

Sitting Bull (1882)

After decades of relentless pursuit and attacks by federal troops and settlers, most Native American tribes in the American West were reduced to life on reservations. In this account, the Sioux Chief Sitting Bull reflected on the meaning of freedom for his people. Why did he consider the government-organized reservation system and schools to be forms of enslavement?

SITTING BULL, TATANKA YOTANKA (Hunkpapa Sioux)

"The life my people want is a life of freedom" (c. 1882)

A journalist visited Sitting Bull (c. 1830-1890), among his braves, two wives and several children, in his tepee while the chief, after his surrender, was a prisoner of war at Fort Randall in 1881-1883. These are the remarks that Sitting Bull made to him.

I have lived a long time, and I have seen a great deal, and I have always had a reason for everything I have done. Every act of my life has had an object in view, and no man can say that I have neglected facts or failed to think.

I am one of the last chiefs of the independent Sioux nation, and the place I hold among my people was held by my ancestors before me. If I had no place in the world, I would not be here, and the fact of my existence entitles me to exercise any influence I possess. I am satisfied that I was brought into this life for a purpose; otherwise, why am I here?

This land belongs to us, for the Great Spirit gave it to us when he put us here. We were free to come and go, and to live in our own way. But white men, who belong to another land, have come upon us, and are forcing us to live according to their ideas. That is an injustice; we have never dreamed of making white men live as we live.

White men like to dig in the ground for their food. My people prefer to hunt the buffalo as their fathers did. White men like to stay in one place. My people want to move their tepees here and there to the different hunting grounds. The life of white men is slavery. They are prisoners in towns or farms. The life my people want is a life of freedom. I have seen nothing that a white man has, houses or railways or clothing or food, that is as good as the right to move in the open country, and live in our own fashion. Why has our blood been shed by your soldiers?

[Sitting Bull drew a square on the ground with his thumb nail. The Indians craned their necks to see what he was doing.]

There! Your soldiers made a mark like that in our country, and said that we must live there. They fed us well, and sent their doctors to heal our sick. They said that we should live without having to work. But they told us that we must go only so far in this direction, and only so far in that direction. They gave us meat, but they took away our liberty. The white men had many things that we wanted, but we could see that they did not have the one thing we liked best,--freedom. I

would rather live in a tepee and go without meat when game is scarce than give up my privileges as a free Indian, even though I could have all that white men have. We marched across the lines of our reservation, and the soldiers followed us. They attacked our village, and we killed them all. What would you do if your home was attacked? You would stand up like a brave man and defend it. That is our story. I have spoken.

SOURCE: James Creelman. *On the Great Highway. The Wanderings and Adventures of a Special Correspondent*. Boston: Lothrop Publishing Co., 1901. 299-302.