

Andrew Jackson calls for Indian removal

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY KATHRYN WALBERT AND L. MAREN WOOD

State of the Union address, 1829.

As you read...

JUSTIFYING INDIAN REMOVAL

From 1790 until the 1820s, the U.S. had generally regarded Indians as foreign nations, signing treaties with Indian tribes as they would have done with foreign powers. But some Indian groups resided within existing U.S. states, leading some politicians to question the legality of a sovereign and independent nation existing within one of the states. General and future president Andrew Jackson believed, in the 1820s, that Indians were subjects of the United States, not foreign powers, and that decisions about land ownership and other negotiations should operate under that assumption.

Missionaries and government-funded programs had attempted to assimilate Indians living within the states, or bring them into white society, by promoting Christianity, establishing schools, and encouraging non-Indian farming practices and gender customs. But Indians were reluctant to abandon their culture and adopt white ways. At the same time, industrialization and improved transportation were encouraging many white Americans to want to move west, away from the crowded cities of the East Coast, meaning that many more whites would be coming into contact with Indian peoples.

Increasing white contact combined with Native Americans' resistance to assimilation meant that more and more whites were anxious for changes in Indian policy to ensure white control of valuable land and the containment of Indians who refused to give up their cultural uniqueness. About a quarter of a million Indians lived within the United States by the 1820s. Over the next two decades, debates over their status and location would end in Indian Removal, a policy that would have a dramatic effect on all Indians, but especially on Southern tribes.

In Andrew Jackson's first inaugural address in 1829, he promised, "It will be my sincere and constant desire to observe toward the Indian tribes within our limits a just and liberal policy, and to give that humane and considerate attention to their rights and their wants which is consistent with the habits of our Government and the feelings of our people." But his first annual message to Congress, excerpted on this page, made clear that his "liberal policy" would be centered around the removal of Indian people from the states.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are Jackson's legal reasons for allowing Georgia to confiscate the Cherokee's territory? How do you think the Cherokee might respond to this argument?
2. Why does Jackson believe it will be good for Indians living in the east to be relocated? Do you think these were legitimate reasons, or were they simply excuses for taking their land?
3. Do you think Jackson saw the removal of Indians as a permanent solution to the difficult relationship between the U.S. government and Indians, or do you think he believed it was a temporary measure?
4. Jackson says that the Indians should voluntarily move out west, but eventually force was used to make the Cherokee and other Indian communities leave their land. Why do you think Jackson went back on this promise?

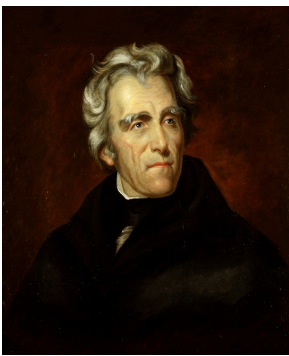


Figure 1. Andrew Jackson had long wanted to remove American Indians west of the Mississippi. When he became President in 1829, he pushed for Indian removal to become official U.S. policy.

The condition and ulterior destiny of the Indian tribes within the limits of some of our States have become objects of much interest and importance. It has long been the policy of Government to introduce among them the arts of civilization¹, in the hope of gradually reclaiming them from a wandering life. This policy has, however, been coupled with another wholly incompatible with its success. Professing a desire to civilize and settle them, we have at the same time lost no opportunity to purchase their lands and thrust them farther into the wilderness. By this means they have not only been kept in a wandering state, but been led to look upon us as unjust and indifferent to their fate. Thus, though lavish in its expenditures upon the subject, Government has constantly defeated its own policy, and the Indians in general, receding farther and farther to the west, have retained their savage habits². A portion, however, of the Southern tribes, having mingled much with the whites and made some progress in the arts of civilized life, have lately attempted to erect an independent government within the limits of Georgia and Alabama³. These States, claiming to be the only sovereigns within their territories, extended their laws over the Indians, which induced the latter to call upon the United States for protection.

Under these circumstances the question presented was whether the General Government had a right to sustain those people in their pretensions. The Constitution declares that “no new State shall be formed or erected within the jurisdiction of any other State” without the consent of its legislature. If the General Government is not permitted to tolerate the erection of a confederate State within the territory of one of the members of this Union against her consent, much less could it allow a foreign and independent government to establish itself there.

Georgia became a member of the Confederacy⁴ which eventuated in our Federal Union as a sovereign State, always asserting her claim to certain limits, which, having been originally defined in her colonial charter and subsequently recognized in the treaty of peace, she has ever since continued to enjoy, except as they have been circumscribed by her own voluntary transfer of a portion of her territory to the United States in the articles of cession of 1802. Alabama was admitted into the Union on the same footing with the original States, with boundaries which were prescribed by Congress.

There is no constitutional, conventional, or legal provision which allows them less power over the Indians within their borders than is possessed by Maine or New York. Would the people of Maine permit the Penobscot tribe to erect an independent government within their State? And unless they did would it not be the duty of the General Government

to support them in resisting such a measure? Would the people of New York permit each remnant of the six Nations within her borders to declare itself an independent people under the protection of the United States? Could the Indians establish a separate republic on each of their reservations in Ohio?⁵ And if they were so disposed would it be the duty of this Government to protect them in the attempt? If the principle involved in the obvious answer to these questions be abandoned, it will follow that the objects of this Government are reversed, and that it has become a part of its duty to aid in destroying the States which it was established to protect.

Actuated by this view of the subject, I informed the Indians inhabiting parts of Georgia and Alabama that their attempt to establish an independent government would not be countenanced by the Executive of the United States, and advised them to emigrate beyond the Mississippi or submit to the laws of those States.

Our conduct toward these people is deeply interesting to our national character. Their present condition, contrasted with what they once were, makes a most powerful appeal to our sympathies. Our ancestors found them the uncontrolled possessors of these vast regions. By persuasion and force they have been made to retire from river to river and from mountain to mountain, until some of the tribes have become extinct and others have left but remnants to preserve for a while their once terrible names. Surrounded by the whites with their arts of civilization, which by destroying the resources of the savage doom him to weakness and decay⁶, the fate of the Mohegan, the Narragansett, and the Delaware is fast over-taking the Choctaw, the Cherokee, and the Creek. That this fate surely awaits them if they remain within the limits of the States does not admit of a doubt. Humanity and national honor demand that every effort should be made to avert so great a calamity. It is too late to inquire whether it was just in the United States to include them and their territory within the bounds of new States, whose limits they could control. That step can not be retraced. A State can not be dismembered by Congress or restricted in the exercise of her constitutional power. But the people of those States and of every State, actuated by feelings of justice and a regard for our national honor, submit to you the interesting question whether something can not be done, consistently with the rights of the States, to preserve this much-injured race. As a means of effecting this end I suggest for your consideration the propriety of setting apart an ample district west of the Mississippi, and without the limits of any State or Territory now formed, to be guaranteed to the Indian tribes as long as they shall occupy it⁷, each tribe having a distinct control over the portion designated for its use. There they may be secured in the enjoyment of governments of their own choice, subject to no other control from the United States than such as may be necessary to preserve peace on the frontier and between the several tribes. There the benevolent may endeavor to teach them the arts of civilization, and, by promoting union and harmony among them, to raise up an interesting commonwealth, destined to perpetuate the race and to attest the humanity and justice of this Government.

This emigration should be voluntary⁸, for it would be as cruel as unjust to compel the aborigines to abandon the graves of their fathers and seek a home in a distant land. But they should be distinctly informed that if they remain within the limits of the States they must be subject to their laws. In return for their obedience as individuals they will without doubt be protected in the enjoyment of those possessions which they have improved by their industry. But it seems to me visionary to suppose that in this state of things claims can be allowed on tracts of country on which they have neither dwelt nor made

improvements, merely because they have seen them from the mountain or passed them in the chase. Submitting to the laws of the States, and receiving, like other citizens⁹, protection in their persons and property, they will ere long become merged in the mass of our population.

On the web

The Seminole Wars

http://fcit.usf.edu/FLORIDA/lessons/sem_war/sem_war1.htm

The Seminole Indians of Florida had frequently clashed with white settlers, supported Britain in the War of 1812, and harbored runaway slaves. In response, the United States fought two wars, called the Seminole Wars, with an army led by Andrew Jackson. This brief article from the University of South Florida tells the story of those wars and their impact on the Seminole Indians.

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Notes

1. American colonists and later the states and U.S. government had tried to introduce English customs and Christianity to Indian communities. Many Indians adapted the customs or beliefs of the white settlers into their traditional ways of life. The ways they did this, and their reasons for doing so, depended on their own circumstances and their relationships with the settlers. Most engaged in trade with whites; some adopted European technology and farming techniques; some converted to Christianity, and many learned English and American laws and customs so that they could negotiate with whites.

At the same time, American Indians kept elements of their traditional culture for as long as they were able. The Cherokee, for example, converted to Christianity and developed a written language to adapt to their place in the United States. But they published newspapers in their own language, not in English, and they kept many of their beliefs and traditions. Some historians call this “selective adaptation” — Indians selected the ways in which they adapted to white culture.

2. Indians who sold their land and relocated often believed it was the best chance they had to retain their traditional way of life. They worried that if they stayed near white settlements, they would be treated as second-class citizens and/or be forced to adopt white culture and religion against their wishes. Leaving the east and moving to the west was often an act of self-preservation.

But the U.S. government often moved Indians into territory already occupied by other Indian communities. This strained the natural resources of these areas and often caused new tensions among Indian communities who were forced to compete with one another over land, water, and food.

3. The Cherokee saw themselves as an independent nation, not subject to the United States. They believed the U.S. would recognize their constitution and right to self-government because the

U.S. had signed treaties with the Cherokee and other Indian groups, just as the U.S. signed treaties with Britain and France.

4. The confederacy of the United States created by the Articles of Confederation (not the Confederate States of America).
5. From the perspective of the Indians, they had no need to ask the U.S. government if they could establish their own government. Indian communities had their own system of government, and the United States had negotiated with Indian leaders as though they represented sovereign (independent) peoples. By the 1830s, though, many white Americans had come to believe that the idea of an independent people within a sovereign state or nation made no sense — or that to treat Indians as sovereign nations would make it harder for whites to get what they wanted.
6. Jackson was thinking of all Indians as hunters who needed great ranges of territory. The “arts of civilization” were agriculture, which was taking away that land. In fact, by this time, most Cherokee made their living from agriculture.
7. The Cherokee and other Indian communities were suspicious of this promise. After all, what would stop the United States from deciding that it wanted the new land given to the Indians and force them to relocate again? This is, of course, what often happened, and throughout the nineteenth century Indians lost their rights of self-government.
8. Southern Indians refused to leave voluntarily, though, and they would be forcibly removed by the U.S. Army in 1838.
9. Laws that limited the rights of free African Americans were often extended to limit the rights of Indians. “Free person of color” referred to blacks and Indians in the South and in many parts of the North. So it’s unclear just how many “rights” Jackson thought these Indian “citizens” should have.

Contributors

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Kathryn Walbert holds a Ph.D. in United States History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs LEARN NC's efforts to develop instructor-led and self-guided materials for professional development in a range of topics in United States and North Carolina history. She has developed and taught online courses on "The Civil Rights Movement in Context" and "North Carolina American Indians." She is also the author of several articles for LEARN NC, including a series on using oral history in the K-12 classroom and "Beyond Black History Month."

A long-time associate of the Southern Oral History Program, Walbert has been using oral history in her own research and training others in the craft for over ten years. Her doctoral research focused on Southern women, both black and white, who became teachers after the Civil War, and the role of teaching in shaping their identities. From 2001 to 2003, she was an academic skills instructor at Duke University. She now serves as a consultant on U.S. history, oral history, and academic skills to LEARN NC and other organizations.

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