



Handout 1 - The Birth of the American Indian Movement

*Read the passage from *God is Red*, written by Native American historian and theologian Vine Deloria Jr, and respond to the questions below.*

In the 1860s, conditions were terrible for American Indians. The California Indians, for example, had been systematically neglected by generations of state and federal bureaucrats. In the 1850s, the federal government had signed a series of treaties with the bands and communities of Indians in California. These treaties gave the Indians clearly defined reservations in certain areas of the state, primarily in places not wanted by the whites or at that time inaccessible to them. But as gold fever grew in intensity, and mining technology grew more sophisticated, arriving settlers began to prowl the length and breadth of the state looking for gold. The miners' objections to the federal effort to preserve the Indian ancestral lands were loud and violent.

The miners embarked on a program of systematic genocides against the Indians of California, going so far as to have Sunday "shoots" in which bands of whites would attack Indian villages killing as many people as the could. Tribes were massacred to prevent them from holding their lands intact and out of reach of the gold-crazed miners. Political pressure was intense in Washington, D.C., and the California Indian treaties were never ratified by the U.S. Senate. Instead they were conveniently buried in the Senate archives, where they remained as classified documents for a half century. By the 1960s most whites in California were not aware of the treatment of the indigenous peoples and had not the faintest idea that they had made treaties with clearly defined boundaries. State and government officials were not so innocent, however.

During the Great Depression the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was given order to find lands for the many homeless California Indians who now lived in tiny pockets of poverty on the outskirts of cities in the extreme southern and mountainous northern parts of the state. Agriculture was having a difficult time of it during the Depression and so the program was used to assist wealthy white landowners, primarily ranchers and farmers, instead of the Indians. Land classified as "submarginal" - lands that the Department of Agriculture believed could not support a family farm or ranch - was purchased from the whites to prevent their bankruptcy and given to the Indians. Some Indians did move to these lands and the BIA organized them as tribal governments under the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. Then, they were largely abandoned by the federal government because the populations of most of these new reservations were so small that national programs could not reach them.

During World War II, a large number of Indians came to the west coast to work in war industries, and after the war they were shunted aside as returning white veterans were given back their jobs. In the 1950s, in order to get Indians off their reservations so that the lands could be sold and the tribal existence terminated, the BIA began a massive "relocation" program that placed thousands of Indians in low-paying jobs in the urban areas of California, primarily Los Angeles, San-Francisco-Oakland, and San Jose. By the 1960s, this mixture of original California Indians and the newly migrated Southwestern and Plains Indians formed a community to assert their Indian identity. Thus, the first stirrings of what became known as the Indian movement began.



Questions:

1. In paragraph 1, what do you think Deloria means when he emphasizes that California Indians were systematically neglected by the government? Why does Deloria choose to use the word “systematically”?

2. What relationship does Deloria point to between land ownership and racism towards Indians?

3. What are some of the similarities you see between the U.S. government’s treatment of Indians and the apartheid government of South Africa?