Objectives:

- Define Manifest Destiny.
- Research other situations in the world where populations have lost homelands due to expansion of a more dominant group.
- Identify cultural stereotypes and their negative effects.
- Create strategies for ensuring harmony between disparate groups sharing the same geographic area.

The American media, movies, and television programs, artists and some historians paint a romantic portrait of the 19th century period of U.S. territorial expansion. It was the era of Manifest Destiny, when pioneers tamed the “wild west” and settlers found new lives on new frontiers. Yet, as cultural scholarship expands, a different perspective of that time is emerging. John Mohawk, a Seneca and Professor of American Studies at the State University College of New York at Buffalo, sheds a different light on 19th Century America.

I think that one of the things that happens in the process of conquest, the people of military power who conquer another people, is that, it stimulates a certain pattern of thought. It’s a very ethnocentric, European ideology, the ideology of the ideal. The Americans are now thinking that they are at the top of, at the forefront of the project of civilization. And the only thing that counts as legitimate are those things that contribute to its idea of progress. And of course Indians are not perceived to be civilized, or part of the story of progress. They were an obstacle, you had to clear them away, then you had progress.

So what they called the movement west was, Manifest Destiny. Now there was a utopian ideology if ever there was one. What’s underlying that is the idea that God, or some power had designated this group of people to sweep across the continent. It’s their destiny to do this, and anything that stands in their way, like the idea that other people already own this land, have their own societies, in order to do it, you have to commit crimes against humanity. In other words, you feel you are justified in killing in order to carry out what must be what God, or whatever you want to call it, has ordained.

John Mohawk, Ph. D.
Seneca, Professor of American Studies
SUNY Buffalo

Many in 19th Century America believed that Indians were of an “inferior” race and that the only way they could survive was through assimilation. Federal programs combined with mainstream efforts pressured American Indians to become “humanized, civilized and Christianized,” to adopt the behaviors, dress and beliefs of white society. It was during this same time period that the stereotypical image of the “Noble Savage” emerged. Romantic and flawed portraits of American Indians were popularized in literature, music, sculptures, paintings and in the stone carvings in government buildings. Many of those stereotypes endure in today’s society despite the efforts of Native American communities.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

Elementary Level

- SMALL SPACE EXERCISE
  We generally study historical events through a combination of fact-finding or research, and reading. Actually sharing a similar experience can bring history to life for us. Try this simple experiential exercise that will help students understand the practical and emotional impact of encroachment and land loss on a group of people.

  Spread a blanket or any large cloth on the floor and have 6 to 8 students stand on it. Now, fold the blanket in half, then in half again, each time making the students press closer to one another on the smaller cloth. Ask
them how they feel: are they pushing against each other or becoming anxious? Are some of these feelings similar in any way to the American Indian experience?

**STEREOTYPE ACTIVITY**

Look through a variety of alphabet books both from the past and the present. Find the letter ‘I’. What symbol does the author use to describe the letter “I”? In how many books is the example for the letter “I” an American Indian? Is the picture of the American Indian truly representative of the entire group? Is the picture an unfair generalization? Do they find other instances where a group of people is used to define a letter in the English alphabet? Is this group depicted in a positive way, or are any subtle negative messages given?

**Elementary -- Middle School Level**

**RESEARCH ON STEREOTYPES**

Research skills and cultural awareness are strengthened through the following simple exercise: Find examples of American Indian stereotypes by searching the Web, books, popular or historical literature, music and all types of media (television, movies, cartoons, etc.) Why do you think American Indians would find the images offensive? How do you feel the images are incorrect?

**Middle School Level**

**NEWCOMERS ACTIVITY**

Imagine a situation where a large group of newcomers arrives in a community like your own. The newcomers bring with them different ways of thinking and different technologies. They are competing for scarce jobs and space in housing, schools and recreation areas.

Divide the class into groups: some will role play members of the existing community, others the newcomers. Provide each group with props that illustrate different attitudes or technologies. Ask members in each group to express fears they might have toward the members in the other group. Create situations where the two groups might clash. What actions would they take to promote harmony or to ensure equality? Ask students if they feel the government was right or wrong to forcibly move Indians to make room for white settlers?

**Middle -- High School Levels**

**WESTWARD EXPANSION**

Review the introduction to Manifest Destiny at [http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/mainframe.html](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/mainframe.html)

What were the reasons for US westward expansion in the 19th century? Discuss how the attitude(s) expressed in Manifest Destiny apply to national and world events in the 20th century?

**LOSS OF HOMELANDS**

Review the excerpt from the interview with John Mohawk where he discusses Manifest Destiny. Many people throughout history, such as the Native Americans, have lost their homelands due to the encroachment of others. Using current news magazines or newspapers, what sorts of actions do you see people taking in other parts of the world in similar situations? Is it clear who is right and who is wrong?

**ON-LINE RESOURCES**

Manifest Destiny, an introduction  (follow the link under Dialogues)
[http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/mainframe.html](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/mainframe.html)