“Kill the Indian…Save the Man”:

Motives for the Assimilation of the Sioux and Sioux Responses to “Americanization”

The Sioux people faced upheaval in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following defeat in the Great Sioux War of 1876-1877, the Sioux faced a concerted attempt by the federal government and private forces to assimilate them into mainstream American culture. Building upon decades of conflict, the federal government sought to dismantle Sioux political, economic, and social systems. The government hoped that the changes would result in the breakup of Sioux tribes. The federal government sought to use education as the primary method of achieving these goals, and worked tirelessly for several decades to convert the Sioux to contemporary American ideals of individualism, Christianity, and yeoman agriculture. Education and Christianity played a dual role, with educators, both those hired by the government and missionary educators, working to ingrain Christian principles in Sioux youth. Both federal officials and individual reform-minded citizens took part in the assimilation movement. However, the federal government often proved more motivated by economic concerns, especially once rumors of gold in the Black Hills materialized, while the reformers were more motivated by humanitarian concerns. Ultimately, the assimilation movement did not lead to the full assimilation of the Sioux, although some Sioux altered their activities and attitudes more than other Sioux did. However, the Sioux did lose large amounts of their land to allotment, a policy promulgated in the Dawes Act of 1887 that provided for the division of Sioux land into individual plots. Although the assimilation movement failed to destroy the tribal organization of the Sioux, the movement created many challenges for Sioux culture and led to massive losses of Sioux land. The massive
losses in land, combined with cultural turmoil following decades of American influence, laid the framework for the prevalence of poverty that still exists among the Sioux.