

“From Sea to Shining Sea”:
The Conflict Over the Fort Laramie Treaties that Compromised American Values

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Group Performance

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Last summer, members of our team spent several weeks living on the Rosebud, Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River reservations — three of the most impoverished areas in the United States, where the average life expectancy is 47 and the unemployment rate is 85-95%. This opportunity provided us with first hand experience of the desperate life conditions of the Sioux Nation (Lakota) people. We asked ourselves, “Why?” and “How did this happen?” In researching the answer to these questions, we discovered that the current plight of the Lakota people is the direct result of the 19th Century conflicts over natural resources between the U.S. Government and Sioux Nation that compromised, and continues to compromise the American values of equality, democracy and the Rule of Law.

We began our research by studying secondary sources, especially books and scholarly articles. We also interviewed Lakota tribespeople, young and old. After deciding on our thesis statement, we began to investigate pertinent primary sources. Museum exhibitions and archives in South Dakota, Connecticut, New York and Washington DC, including important “Ledger Drawing” exhibitions (American Indians’ primary record source), the National Archives, and the database “Chronicling America” (Library of Congress), provided us with a deeper understanding of the resource conflicts and perspectives contributing to the Plains Wars. Perhaps our favorite resource was our visit to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., where the current “Nation to Nation” exhibit features key treaties, articles, and first person accounts

from both sides of the Plains Wars conflict and where we acquired the indispensable secondary source American Indians and the Law by N. Bruce Duthu.

In researching and discussing our topic together, it became quickly apparent that the performance category was the natural and best choice for our team and subject. All members of our team have strong theater backgrounds, and we intuitively felt that theater was the ideal platform for effectively conveying the human face of this complex relationship between the U.S. and Indian Nations, the individual voices, intense conditions and sweeping perspectives (Manifest Destiny) that contributed to the Plains Wars. We believe that theater is the ideal platform for communicating the many and varying viewpoints in the long history of debate over American Indian rights that culminated in wars throughout the 19th Century.

Our project strongly relates to the theme, “Conflict and Compromise in History.” The 19th Century Plains Wars between the American Indians and U.S. Government, as exemplified in the language (and violations) of the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868, compromised American values. It is a conflict and compromise that continues today. The living conditions and resources of the Lakota people continue to be jeopardized. Last year, in direct violation of the Treaty of 1868, and in face of pointed admonition by the United Nations, the Dakota Access Pipeline was completed; it runs directly through the Lakota tribes’ primary water source and sacred burial grounds. Conflict over natural resources continues to compromise American values of equality, democracy and interpretation of the Rule of Law.