

President Jefferson and the American Indians

In this assignment you will read two letters written by President Jefferson regarding his policies toward the American Indians. You will compare the message(s) in the two documents, and then consider the following two questions:

1. *What were President Jefferson's real motives toward the Indians and the western territories?*
2. *What impact do you think this will have on later policies and relations between the Indians and the United States?*

Background: *Handsome Lake was a Seneca Indian, which was part of the Iroquois nation. The Iroquois mostly supported the British during the War for Independence. During the War, General Washington had ordered the destruction of 40 Indian villages, crops, food stores, and fruit trees. Many Iroquois fled to Canada, but those who remained lost the majority of their land. Submerged in poverty and depression, many became alcoholics, which in turn made them poorer and more dependent. Handsome Lake quit drinking and prohibited the sale and consumption of alcohol among the Indians where he lived. President Jefferson respected this decision, and thought he could negotiate with this Indian, whom he believed to be more reasonable than others.*

William Henry Harrison was a member of the Army and an aide to General Wayne during the Battle of Fallen Timbers. He was governor of the Indiana Territory, and Indian Commissioner under President Jefferson. Jefferson gave Harrison the assignment of the acquisition of Indian lands, by any means, promoting peace but authorizing the use of force. Harrison was amazingly successful at his job.

Graphic Organizer – Jefferson and the Indians

Name _____

	Document A	Document B
Based on this document, what was Jefferson's policy or policies toward the American Indians? (What did he want?) (2 or more ideas)		
Give specific evidence from the text to support your ideas above.		

Document A: Jefferson to “Brother” Handsome Lake (Modified excerpt)

I have received the message you sent me with Captain Irvine. I am happy to know that the Divine Spirit had favored you with good sense as to what is good for you and your people, as well as knowing what is harmful, particularly regarding the disastrous effects that alcohol abuse has produced among you.

You remind me, brother, what I promised you during your visit last winter, that your lands would remain in your hands always, unless you were wishing to sell them. This I repeat now and forever. Truthfully, we are always willing to buy land, but we would never ask you to sell it unless you wished to. Our laws, to protect you from such an imposition, prohibit that individuals would buy your land. If you were to wish to sell your lands, then an agent of the United States government would preside over the sale to insure that you were in agreement, that you were paid a fair price, and that such a transaction were properly documented.

This was all done in the case of which you complain. The deputies from your nation presented themselves in the manner that we have understood as evidence of the desires of your nation. They proposed to sell certain lands to the State of New York, who wished to buy them. I sent a reliable agent, who reported that the sale was performed in all fairness. Neither do I believe, brother, that the sale of these lands could be harmful to your people. When you depended on hunting for your survival, you needed more forest. But in an agricultural state, it could be advantageous for your people to sell land which is more than one can work, and use this profit to purchase agricultural tools. A small piece of land, well cultivated, will produce more.

It is my wish, then, that you will see this transaction in a more favorable light. Continue, brother, with the great reformation you have begun. Convince the men to leave their drink, to farm their lands, and that the women should spin and weave for their families. You can trust in the support and protection of the United States.

Source: Thomas Jefferson wrote this letter to Handsome Lake on November 3, 1802. (Original document available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jeffind2.asp).

Document B: Jefferson to William Henry Harrison (Modified excerpt)

... from the Secretary of War you will receive from time to time information and instructions regarding our dealings with the Indians. Since these communications will be public record, they will be more limited than this letter, which is private and not official. Here I will give you a more extensive overview regarding our policies toward the Indians, so you can respond appropriately if you find yourself in a situation where you should have to act without instruction.

Our policy is to live in perpetual peace with the Indians, and to cultivate in them affection toward us, with fair and free treatment, offering them protection from the individual injustices of our people. Now that hunting is insufficient to sustain them, we want to bring them to farming, spinning, and weaving. The women will happily leave their labors in the field to work indoors, and when their lives are reduced to a smaller area, they will see how useless their large forests will be to them. Then they will be willing from time to time to exchange land for those articles necessary for the maintenance of their farms and families.

In order to promote this willingness to exchange lands which are no longer of use to them and which we wish to acquire, we will establish shops where we will with pleasure offer products on credit. We will see that when their debts are more than what an individual is able to pay, they will exchange their lands instead. In these shops we will sell at prices so low as to cover only our costs, and not make any profit, until the small business owner finds himself obliged to retire himself from the competition. In this way the Indians will be obliged to do business with our shops, and in time they will unite with us as United States citizens, or they will retire west of the Mississippi. If any tribe were so foolish as to attempt an armed attack, the only condition of peace would be to confiscate all their land and send them across the Mississippi. This will serve as an example to the rest, and help us in our final consolidation.

Source: Thomas Jefferson wrote this private letter in February 1803 to William Henry Harrison, the governor of the Indiana Territory, Indian Commissioner, and Army veteran, where he served as aide to General Wayne at the Battle of Fallen Timbers.

Original document at: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/indian_removal/jefferson_to_harrison.cfm

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