

HOWARD ZINN

adapted by REBECCA STEFOFF

A YOUNG PEOPLE'S
HISTORY
of the UNITED STATES

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CHAPTER SEVEN

AS LONG AS GRASS GROWS OR WATER RUNS

From Indian Fighter to President

AFTER THE REVOLUTION, RICH AMERICANS bought up huge pieces of land on the frontier. They planned to sell it later for great profits. This was called speculating. Some of the speculators were Founding Fathers, including George Washington and Patrick Henry.

Another land speculator was also a merchant, slave trader, soldier, and future president. He was Andrew Jackson, the harshest enemy of the Indians in early American history.

Jackson became famous during the War of 1812. Textbooks usually say that the war was a struggle against Britain for America's survival, but it was more than that. It was also a war for territory. It allowed the United States to expand into Canada, into Florida (which was owned by Spain), and into Indian territory.

Jackson's first Indian wars were against the Creeks, who lived in most of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. In the midst of the war, Creek warriors massacred 250 whites at an Alabama fort. Jackson's troops took revenge by burning down a Creek village, killing women and children as well as men. A year later, in 1814, Jackson became a national hero when he fought the Battle of Horseshoe Bend against a thousand Creeks. He killed eight hundred of them, with few deaths on his side. Jackson owed his victory to Cherokees who fought on his side because the government had promised to treat them well if they joined the war. Jackson's white troops failed in an attack on the Creeks, but the Cherokees swam a river, came up behind the Creeks, and won the battle for Jackson.

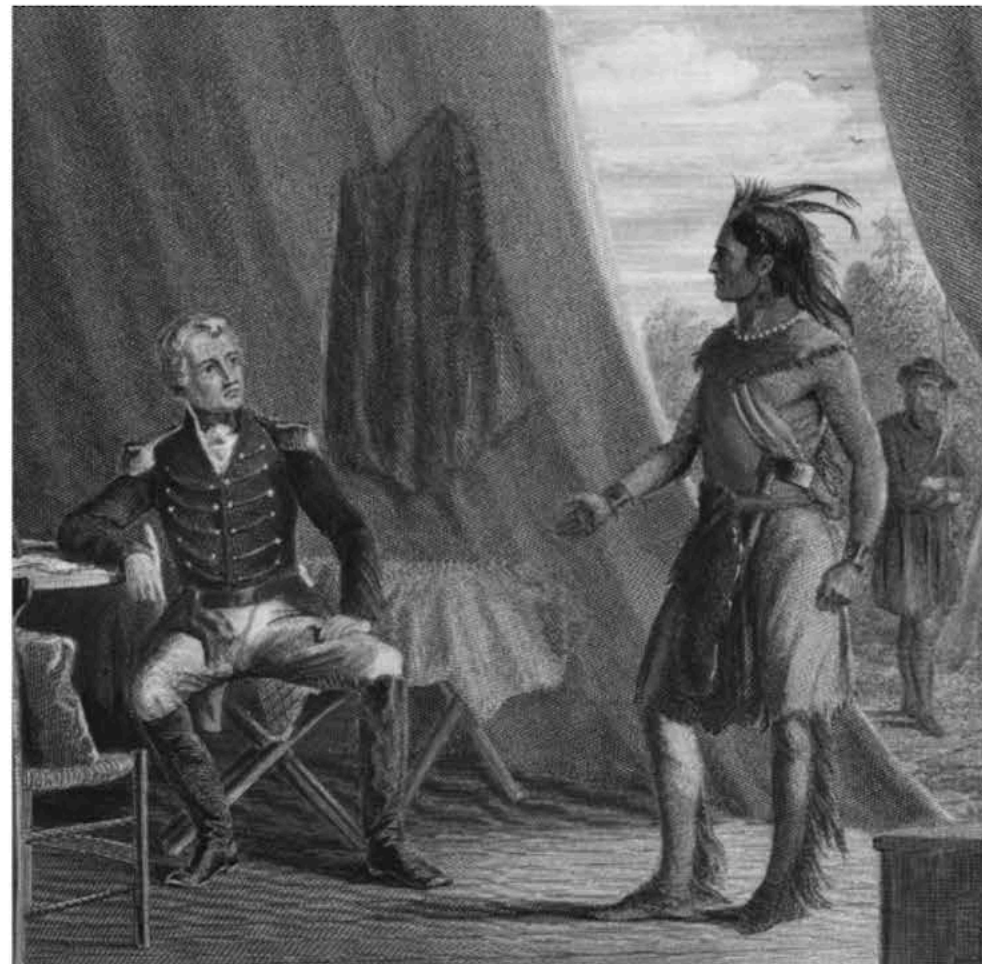
When the war ended, Jackson and his friends started buying up Creek lands. Jackson got himself put in charge of treaties. In 1814 he wrote a treaty that took away half the land of the Creek nation.

This treaty started something new and important. The Indians had never thought that land belonged to individual owners. As a Shawnee chieftain named Tecumseh said, "The land belongs to all, for the use of each...." But Jackson's treaty gave the Indians individual ownership of land and broke up their shared landholdings. The treaty turned Indian against Indian, bribing some of them with land and leaving others out.

Over the next ten years, Jackson was involved in many more treaties with the southern Indians. Through force, bribery, and tricks, he helped whites take over three-fourths of Alabama and Florida, a third of Tennessee, and parts of four other states. These land grabs became the basis for the cotton kingdom of the South, where slaves labored on white-owned plantations.

Soon white settlement reached the edge of Spanish Florida, home of the Seminole Indians and some escaped black slaves. Jackson claimed that the United States had to control Florida in order to defend itself—just what modern nations often say before starting a war of conquest in some other country's territory.

Jackson started making raids into Florida, burning Seminole villages and seizing Spanish forts. As a result of these attacks, Spain agreed to sell Florida to the United States. Jackson became governor of the new territory. He also gave his friends and relatives advice on buying slaves and speculating in land.



Jackson & Weatherford, 19th century.

In 1828, Americans elected Jackson president. Under Jackson and Martin Van Buren, the man he chose to follow him as president, the U.S. government removed seventy thousand Indians from their homelands east of the Mississippi River. A government official named Lewis Cass explained the removal by saying that “savages” could not live “in contact with a civilized community.”

Cass had taken millions of acres from the Indians when he was governor of the Michigan Territory. In 1825, at a treaty meeting with the Shawnees and Cherokees, he had promised them that if they moved west, across the Mississippi River, “The United States will never ask for your land there.” The land beyond the river, Cass declared, would remain Indian territory forever.



The Trail of Tears, 1838.

The Terrible Choice

FOR A FEW YEARS IN THE 1820s, BEFORE Jackson became president, the southern Indians and whites had settled down. They lived in peace, often close to one another. White men visited Indian communities, and Indians were guests in white homes. Frontier figures like Davy Crockett and Sam Houston came out of this setting. Both of them—unlike Andrew Jackson—were friends of the Indians.

Pressure to remove the Indians from the land came from politicians, business interests, land speculators, and population growth that demanded new railroads and cities. These pressures might push poor white frontiersmen into the first violent clashes with the Indians, but the frontiersmen who were neighbors of the Indians did not lead the movement to get rid of them.

Just how did the government remove the Indians from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and other places? The answer lies in the difference between federal (or national) laws and state laws. Federal laws, like treaties between the federal government and the tribes, put the U.S. Congress in charge of Indian affairs. But the states passed their own laws that gave away Indian land to whites.

As president, Jackson was supposed to enforce the federal laws. Instead he ignored them, letting the states do what they wanted. This put the Indians in a terrible position. They would not be “forced” to go west. But if they stayed, they would have to obey state laws, which destroyed their rights. They would suffer endless trouble from whites who wanted their land.

On the other hand, if the Indians agreed to leave, the federal government would help them with money and give them land west of the Mississippi. Jackson told the Choctaws and Cherokees that if they left their old lands peacefully, they would be given new lands, and the government would leave them alone. He sent them this message:

Say to the chiefs and warriors that I am their friend ... but they must, by removing from the limits of the States of Mississippi and Alabama and by being settled on the lands I offer them, put it in my power to be such—There, beyond the limits of any State, in possession of land of their own, which they shall possess as long as Grass grows or water runs. I am and will protect them and be their friend and father.

Now the pressures began on the tribes, one by one. The Choctaws didn't want to leave, but after fifty members of the tribe were bribed with money and land, they signed a treaty that gave up Choctaw lands east of the Mississippi. In return, the Choctaws were supposed to get financial help for the journey west. Thirteen thousand of them began that journey in late 1831, migrating to a land and climate completely different from everything they knew. The army was supposed to organize their trip, but it failed miserably. Indians

died by the thousands from hunger, cold, and disease. The seven thousand Choctaws still in Mississippi refused to follow them. Some of their descendants still live in Mississippi.

After Jackson was re-elected to the presidency in 1832, he speeded up what was called the Indian removal. By this time, Alabama's twenty-two thousand Creeks lived on a tiny portion of their former territory. They agreed to leave in exchange for the federal government's promise that some of that land would be given to individual Creeks, who could either sell it or stay on it with federal protection.

The government immediately broke its promise. It didn't protect Creeks from whites who swarmed onto their land. An army officer wrote that the Creeks were "brow beat, and cowed, and imposed upon, and depressed with the feeling that they have no adequate protection in the United States...."

Speckled Snake was a man of the Creek nation. During his long life, he saw the white American government cheat and mistreat the Indians over and over again. When he was more than a hundred years old, he told a story about how the white man had betrayed the Indian:

Brothers! I have listened to many talks from our great white father. When he first came over the wide waters, he was but a little man ... very little. His legs were cramped by sitting long in his big boat, and he begged for a little land to light his fire on.... But when the white man had warmed himself before the Indians' fire and filled himself with their hominy, he became very large. With a step he bestrode the mountains, and his feet covered the plains and the valleys. His hand grasped the eastern and the western sea, and his head rested on the moon. Then he became our Great Father. He loved his red children, and he said, "Get a little further, lest I tread on thee."

After some desperate Creeks attacked white settlers, the government claimed that this "war" had broken the treaty. Now the U.S. Army could use force to make the Creeks go west. Soldiers invaded Creek communities and marched the people westward in groups of two or three thousand. The government was supposed to supply things like food, shelter, and blankets to the marchers, but again it failed. Starvation and sickness killed hundreds as the Creeks were carried across the Mississippi on old, rotting boats. More than three hundred Indians died when one boat sank.

Fighting for Freedom

IN DECEMBER 1835 A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ordered the Seminoles of Florida to gather at a meeting place to begin their journey west. No one showed up. The Seminoles had decided to fight.

They started making surprise attacks on white settlements along the coast, striking quickly from hideouts in the interior. They murdered white families, captured slaves, and destroyed property. General Winfield Scott led U.S. troops into Florida to fight the Seminoles, but they found no one. Two-thirds of Scott's officers resigned from the army, worn out by mud, swamps, heat, and disease.

The war lasted eight years and cost \$20 million and 1,500 American lives. But the Seminoles were a tiny force fighting a huge nation that had great resources. Finally, in the 1840s, they got tired. The Seminoles asked for a truce but were arrested. Their leader, Osceola, died in prison, and the war died out.

In Georgia, the Cherokees were fighting back in their own way, without violence. They tried to fit into the white man's world by becoming farmers, blacksmiths, and carpenters. They set up a governing council and welcomed Christianity and white missionaries. After their chief, Sequoyah, invented a written form of their language, they printed a newspaper in both English and Cherokee. But although the Cherokees were taking up the ways of white society, the whites still wanted their land.

Georgia passed laws that stripped the Cherokees of their land and outlawed the tribal government, meetings, and newspaper. Any Indian who encouraged others to stay in the homeland could go to prison. White missionaries who said that the Cherokees should be allowed to remain on their land also received punishments such as four years at hard labor in prison.

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Writing Cherokee

PHILLIP HOOSE, IN HIS WONDERFUL BOOK *We Were There, Too!*, argues that it wasn't Cherokee chief Sequoyah alone, but also his six-year-old daughter Anyokah, who brought a written language to the Cherokee people and found a way to prove its importance to the tribal elders.

First, father and daughter tried to make a list of every sound in the spoken language of the Cherokee people and to draw a picture for each sound. Then they made a list of all the spoken syllables. They came up with about two hundred, but were able to narrow down the list to eighty-six distinct syllables, each with its own written expression.

By now Anyokah was ten years old. It was 1821. Sequoyah and Anyokah rode to the Cherokee Tribal Council to present their idea. At first, the Council laughed because they couldn't see how writing down sayings could be useful in any way. So, Sequoyah proposed a test. He would leave the room. The Tribal Council could tell Anyokah anything they wanted, and she would write it down. Then Sequoyah would come back, look at the marks on the deerskin, and tell them what they had said. It worked again and again. "The first few times the elders called it luck," Hoose writes, "but gradually doubt gave way to excitement. Soon thousands of Cherokees wanted to learn how to read. The syllabic alphabet led to the preservation of the Cherokee language and then to the first American Indian newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix. Before long schoolchildren were learning to read in both Cherokee and English. The letters were called talking leaves."

Source: Hoose, Phillip. *We Were There, Too!: Young People in U.S. History*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001.

Once again, the federal government arranged a removal treaty with a few Cherokees, who signed it behind the backs of most of the tribe. And once again the government sent the army to enforce the treaty. Seventeen thousand Cherokees were rounded up and crowded into stockades. On October 1, 1838, the first group set out on what came to be called the Trail of Tears.

Four thousand Cherokees died of hunger, thirst, sickness, or exposure in the stockades or on the brutal march westward. But in December 1838, President Martin Van Buren told Congress about "the entire removal of the Cherokee Nation of Indians to their new homes west of the Mississippi." Congress's decision to remove the Cherokees, Van Buren said, had had "the happiest effects."