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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume IV: Resistance from Aristotle to Star Wars

Modern Indigenous American protests, from American Indian Movement to the Dakota Access Pipeline

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Intro/Rationale

The objective of this curriculum unit is for my students to comprehend how protests evolved in America and how these protests apply to Navajo/Indigenous students' situations today.

Given the current political climate in America and its polarization, this offers a good topic to bring light to protests in America. The United States is abundant in national protests in its history, from the colonial era to mining of the early 1900s to the antiwar protests of Vietnam to the No Kings protests in 2026. With Native peoples, this initial protest also goes back to the Indian Wars. Now they have national issues confronting them with the environment and even Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They will be able to recognize and put together a thought process of confronting such issues.

What my predominantly Navajo student body will learn is that protest is not just for mainstream Americans. It is common among all peoples and it is even protected in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Yet this unit curriculum will focus on Native protests.

Demographics

I teach US History and Advanced Placement US History (APUSH) to sophomores at Window Rock High School in Fort Defiance, Arizona. It is part of the Navajo Nation, with a student population of 557. Out of this number, 99% are Navajo with the remaining one percent being Hispanic and Caucasian. My classes are made up of an average of 120 students.

One section is APUSH, with about 20-28 students. Four sections make up the general US History courses. One section tends to 'float' as an enrichment class or career planning class, outside the scope of history/social studies. It is also a high poverty area with all students eligible for free breakfasts and lunches.

Reading and writing are a focal point within the Window Rock Unified School District (WRUSD). Reading

scores are low, averaging 7th -grade level. Yet, the high school continues to make gains and was rated an “A” school by the state of Arizona in 2025. It’s only one of two schools on the Navajo Nation with this distinction and is above the local border-town schools just off the reservation boundaries. This curriculum unit would pertain to any non-Navajo student as well.

Many students do tend to go on to college, with many in state at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff or Arizona State University in Tempe. Our school also is sports driven with many competing at the next level in volleyball, basketball, cross country and wrestling. There tends to be that extra drive to do more academically.

Content

Teach/Re-teach prerequisite history- (I’ll interchange the words Native, Native American, and Indian, and American Indian)

Ask, When Did the Indian Wars Begin? Wait for the responses and guide the answers/discussion to the arrival of Europeans to the Caribbean.

Early Resistance- Use maps to enhance the information given. These conflicts began right upon the arrival of Europeans in 1492. Columbus captured “...550 souls”[1] upon his second voyage into the Caribbean, referring to the capture and enslavement of Natives he encountered. Other factors also took their toll on the Taino, Arawak, and Carib with the introduction of diseases, slavery, and famine. Some Indians were sent back to Spain as slaves, many did not survive the journey. Slaughter would follow soon afterward for the Native peoples who resisted on newly colonized lands. This point of slaughter would often accompany war which spread through the Caribbean, Mexico and South America.

Spanish exploration and conquest of the continental United States began in the early 1500s in the American Southwest and the Floridian Peninsula. Natives fought against (and alongside) various European empires like Spain, France, The Netherlands, England, and Russia as well as Mexico and of course the United States.

Although warfare was the most common form of resistance among most Native peoples, there were rarer instances of Native peoples trying to fight for their rights in a legal sense. In 1549, Catalina de Velasco petitioned her right for freedom as a slave in Spain[2] and also the case of the Cherokee taking their case to the Supreme Court over disputed land in Georgie in 1832. Collectively, to resist in this manner was not prevalent so the alternative was to take up arms.

Indian wars- These wars between Native nations and that of the United States took place virtually everywhere in the continental U.S., with the beginning in 1776 (and before) with the end date for most American historians with the massacre of Lakota at Wounded Knee, South Dakota on December 30, 1890.

(Use your own tribe’s information or that of a local nations)- For the Navajo, their war with Americans ended with a final peace treaty 22 years earlier on June 1, 1868 in Fort Sumner, NM.

While no one will ever know the full number of American Indians that died during these various conflicts between Native nations and the United States, the aftereffects were evident with the loss of life, lands, and

culture. Some nations were wiped out into extinction as well. Warfare, disease/sickness, starvation and exposure were often the causes of mass deaths.

There were other instances of Native nations that fit outside of the normal circumstances by being powerful, adopting Southern societal ways of life, or collaborating with non-Indians. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) were a large force to be reckoned with; they were seen as a threat to the English and later the Americans. They were done away with militarily at the start of the USA's infancy. Of all six tribes making up the confederacy, many were killed in war, or by disease and displaced to lands in Canada or Oklahoma. Those who remained in the Northeast had to settle for much smaller tracts of land. In the South, the Cherokee adopted the ways of white society with the acceptance of schools for Cherokee children, adoption of Christianity, business ventures, writing and even keeping African slaves. Their case went before the Supreme Court and they won in the case of *Worcester v. Georgia* because of Southerners encroaching on their lands. President Andrew Jackson refused to honor the SC ruling because he believed in acquiring all Native lands for the growing America. Most of the Cherokee nation was forcibly removed from ancestral lands in the South to Oklahoma. The Crow and Pawnee joined the US Army as scouts, mainly against their Lakota enemies. They, too, met the same fate with loss of land or relocation. Some Chiricahua Apaches did the same against their own tribe, thinking it was a means of surviving in Arizona. These Apache scouts were arrested and imprisoned alongside those they fought against. The Chiricahua Apache was forever exiled from Arizona in 1886. Their descendants now live in Oklahoma or New Mexico. Their current reservation lands in NM are not their traditional lands along the Arizona and New Mexico border. These different paths of these various groups across the nation led to the same outcome.

Ending questions: Why did these methods of resistance not work? What did they have in common? What were their differences?

Resistance changes in the 20th Century. Why didn't Indians fight for their rights with arms? What changed?

There were other forms of resistance which were more lawful and helped solidify Native progression in times of social inequality. Hopi and Navajo kept their children from attending government boarding schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Native Veterans from World War I were able to help secure US citizenship and their counterparts from World War II helped in establishing voting rights. These were also non-violent.

The 1960s

The decade in American history with a rising tide of resistance among many minorities in America was undoubtedly the 1960s. African Americans led the way with the largest of movements with Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers and others. Latinos also had their movements with Dolores Huerta and the Chicano Movement. American Indians would follow in that late 1960s.

Native peoples were faced with discrimination themselves. Having suffrage and citizenship rather later was not a quick fix. Some common practices Natives faced after World War II which Indians were "...voter suppression, racially restrictive housing covenants, and prohibitions against receiving state and welfare benefits. Native children were denied entrance to well-funded white schools. Businesses with signs reading, 'No Indians and Dogs Allowed' dotted the Western landscape." [3]

Forced attendance of government boarding schools were ongoing and Indian termination was still an issue and probably the most pressing issue facing all Native peoples in the United States. Treaties such as Treaty of Fort Laramie and Navajo Treaty of 1868 (both written a month apart and overseen by the same military and

civilian administrators, have stipulations that northern plains tribes and the Navajo of the Southwest had to adhere to their respective treaties that said they must, "...pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school, and it is hereby made the duty of the Agent for said Indians, to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with; and the United States agrees that for every thirty children between said ages, who can be induced or compelled to attend school, a house shall be provided; and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education." [4] The same stipulation is found in both treaties and it read exactly the same for two tribal groups hundreds of miles apart. [5] This shows it was as a common tactic used by the US government to break down the resistance of American Indians by focusing on their children.

The government boarding school system was the brainchild of a former US Army officer in the late 1800s. The first and most infamous of these institutions was in Carlisle, PA and became known as the Carlisle Indian School. The process began with the Native children being taken as young as 4 years of age. They would remain at these schools until the average age of 18-20 years. There was no going home on summer or winter breaks, even in emergencies. Language and culture were often forgotten in those lost years. Sometimes the student never returned, as they expired from sickness at the school site, died from abuse, or succumbed to exposure while running away. The schools were run in a military manner, with formations, marching, and similar discipline. These schools would dot the United States with more than 300 boarding schools. While less extreme or volatile in the last of their popular years, most schools closed by the 1980s. In the one hundred years of its' main operation, the schools had accomplished what they were meant for, taking culture and making Native languages mostly forgotten.

It was within this latter generation that these issues which were obstacles came to light with pushback from the younger Native generation.

While there were various individuals and factions that protested, American Indian Movement (AIM) will be the focus in this curriculum unit. Its founding and tactics were comparable to that of other contemporaries of that era. Founded by Dennis Banks, Russell Means and the Bellecourt brothers, Clyde and Vernon in 1968, this grassroots organization was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They formed to combat the social issues aforementioned which affected most American Indigenous peoples, especially in the urban areas. Means was Oglala Lakota and his four companions were Ojibwe. This group would include many others from other Native tribes too. They were not limited to only peaceful means; they could be and were confrontational to authority as well.

Red Power was another organization which other Indians flocked to. They were not as confrontational and forbade the use of weapons or violence at their demonstrations. One of their first renowned activities, which captured the attention of many Americans, was the occupation of Alcatraz Island off the coast of San Francisco. Used as a famous federal maximum-security prison, it was closed in 1963 due to humanitarian issues. Some Native students at UC-Berkeley moved on to occupy the island via provisions in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. [6] Mohawk activist, Richard Oakes, was a key figure in the initial takeover of Alcatraz. AIM members were actually ordered to leave by Oakes when they tried to join due to conflicting ideologies. The Red Power movement was further enlightened and pushed forward by Lakota writer Vine Deloria's book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, which was published in 1969.

Despite their differences, both groups would be tangled with violence, not unlike the fates of MLK and Malcolm X who were both murdered and had opposite resistance tactics. Richard Oakes was shot and killed in 1973 in a confrontation with Michael Morgan. Morgan was acquitted. [7] Due to Morgan being white, racial hatred was

suspected but not proved.

Wounded Knee Occupation

The actions of AIM were more widely known and documented. Although their initial actions were centered in Minneapolis, they were drawn to events which unfolded on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota in 1973. Home to the Oglala Lakota nation, it was governed by tribal chairman Dick Wilson. Corruption and scandal were the normal functions of his political rule. Outright murder was also common among the residents of Pine Ridge. Political opponents were beaten and jailed in addition to being killed. At that time, the reservation was soaring to the top of having the highest rate of murder per capita in the United States.[8]

The Oglala people were torn between being progressive and remaining traditional. Chairman Wilson's time in office was tyrannical and AIM support for the traditional Lakota came to a head in 1973 when AIM took over the town of Wounded Knee, SD. This drew outside attention with national news as it turned violent. Three members of AIM were killed by the FBI during the 71-day occupation, and another had an unknown cause of death. This was also the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, the official end of the Indian Wars.

Along with the issues on Pine Ridge, there was also inherent racism in nearby "border towns" with non-Indians. A Lakota man was killed by a white man in nearby Custer, SD. Little to nothing was done and AIM members went to the courthouse in Custer, with fighting breaking out between AIM and police.

Negotiations broke down as the federal government became preoccupied with national and international issues like the Watergate Scandal and the US withdrawal from South Vietnam. Because there was no resolve of these issues another incident would happen in 1975. The AIM leadership was splintered with the trials and incarceration of its primary leaders.

Pine Ridge Incident

Tensions continued to run high on Pine Ridge. There was still violence in everyday life and the US government turned a blind eye to the actions of still-chairman, Dick Wilson. He had what would basically be a private army called GOONS, Guardians Of the Oglala Nation, who did his bidding against his political opponents. Murder rates were at their highest. This resulted in the deaths of two FBI agents and one AIM member.

Three AIM members were arrested. Two were acquitted and one, Leonard Peltier, was convicted. Peltier would serve 30 years in federal prison, while always maintaining his innocence. His sentence was commuted to house arrest in 2025 in a last official act by President Joe Biden.

Both incidents in 1973 and 1975 resulted in violence from both sides, whether it was fistfights or firefights. Deaths were the most notable results.

Questions for discussion:

1. What were the issues you found that needed to be addressed in both events?
2. Were the protests effective in changing anything?
3. How were Navajos involved? What similar events happened with Navajos at that time period? Research the events to conclude-
 - a. Larry Casuse (Navajo), killed while pushing forth actions similar to the goals of Red Power and AIM, was killed by police in 1973.[9]
 - b. Norman Brown (Navajo) was questioned by the FBI in 1975 about his involvement at Oglala.

4. How were typical protests to be carried out? How were they typically dealt with by authority?

No DAPL

In 2015, plans were altered to run the Dakota Access Pipeline from north of Bismark, ND to its south. This new route was just north of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in nearby South Dakota. Its biggest concern was that it would go under the Missouri River, a major water source for Native Lakota peoples to the south. This also violated the earlier Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851.

The #NoDAPL movement began in 2016. No Dakota Access Pipeline's movement began within the bounds of social media. Headlined by younger people within the various Sioux (Lakota and Dakota) they were soon joined by thousands of supporters from across the United States. This pan-Indian effort had not been seen in over forty years. Ironically, it took place not too far from the Pine Ridge reservation and its events in the early 1970s. Some celebrities joined in too like Shailene Woodley and Colin Kaepernick. Non-Indians also took part, such as white farmers downriver and military veterans.

The NoDAPL protesters, also called Water Protectors, took the lessons learned from their predecessors in the 70s to heart and used no violence. Despite that protocol, the oil company hired private security to keep Water Protectors off commandeered land and to push off these lands. Tear gas and attack dogs gave way to ultra sonic (extremely loud sound) weapons and water cannons used in freezing temperatures.[10]

Some of the leaders of the Water Protectors were subsequently arrested and tried. Although most were acquitted or had reduced charges before sentencing, a handful did receive prison sentences. Red Fawn Fallis, Michael Foster, Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya all received various sentences.

Questions for discussion

1. What were similarities of the protests in the 1970s to that of 2016? What were their differences? If the question falls on disinterested students, ask why we can't now fight like we did prior to 1890.
2. Did they achieve what they set out to do as far as accomplishing their goals?
3. Were the protests worth the price some individuals paid?

Project -Native American Resistance

There are many hot and pressing issues today in America that affect Indigenous peoples. Ask the students what they are and most likely it will be Immigrations & Customs Enforcement (ICE) and their tactics or environmental issues. There could be more if the students stretch their minds and think about what is important to them.

Have students pick one topic: (guide them to come up with something similar to these)

1. ICE abducting and using violence on US citizens, leading to abductions of American Indians too.
2. Uranium/coal mining on the Navajo Nation.
3. Water Rights on Navajo Nation.
4. Uranium waste transported through Navajo roads.
5. Mystery wells on Navajo lands.
6. Limitation of voting rights, such as elimination of early ballots or reduction in polling places.
7. The war in Iran.

The students may brainstorm other topics of interest along these lines. Research, what is the problem? And what is the solution? How can this issue be rectified? Answers could be: 'Letters to the Editor' of a local newspaper, take to social media, addressing said issue to politician such as tribal representative, state senators, or congress persons. They could even organize protests.

Reading activity which talks about student activism would be provided, *The Forgotten History of High School Student Activism*.^[11]

Address the guidelines of bringing the issues up front. What are appropriate tactics to follow? (THIS PART WILL BE EXPANDED MORE)

1. Insert guidelines for writing a letter to the editor.
2. Insert guidelines for appropriate use of social media (YouTube, Instagram, FaceBook, etc.)
3. Insert guideline for writing letter to political representative.
4. Insert guidelines/rules if organizing a demonstration or protest.

Another possible activity could be a mock trial.

Appendix

Navajo Department of Education

Taken from 9th / 10th grade history

Standard- I will understand historical/cultural events, people and symbols that influence my family.

Concept 1-I will present how Dine people and events have influenced the development of Dine communities and culture to the present day.

PO2- I will research Dine leaders' accomplishments and impacts on Dine History.

PO3- I will research and analyze Dine historical events.

Concept 3- I will analyze and interpret major historical events of Dine and neighboring tribes.

PO2- I will research how American government affected the Dine way of life and that of surrounding tribes.

PO3- I will research and analyze the Treaty of 1868.^[12]

Arizona State Standards History

DISCIPLINARY SKILLS AND PROCESSES

Chronological reasoning requires understanding processes of change and continuity over time, which means assessing similarities and differences between historical periods and between the past and present.

- HS.SP1.1 Evaluate how events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and

place as well as broader contexts.

- HS.SP1.2 Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- HS.SP1.3 Evaluate the significance of past events as they relate to their own lives and the world.
- HS.SP1.4 Use compelling questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

Thinking within the discipline involves the ability to identify, compare, and evaluate multiple perspectives about a given event to draw conclusions since there are multiple points of view about events and issues.

- HS.SP2.1 Analyze how contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.
- HS.SP2.2 Analyze the ways in which perspective shapes recorded history.

HISTORY

The development of civilizations, societies, cultures, and innovations have influenced history and continue to impact the modern world.

- HS.H1.1 Explain the process of state-building, expansion, and dissolution.
- HS.H1.2 Explain and compare how social, cultural, and environmental factors influenced state-building, expansion, and dissolution.
- HS.H1.3 Evaluate the consequences that resulted from civilizational and cultural interactions.
- HS.H1.4 Analyze the impact of cultural diffusion.
- HS.H1.5 Explain how religions and belief systems have affected the origins of societies.
- HS.H1.6 Analyze the relationship among different regional, social, ethnic, and racial groups and explain how these groups' experiences have related to national identities.
- HS.H1.7 Analyze how technological innovation and trade has affected economic development and transformed societies.

Cycles of conflict and cooperation have shaped relations among people, places, and environments.

- HS.H2.1 Explain multiple causes of conflict.
- HS.H2.2 Analyze approaches to conflict management and resolution.
- HS.H2.3 Evaluate the short- and long- term impacts of conflicts and their resolutions

Economic, political, and religious ideas and institutions have influenced history and continue to shape the modern world.

- HS.H3.1 Analyze how societies, leaders, institutions, and organizations respond to societal needs and changes.
- HS.H3.2 Analyze how ideologies, religion, and belief systems have influenced economic, political, and social institutions over time.
- HS.H3.3 Compare the ways in which economic philosophies influenced political, economic, and social developments.
- HS.H3.4 Evaluate how societies have balanced individual freedoms, responsibilities, and human dignity versus the common good.

Patterns of social and political interactions have shaped people, places, and events throughout history and continue to shape the modern world.

- HS.H4.1 Examine how historically marginalized groups have affected change on political and social institutions.
- HS.H4.2 Explain how artistic, philosophical, and scientific ideas have developed and shaped society and institutions.
- HS.H4.3 Examine how access to information and technology has been used to influence society.
- HS.H4.4 Examine how a diverse society can be a force for unity and/or disunity.[13]

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Notes

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