

Dear AP U.S. History Students,

Welcome to AP U.S. History!

You must complete a **short summer assignment** before attending your first day of class. Your summer assignment is simple, direct and useful. Students taking APUSH in the Spring Semester may read it over the winter break.

Carefully read the essay “American Indians” which you will find below this message. This reading offers a starting point for our studies, and will provide the basis of a short discussion and activity on the first day of class. As you read through the essay, reflect on what you learn about Native American societies. In particular, think about the many ways in which Native Peoples differed from each other. Consider too how the arrival of Europeans brought them new opportunities, yet ultimately also introduced terrible dangers.

We look forward to an exciting and productive year with you!

Mr. Lake and Mr. O’Dwyer.

American Indians

by Elliott West

By 1492 what is today the United States was home to an extraordinary number of cultures of breathtaking variety. There were more than five hundred peoples, most of them divided into smaller related groups. Each people spoke their own language, many with separate dialects. Many languages were grouped in half a dozen families but many were not, and the difference between, say, the language of the Pomo of California and that of the Chickasaws of Mississippi was as great as the difference between German and Chinese.

The disparate peoples expressed themselves in rich artistic traditions—elaborate redwood carvings in the Pacific Northwest; basketry of grasses woven into gorgeous, intricate patterns in the Southwest and California; garments on the plains decorated delicately with shells, porcupine quills, and elk teeth. Indians worshipped by cosmologies as varied as their art and languages. Pawnees believed the stars were living beings who had sung and chanted everything into existence. Hopis could point to a spring where they had emerged from several worlds beneath this one and from which sustaining spirits visited annually.

Each Indian people supported themselves by a savvy and complex use of their particular place, and in America’s diverse geography that meant a bewildering array of economies. Those in the wooded East lived in permanent villages and practiced diversified “safety net” economies blending gardening, gathering, hunting, and fishing. Southwestern peoples like the Hopis and Zunis farmed with the help of elaborate irrigation systems. In the Missouri River valley people living in villages of large earth lodges cultivated extensive gardens and hunted from huge herds of bison to the west. Downstream on the lower Mississippi palisaded cities thrived, fed by great cornfields, fishing, and trade, while on the high plains other peoples lived semi-nomadically in small groups as hunters and gatherers. On the Pacific

coast there was virtually no agriculture but dense populations supported themselves by gathering, hunting, and fishing—in the Northwest especially of the salmon that returned annually in unimaginable numbers.

Tying together this splay of cultures and economies was an intricate and well-trafficked trade network. Goods from across the continent and beyond passed through major trading centers and annual rendezvous into a webbing that ultimately reached the remotest villages. Men along the eastern Great Lakes wore necklaces of grizzly claws from the far West, while others on the upper Rio Grande listened to music from flutes fashioned from the leg bones of Gulf coastal whooping cranes.

The first Europeans, then, encountered a land far more culturally varied than the one they had left. They would only gradually realize that variety, however. Indians were described as simple, childlike, and innocent but also savage, dangerous, godless, and debased. American Indians' impressions of Europeans are much harder to determine, but natives also misunderstood much of what they saw. Certainly they underestimated the forces about to be unleashed and the changes that would follow.

Indians often were first impressed by what they might gain from the newcomers. The most immediate effects, however, came from the “great things” changing their daily lives. Metal goods ranked high among them. Iron pots and axe heads, a point for a lance or arrow, and something as simple as a metal awl to replace a sharpened piece of bone to punch a hole in an animal hide—these were near miraculous advances that eased the labors and heightened the comforts of Native peoples. Such items coursed through the long-established trading network linking coast to coast and the Arctic to tropical rainforests. This initial European impact, the vigorous spout of life-transforming goods, preceded the Europeans themselves into much of the interior. Impressions of the newcomers traveled with the pots and spearpoints.

With a few isolated exceptions, Indian peoples in what is today the United States were still firmly in command of their world in 1620. They vastly outnumbered Europeans. In many ways they had benefited from goods Europeans offered, and they were increasingly savvy to the newcomers' ways and how to deal with them to their advantage. By then, however, their vulnerabilities to the new arrivals were clear. In time those vulnerabilities would undermine their independence, cripple their economies and threaten their cultures and even their very existence.

The greatest threat came from diseases—smallpox, typhus, influenza, measles, malaria, and others. With no earlier exposure, Indians had little resistance to them, and the toll was horrific. Pathogens brought by de Soto's expedition apparently swept away vast numbers of southeastern natives and led to the abandonment of many cities described by the invaders. The terrible losses from diseases were followed by economic disruption, which brought hunger, social disarray, and further deaths. Like trade goods, epidemics often moved in advance of Europeans themselves. Traders, fishermen and privateers infected Indians along the North Atlantic coast on the eve of the first colonies. Plymouth was founded on the ruins of a Wampanoag village abandoned after a pestilence, possibly typhus, had swept away its peoples in 1616–1617. More than fifty New England settlements rose from other devastated villages. Diseases would move in waves across the continent, eventually reducing the overall Indian population by 80 percent or more.

Europeans brought domesticated animals that Indians had never known. Some were welcomed. Especially in the far West after 1680, horses would revolutionize Native life. Initially, however, horses

were hugely helpful in subduing Indians and in maintaining European settlements. Animals introduced diseases—de Soto's herds of pigs may have carried dangerous contagions—and pigs, cattle, horses, sheep and goats threatened Indian economies by destroying their crops and competing with game animals for forage. The effects of Europe's technology, like its animals, cut both ways. While trade goods offered great advantages, the more Indians used them, the more reliant on them they became, and thus the more leverage Europeans had in economic exchanges. As the newcomers' numbers grew and Indians were less able to supply what they wanted, that disparity would prove deeply troubling.

The greatest threats to Indian peoples in 1620 were so fundamental they are easy to miss. Europe held far more people than did North America—and in fact the Indian population was shrinking due to epidemics. European nations could focus resources and power against Native American divided into hundreds of different societies. European nations were highly motivated to invade and exploit a continent brimming with resources, and they looked upon its natives not as partners but as people to convert or to conquer. The Indians' firm command of what is now the United States was not to last. By 1820 they had lost control of land east of the Mississippi River, and a mere sixty years later the descendants of those newcomers perched so precariously on the Atlantic in 1620 dominated the continent all the way to the Pacific. The ways of life of all American Indian peoples were under siege.

Elliott West is Alumni Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Arkansas. He is the author of, among other books, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (1998), *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (1995), and, most recently, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (2009).