

The Trail to Cultural Conformity: A History of Native American Struggle in the 19th Century

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Shortly before President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, one hundred Cherokees signed a petition to Colonel Lindsay which read:

We do not want to see our wives and children die. We do not want to die ourselves and leave them widows and orphans. We are in trouble and our hearts are very heavy. The darkness of night is before us. We have no hope unless you will help us.... We ask your pity. Pity our women and children if they are Indians. Do not send us off at this sickly time.¹

The Indian Removal Act was an agreement signed by Jackson to relocate all eastern Native American tribes to federal territory west of the Mississippi River so that white people could settle onto Native lands. Subsequently, around four thousand Native Americans died from starvation, disease, and hypothermia on the 800-mile route which became known as the Trail of Tears.² Those who survived were relentlessly forced into white culture and education by the federal government for the majority of the 19th and 20th centuries. Following the Cherokee Supreme Court cases in the 1830s and the Dawes Act in 1887, the Native American boarding school movement continued to reform and assimilate Native American children into white culture up until the 1990s.³ These events across two centuries erased a large portion of the Native American narrative in America. As a result of the merciless cultural assimilation by the US government, starting with the Indian Removal Act, Native Americans suffered the loss of their identity and culture. They emerged as outsiders from the white narrative which was enforced by the Dawes Act, the boarding school system, and a number of Supreme Court cases which prevented Native Americans from gaining political power.

Andrew Jackson laid out his reasoning for the Indian Removal Act in his Seventh Annual Message to Congress in 1835. In this speech, he explained that the Native American tribes living in the United States weren't able to live in harmony with civilization. He argued that they were a people who enjoyed "enlarged liberality,"⁴ and would therefore prefer to live outside of state lines, ungoverned by local authorities. Additionally, Jackson believed that Native Americans would prefer white culture if they had the chance to learn it. With confidence, he stated, "No one can doubt the moral duty of the Government of the United States to protect and if possible to preserve and perpetuate the scattered remnants of this race which are left within our borders."⁵ Considering Jackson's beliefs, his definition of "preserve" and "perpetuate" likely meant something along the lines of "civilize" and "reform". After stating his reasons for removal, Jackson insisted that the outcomes of the act would be highly beneficial for the relocated tribes. According to Jackson, the Indian Territory harbored a thriving climate and fertility which would support the tribes for generations to come.⁶ However, his true motives were not for the benefit of the indigenous population, but rather for his own benefit and the benefit of white people living in America. Besides his argument that bloody wars and violence were a part of the Native American social system,⁷ and therefore threatened the American population, Jackson's main reasoning for the act was that it would open up the west to white settlement by removing the indigenous tribes who lived there.⁸ His version of why and how the Removal Act would take place, or the "white narrative," shielded the American public from the true horrors of the event that thousands of Native Americans experienced firsthand, erasing their narrative from this chunk of history.

The Native American perspective on removal diverged significantly from Jackson's version. In 1831, the Creek Nation - also known as the Muscogee Confederacy, one of the most

powerful Native American confederacies at the time⁹ - drafted a letter to Jackson asking for him to control the other tribes in the Indian Territory so that the Creek and their friends could live peacefully. The letter reads, “These wild Indians depend almost altogether upon the chase for support, and their glory is war. We are anxious to pursue a different course.”¹⁰ In other words, instead of coming to new lands where they felt safe and supported, like Jackson had promised, the relocated tribes were forced into a place of hostility and danger. Even the journey to the territory itself was ridden with death and disease. John G. Burnett, a U.S. army private during the Trail of Tears, describes the horrors of the removal in his *Story of the Removal of the Cherokees*.¹¹ In this story, he writes that the Cherokees were dragged from their homes and led along an 800-mile trail through a snowstorm. Many of the Cherokees were forced out of their homes barefoot; twenty-two people died of pneumonia in one night and were buried hastily in ditches beside the road.¹² Again, this is utterly incomparable to the picturesque new life that Jackson had described in his message to Congress. Most Native Americans did not even get the opportunity to identify the truth once they reached the Indian Territory, as many hadn’t lived to tell the story, and those who had were silenced by Jackson’s claims of success. The Native American struggle was lost to history for a long period of time, obscured by the happy narrative which Jackson had imprinted upon the American population. Unsure of where they fit into this false narrative, the newly removed tribes slipped further and further away from their identity as Native Americans, quickly becoming powerless to Jackson’s schemes.

Before and after the Indian Removal Act, many Native Americans sought to gain political power within the states in order to combat the removal. They believed that being forced from their homes onto new land violated previous indigenous land treaties and was unconstitutional.¹³ In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, an 1831 Supreme Court case, the Cherokee tribe asked for an

injunction, or a judicial order, against Georgia's illegal removal of the Cherokees.¹⁴ However, the court ruled that the Cherokees did not have the right to make a demand of the federal government due to the fact that they were not considered an independent nation: "The majority is of opinion that an Indian tribe or nation within the United States is not a foreign state in the sense of the constitution, and cannot maintain an action in the courts of the United States..."¹⁵ In choosing to define the Cherokee as a domestic dependent nation, the Supreme Court prevented the tribe from seeking protection against injustice. A year later, a similar case came about on behalf of a white missionary named Samuel Worcester. In *Worcester v. Georgia*, Worcester argued that it was unconstitutional to deny the Cherokees their right to remain on traditional indigenous land.¹⁶ Surprisingly, this case yielded a different result: the Supreme Court ruled that Native American tribes did hold a level of sovereignty in the United States, and that only the federal government could negotiate with them, not the state governments. However, Jackson refused to comply with this ruling.¹⁷ Georgia continued to enforce its laws against the Cherokees with Jackson's permission, rendering the case seemingly pointless. Although many historians believe in the idea of rhetorical sovereignty,¹⁸ meaning that the prioritization of Native American voices during these cases still contributed to the progression of indigenous rights, the only concrete effect of the Supreme Court rulings was the denial of political power to Native Americans. In the long term, this advanced Jackson's ideals, forcing indigenous people into a society where their voices could not be heard.

Although women were largely excluded from politics at the time, many Native American women used their traditional roles as mothers to advocate for indigenous rights. The removal had placed an emphasis on family roles in the community, allowing for Native women to gain respect and maternal power.¹⁹ The idea of funneling maternal respect into political advocacy had long

been utilized by Native American women. For example, one Cherokee woman wrote to Benjamin Franklin urging that he consider Native requests because “[a] woman is the mother of All—and the Woman does not pull Children out of Trees or Stumps nor out of old Logs, but out of their Bodies, so that they ought to mind what a woman says.”²⁰ A group of Cherokee women also formed an organization called the Four Mothers Society,²¹ which aimed to fight against cultural assimilation and the division of native land. The name is significant because it honors the power of motherhood in a struggling society. However, the inability of women to vote eventually wore down on the movement, and the most that Native women could do to advocate for themselves and their people was to petition and plead for support. Although they were able to use traditional gender roles to their advantage, in the end, Native women were equally defenseless against waves of racism and assimilation by the federal government, and were unable to bring sufficient attention to their narrative due to their lack of political power.

By far the longest struggle of the removed indigenous tribes in America was their struggle against forced integration into white culture in the 19th century. The prime example of this assimilation was the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, which promised citizenship to Native Americans who “adopted the habits of civilized life,”²² or in other words, who adopted the ways of white people in America. Native Americans’ assimilation into white culture included cutting their hair, being forced to speak English, and conforming to Christianity.²³ In return, they would receive United States citizenship. Native values were also compromised by the Dawes Act because it forced indigenous peoples to adopt a system of private land ownership, which contradicted their ideas of nomadic culture, or the belief that land was not meant to be owned. The act transformed designated Native American land (as established by previous treaties) into a checkerboard of land whose ownership was divided amongst various government and state

organizations as well as private individuals.²⁴ The impact that these changes had on Native American society was not subtle. In 1884, a man named John Elk insisted in court that he had earned the right to vote, since was no longer Native American; that he had “fully assimilated into white American society.”²⁵ Native American traditions, languages, practices, habits, and dress were starting to erase themselves. Such erasure led Native Americans to consider themselves white men, to reject their entire race, in the hopes of fitting into American society and receiving all the same rights as white people. However, it was all sacrifice with no reward. Native Americans continued to be mistreated and discriminated against in American society legally, politically, and socially. For example, although John Elk had insisted that he was no longer Native American at all, the court still rejected his plea for the right to vote. One historian notes that “it was essential that Indians learn the ways of whites in order to survive,”²⁶ and yet, they still couldn’t win in Jackson’s system of discrimination and assimilation, erasure and inferiority, his narrative, his legacy. America continued to accept and perpetuate the ideals that Jackson had left behind for centuries to come, keeping Native Americans trapped in a ditch with no ladder. The only option was to adhere to white culture, to give in to the system of inferiority and conformity.

Seeking further opportunities to assimilate the Native Americans, the federal government began to usher thousands of Native American children into boarding schools. From the 1800s to the 1990s, Native American children were dragged away from their homes on the reservation and sent to boarding schools where all sense of their identities were effectively destroyed.²⁷ These government-run schools made no effort to dilute their real purpose to the general public; one boarding school’s motto was “Kill the Indian and save the man.”²⁸ It was a central American belief that erasing tribal culture and introducing white culture to Native American children was

beneficial to American society as a whole. Children in these boarding schools were not only figuratively beaten down, but also quite literally. They were sexually, verbally, and physically abused, forced to change their names and styles and strictly follow the school rules. These school rules included commands such as “Dress like a white man” and “Believe that property and wealth are signs of divine approval.”²⁹ It was also a rule to speak English at all times, and as a result, many Native American children lost touch with the languages in which their stories had been passed down from for centuries. Social time was limited by a strict hourly schedule, and Native American schoolchildren were forbidden from spending time with other Native Americans during their social hours.³⁰ Children who didn’t follow these rules were often sent to the “school jails,” where they were isolated from their fellow classmates and harshly abused.³¹ These children quickly became detached from their families and friends, slowly and permanently conforming to the standards of American society. This long-lasting system carried out the final stab of Jackson’s ultimate plan: an entire generation of Native American culture was lost, gone forever from the American narrative. Inevitably, white culture absorbed the Native race and stole the identity of thousands of indigenous people.

First by removing Native Americans from their land and erasing their story, then by keeping them from gaining any political or legal leverage, and finally, by completely destroying any evidence of their resilient and loving culture, the legacy of Jackson played out successfully through generations of federal governments, erasing the identity of Native Americans in order to sustain the system of white superiority and dominance. The American government trampled on Native Americans harshly and without remorse for hundreds of years, causing permanent damage to both the ancestors and the descendents of the Native race, whose forgotten history has left gaping holes in the hearts and souls of indigenous people for eternity. Erasing the narrative

of an entire race from history and covering it with your own is one thing, but failing to sufficiently own up to these mistakes is on an entirely different level of offense. The American government continues to perform the bare minimum in terms of apology or compensation to Native American society, but as historians continue to uncover the truth about Native American history, America gets one step closer to accepting responsibility. It is supremely important that the voices of indigenous people continue to be heard and recognized until the unfixable is as close to being fixed as possible in this modern society.

Endnotes

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