattention to the bare necessities of health.”
- 1924** A Red Cross report on conditions in BIA boarding schools in the US was submitted to the BIA Commissioner but not made public. The following year one of the BIA superintendants with the worst record of student fatalities (Harvey B. Peairs) was appointed head of the entire BIA educational system. He defended the system and said any changes, such as quarantining students with active cases of TB, would be an “unnecessary extravagance.”
- 1935** One BIA official (Oliver LaFarge) went on record describing the BIA boarding schools as “penal institutions—where little children [are] sentenced to hard labor for a term of years for the crime of being born of their mothers.”

Children resisted by running away or attempting suicide, often after just one too many beatings or sexual assaults. In one school, over 10% of the children ran away in one year. In winter, the runaways often perished.

- 1941** 49 boarding schools were still operating in the US.
- 1990** The last BIA boarding school, the Phoenix Indian School, finally closed. However, the “*Residential School Syndrome (RSS)*,” as it is called in Canada, carries on in the next generation, where it can take the form of chronic PTSD (domestic abuse, suicide, depression, drug or alcohol abuse).

To this day American public schools teach curriculum in which indigenous peoples, their culture, and their history are largely invisible, distorted, and treated as something that existed in the distant past. A mythological American creation story, based on the white racial frame, is conventionally taught as American history.

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Part 3. Resources for Further Exploration of Systemic Racism in America and American Education

Want to learn more about American racism? About systemic racism in American education? About the invention of whiteness? About the treatment of immigrants, indigenous peoples, and those of non-European heritage in our schools and our body of knowledge? About the censorship and omission of key facts from what we teach about our nation and our history? This bibliography lists selected resources, well-researched and respected, for beginning that exploration.

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