



## Treat All Men Alike: Chief Joseph and Respect

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

The Wallowa Valley had been the ancestral home of a band of the Nez Perce for many years before the Lewis and Clark expedition discovered them in 1805. With his men starving and desperate, Lewis described his encounter with this exceptional group of Native Americans, calling them “the most hospitable, honest and sincere people that we have met with in our voyage.” Decades later, under the leadership of Chief Joseph the Elder, the Nez Perce continued to welcome and assist the white visitors who were arriving with increasing frequency. The green valley nestled between mountains in what is now northeastern Oregon was visually stunning, with fish-filled lakes and rivers, and the Nez Perce hoped to share it peacefully with new settlers. In 1855, Chief Joseph and Washington’s territorial governor agreed to establish a large reservation stretching through parts of present-day Washington, Oregon, and Idaho—land that would forever be designated for the Nez Perce.

However, with the discovery of gold in the region, the United States’ government in 1863 reclaimed almost 6 million acres of the reservation. This act left Chief Joseph and his people with some scattered pockets of land in Idaho that amounted to only one-tenth of the land previously set aside for them and did not include the ancestral Wallowa Valley home. To help sweeten the deal, the U.S. promised cash, a hospital, and schools. Some of the Nez Perce people moved to the new smaller reservation, but Chief Joseph called the new treaty invalid and refused to sign it.

#### NARRATIVE

Settlers continued to arrive in the Wallowa Valley, but Chief Joseph refused to force his people to move. The situation was tense when Chief Joseph the Elder died in 1871 and his son, Joseph the Younger, was elected to take his place. In 1873, it seemed that the Nez Perce cause was vindicated when the federal government ordered the white settlers to evacuate and return the land to the Native Americans. However, in 1877 the government reversed the order and General Oliver Howard ordered Chief Joseph the Younger’s band to abandon their homes and move to the reservation. Chief Joseph is said to have responded to the general with an address that focused on respect for human equality. He expressed his disbelief that “the Great Spirit gave one kind of men the right to tell another kind of men what they must do.” Howard threatened a cavalry attack to remove the Wallowa Nez Perce. Joseph sought the counsel of tribal leaders, and decided that they had no feasible chance of successful resistance to U.S. troops. He agreed to begin the journey to Idaho with his people.

## NARRATIVE

However, one of the young men reported to Chief Joseph that he and several other young warriors, furious at the injustice of their situation, had carried out a raid on nearby settlements, killing several settlers. Chief Joseph knew that the reprisals for this raid would be terrible, so he began one of the most remarkable military retreats in U.S. history. For over three months in the summer and fall of 1877, Chief Joseph and several hundred of his followers, fewer than 200 of whom were warriors, outmaneuvered more than 2000 pursuing U.S. soldiers. Their goal was Canada. Along the way, Chief Joseph's band fought General Howard's troops in four major battles and several skirmishes. The Nez Perce stampeded the general's horses and pack train, but they refrained from scalping and murdering civilians, released women captives, and paid for the supplies they needed rather than stealing them. The 1,400 mile march impressed even battle-hardened General William Tecumseh Sherman, who stated 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." Only 40 miles from the Canadian border, Howard's troops cornered the Nez Perce. Chief Joseph's people, who by this time were mostly women, children, and the elderly, were unable to go any further due to starvation and cold.

Chief Joseph's surrender message is well-known and provides a glimpse of the tragedy—and of his character:

"I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. Toohoolhoolzote 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."

The U.S. Army conducted the survivors to a compound in eastern Kansas. However, disease was rampant there, so they were moved to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). Once again, disease decimated their numbers. In 1879, Chief Joseph was allowed to present his case to President Rutherford B. Hayes. The Nez Perce chief declared:

"It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and all the broken promises. There has been too much talking by men who had no right to talk. Too many misinterpretations have been made; too many misunderstandings have come up between the white men and the Indians. 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 the same laws. 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 all rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented

## NARRATIVE

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...Whenever the white man treats the Indian as they treat each other then we shall have no more wars. We shall be all alike -- brothers of one father and mother, with one sky above us and one country around us and one government for all.”

Chief Joseph continued to speak out against the injustices done to Native Americans. Finally, in 1885, his people were allowed to return to the northwest—but not to their beloved Wallowa Valley. Chief Joseph lived for the day when Native Americans would be treated with respect as human beings, permitted to enjoy equality, justice, and government by consent. He died, still in exile, in 1904 at the age of 64.