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History Now

The Indian Removal Act

by Elliott West

In the early nineteenth century, as European empires and the fledgling United States jockeyed for position in the West, true power was still in the hands of Native peoples. They far outnumbered whites and controlled resources and routes of movement. Like the outsiders,

Native Americans too were in rivalry with each other. This contested arena became even more unsettled as the US government removed most eastern Native groups beyond the Mississippi River.

On maps of the 1830s the westernmost part of the United States was labeled "Indian Country." The western Sioux (Lakota) consolidated their hold on the central and northern plains and allied with the Cheyennes and Arapahoes to the south. In 1840 these three groups forged a peace with their longtime rivals on the southern plains, the Kiowas and Comanches. Now a wide corridor from Montana deep into Mexico was dominated by an interlocking alliance of horseback peoples. Elsewhere, the Apaches increased their influence in the far Southwest and northern Mexico, the Nez Percés in the Northwest, and the Blackfeet on the northern plains. The shifting currents of power sharpened conflict over land and such resources as bison ranges.

An increasingly vigorous trade connected these independent Native peoples to the world outside. In exchange for goods some groups supplied beaver pelts to white merchants while others provided white trappers with support including protection, horses, and wives. After the beaver population was depleted around 1840, the fur trade shifted toward that of bison robes. By



Indian peace medals were given to tribes to seal the signing of treaties. This one, from 1829, has Jackson's profile on the other side. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

the mid-1840s about a hundred thousand robes from the plains passed through St. Louis annually.

Trade enhanced Native American life. Besides prime items like firearms, western Natives acquired cattle, foods like coffee and molasses, knives, tools such as cooking pots and metal hide scrapers, and luxury goods, including silverware and jewelry. Trade had its downside, however. Much of what American Indians acquired they could not make themselves. The more they relied on such items, the more vulnerable they became to those who provided them. In time, enriching economic links became bonds of dependence.

For a glimpse of what lay ahead, western Indians might have looked toward the East. Tens of thousands of Native Americans in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, the Great Lakes, and the Gulf Coast faced mounting pressures to surrender their lands, including deliberately engineered trade imbalances. In 1803 Thomas Jefferson wrote to future president William Henry Harrison that his government heartily encouraged selling goods on easy credit, for once debts mounted, leaders of eastern tribes would be forced to "lop them off by a cession of lands."

The most powerful force pressing against Indians was the oldest—a land hunger that became especially ravenous after the War of 1812 broke the last significant military resistance from Indians and opened lands west of the Appalachians to white settlement. Between 1810 and 1820 Ohio's white population grew by more than two-and-a-half times from around 230,000 persons to 581,000, while Alabama's swelled by an astounding 1300 percent, from roughly 9,000 to more than 128,000. This left the federal government in a dilemma. It had agreed to treaties guaranteeing American Indians their land, yet the flood of settlement seemed to demand opening that land to white newcomers. Washington's answer, developed primarily by Jefferson, was twofold. With the help of missionaries, agents would transform Native Americans to fit into the dominant national culture of language, religion, and making a living. Those who resisted or moved too slowly in this metamorphosis would be pushed to surrender their lands for others farther west. There the transformation would continue.

Two factors complicated the situation. Tribes were increasingly divided by political rivalry between those prone to accepting white ways and those holding to traditional ones. Then there was escalating pressure from individual states—Georgia being the most aggressive—to force Native Americans to surrender their lands. When state laws interfered with federal treaties, as Georgia's did, they raised the issue of states' rights. This, the most contentious legal issue of the day, would escalate into civil war in 1861. The contention over states' rights muddied the question of the place of Native Americans within the American community.

In 1828, as demands for removal reached new heights, Americans elected as president Andrew Jackson of Tennessee. He had built his political reputation in part by warring against Creek and Seminole peoples and had pushed hard for removal during his rise to the White House. In the Indian Removal Act (1830), Congress authorized an aggressive effort to open Native American lands to whites. To receive the removed tribes, it created the Indian Territory, comprising present-day Oklahoma (minus its panhandle) and lands to the

north up to the Platte River in Nebraska. To protect this country from white intrusion, it would provide a "permanent Indian frontier" of military posts along the territory's eastern boundary.

After 1830 the displacement of eastern tribes moved into full swing. Through chicanery, persuasion, bullying, and sometimes violence, the federal government cleared the majority from their homelands by the mid-1840s, although pockets remained—and are there today. Thousands of eastern Native Americans moved voluntarily, beginning well before 1830, but most resisted through legal means or armed rebellion.

The Cherokees chose legal resistance. Led by their principal chief, John Ross, they took their case to the US Supreme Court. In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that because tribes like the Cherokees were "domestic dependent nations," states like Georgia could not interfere with federal treaties. President Jackson's agents nonetheless pressed ahead to enforce a removal treaty signed by a tiny minority of Cherokees. When the vast majority refused to leave, the US Army moved in, rounded them up, and in 1838 and 1839 forced them on foot and by steamboat to the Indian Territory. Of the more than sixteen thousand on these "Trails of Tears," it is estimated that two thousand died and many more dropped out to settle along the way.

As many as a hundred thousand American Indians were removed from east of the Mississippi. Defenders of the policy claimed eastern Native Americans were out-of-step with the white ways of life. However, while many did hold firm to traditional cultures, others had become English-speaking Christians who practiced white methods of agriculture and, in the South, owned slaves. Ironically, they helped carry into the West the mores and institutions of the very people who expelled them as cultural aliens. Their removal beyond the Mississippi added to the turmoil of a turbulent West. New arrivals fought with Native Americans already there, and divisions among displaced groups led to bloody reprisals and intertribal warfare.

In 1845, as removal was winding down, Native America was on the cusp of momentous change. In the West Native Americans rode a crest of power and affluence, while those in the East had lost out to a government determined to rule unchallenged in the nation's most desirable land. The official claim was that the new "permanent Indian frontier" along the western edge of the United States would usher in a long era of stability and peace. But the forces that had expelled the Cherokees, Shawnees, Chickasaws, Miamis, and others were already at work in the West. Whatever respite there was would be measured not in generations or in decades but in months.

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