

Chief Joseph: “I Will Fight No More” Surrender Speech (1877) & Plea for Justice (1879)

The Nez Percé (pronounced “nez PURS”) occupied the plateau regions of the Northwest—western Idaho and eastern Oregon and Washington. Nez Percé means “pierced nose” in French (pronounced “nay per-SAY”) and refers to an early practice by some tribe members, reported by French fur trappers, of wearing shell ornaments in their noses (there is doubt about whether this tradition actually existed among the Nez Percé). The Nez Percé were skilled in hunting and salmon fishing as well as weaving, and lived a semi-migratory life—traveling as far as Wyoming and Montana for hunting and trade. In 1877, the Nez Percé, led by Chief Joseph, attempted to evade reservation confinement by the United States government.

Joseph’s father (also Joseph) was one of the first Nez Percé converts to Christianity and an active supporter of the tribe’s longstanding peace with whites, even assisting Washington’s territorial governor establish a Nez Percé reservation that stretched from Oregon into Idaho. But in 1863, following the discovery of gold in Nez Percé territory, the federal government took back almost six million acres of this land, restricting the Nez Percé to a reservation in Idaho that was only one tenth its prior size. Feeling personally betrayed, the elder Joseph denounced the United States, destroying both his American flag and Bible as acts of defiance. He steadfastly refused to move his band from the Wallowa Valley and sign the treaty that would make the new reservation boundaries official.

When his father died in 1871, Joseph was elected to succeed him. Joseph staunchly resisted all efforts to force his band onto the small Idaho reservation, and in 1873 a federal order to remove white settlers and let his people remain in the Wallowa Valley made it appear that he might be successful. But the federal government soon reversed itself (again), and in 1877 General Oliver Otis Howard threatened a cavalry attack to force Joseph’s band and other hold-outs onto the reservation. Believing military resistance futile, Joseph reluctantly led his people toward Idaho.

Unfortunately, they never got there. About 20 young Nez Percé warriors, enraged at the loss of their homeland, raided nearby settlements and killed several whites. Immediately, the army began to pursue Joseph’s band and the others who had not moved onto the reservation. Although he opposed war, Joseph nevertheless decided to resist.

What followed was one of the most brilliant military evasions in American history. Even the unsympathetic General William T. Sherman was impressed, stating that “the Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise...[they] fought with almost scientific skill, using advance and rear guards, skirmish lines, and field fortifications.” During a period of just over three months, the band of about 700 (fewer than 200 were warriors) fought 2,000 U.S. soldiers and Indian auxiliaries in four major battles and numerous skirmishes.

In his surrender speech, "I Will Fight No More Forever," Joseph confesses his own exhaustion and offers a list of the hardships that have befallen his people while attempting to escape the U.S. Army. The Nez Percé had traveled over 1,500 miles through Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana, hoping to find refuge with Sitting Bull, the Sioux chief who had earlier brought his people to Canada to escape United States jurisdiction. Joseph delivered the speech on October 5, 1877, after the Battle of the Bear Paw Mountains. Winter had come, and the Nez Percé were suffering from freezing weather, lack of food, and fatigue from the prolonged travel and fighting.



Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before, I have it in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our Chiefs are killed; Looking Glass is dead; Ta Hool Hool Shute is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men [Olikut] is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my Chiefs! I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.

Twenty-five years after fighting his reluctant war with the United States, Chief Joseph was still in exile, longing to return to his beloved Willowa Valley in eastern Oregon. In his last years, Joseph spoke eloquently against the injustice of United States policy toward his people and held out hope that America's promise of freedom and equality might one day be fulfilled for Native Americans as well. Twice he went to Washington, D.C., and met with Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley. Joseph died in 1904, according to his doctor, of a "broken heart." An excerpt of his simple "Plea for Justice" follows.



I am tired of talk that comes to nothing. . . . If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian, he can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow.

All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it. You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented when penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases. If you tie a horse to a stake, do you expect he will grow fat? If you pen an Indian up on a small spot of earth, and compel him to stay there, he will not be contented, nor will he grow and prosper.

I have asked some of the Great White Chiefs where they get their authority to say to the Indian that he shall stay in one place, while he sees white men going where they please. They cannot tell me.

I only ask of the Government to be treated as all other men are treated. If I cannot go to my own home, let me have a home in some country where my people will not die so fast. I would like to go to Bitter Root Valley [in western Montana]. There my people would be healthy; where they are now they are dying. Three have died since I left my camp to come to Washington. . . .

I know that my race must change. We can not hold our own with the white men as we are. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work alike on all men. If the Indian breaks the law, punish by the law. If the white man breaks the law, punish him also.

Let me be a free man—free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself—and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty.

Whenever the white man treats the Indian as they treat each other, then we will have no more wars. We shall all be alike—brothers of one father and one mother, with one sky above us and one country around us, and one government for all. Then the Great Spirit Chief who rules above will smile upon this land, and send rain to wash out the bloody spots made by brothers' hands from the face of the earth. For this time the Indian race are waiting and praying. I hope that no more groans of wounded men and women will ever go to the ear of the Great Spirit Chief above, and that all people may be one people.

- What does Chief Joseph state were the causes of the Indians' distresses?
- What is the main request Chief Joseph asked of white Americans?
- According to Chief Joseph, what must happen to bring peace between whites and Indians?
- How does Chief Joseph respond to the requirement that western Indians live on reservations?
- In this excerpt, does Chief Joseph seem to be speaking for all American Indians? Explain.
- Does Chief Joseph use facts or opinions to support his point? Explain.