

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY & CULTURE

These questions are meant to:

- ✧ *deepen our understanding of the American Indian experience, and / or*
- ✧ *apply lessons we learned from the American Indian experience to other circumstances*

The American Indian Experience:

What are some of the challenges that American Indians have faced with the coming of European civilization?

What methods did the U.S. Government use to subdue and control American Indians?

Discuss the validity of this sequence: “Contact—Misunderstanding—European Incursion—Tribal Crisis—Violence—Displacement—Confinement—Forced Assimilation.”

Was there ever a possibility that the Native Peoples could have “won”? If so, what form could this victory have taken? If not, why not?

Do whites consider themselves to be culturally superior to indigenous peoples? If so, how does it affect the majority view of Native culture, land title, religion, and “inalienable rights”? How has this changed over time?

Traditional Culture and Values:

What role did the grandparents have in teaching the young children? To what extent were games and sports part of an Indian child’s education?

What qualities were the most highly admired in traditional American Indian men? What about the women? What traditional values are common to both Native women and men?

How did the traditional values of the American Indians help them to overcome the challenges of the past four centuries?

How and why is the traditional Native attitude toward wealth and material possessions different from today’s prevailing values?

What values do you share with traditional American Indians?

Would you trade places with a Plains Indian born in the late 1700s? Why or why not?

Challenges:

What is a reservation: a sanctuary, a trap, or both? How has this changed over time? Discuss.

Consider the validity of the stereotype that today’s reservation culture approves of the excessive use of intoxicants, including alcohol and drugs.

If you were a tribal council member, would you vote to allow casino gambling on your reservation? Would your opinion change if your reservation was far from a metropolitan area and not on a major highway?

What are the largest challenges on Indian reservations today?

Has the U.S. Government adequately compensated American Indians for four centuries of injustice? If not, consider what other actions might be possible or appropriate.

The Environment and Natural Resources:

How and why is the traditional Native attitude toward nature and the environment different from today's prevailing values?

Will our descendants in "the 7th generation" to come ask, "Why did our forebears in the 20th and 21st centuries waste non-renewable natural resources?" Discuss.

The U.S. Government failed to recognize the rights of the American Indians for four hundred years, in part because it wanted to control their natural resources. The governments of industrialized nations will struggle over the next century to control the earth's shrinking natural resources.

- ✦ In what ways are these two situations similar to each other? In what ways are they different?
- ✦ Will history repeat itself by seeing those with military strength oppress those who are weaker?

Government / Democracy:

Why did Plato and James Madison, a Founding Father, warn that democracy can become a "tyranny of the majority"?

Do the short-term wishes of the voting majority oblige elected officials to pass problems on to future generations? Consider this question in the context of current U.S. policy for:

- ✦ excessive national debt
- ✦ environmental protection, including preservation of non-renewable natural resources

Consider the consequences of living under the Iroquois Constitution, where only women could vote and only men could sit in the council.

Does the Iroquois system of government provide checks and balances that force elected officials to give more consideration to the needs of future generations?

What ethical obligations does a government owe to its indigenous peoples? What ethical obligations do industrialized nations owe to underdeveloped nations that are rich in natural resources?

- ✦ In what ways are these two questions similar to each other? In what ways are they different?

Our Changing World:

Today there is no one ethnic majority in our two most populous states—California and Texas. Within 35 years there will most likely be no one ethnic majority in the U.S.

- ✦ Will we experience an assimilation of races and religions into a single "melting pot", or will our society become a "cultural mosaic" with distinct ethnic and religious differences, or both?

Does American Indian history and culture teach us lessons that can help reduce the enormous potential for ethnic and religious conflict in today's world? Discuss.

To what extent is each of us living between two worlds if we are trying to maintain traditional values in our daily lives?

*These questions are based on reading *Living in Two Worlds: The American Indian Experience*
edited by Michael Oren Fitzgerald, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2010*

WWW.WORLDWISDOM.COM

These questions were prepared with the help of a number of individuals, especially Richard Battersby and Richard Davies at Culver Academies, Mark Bell at St. Paul's School, and Judith Antell at the University of Wyoming.