

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

ANDREW JACKSON AND HIS INDIAN WARS

A BOOK REVIEW SUBMITTED TO

DR. GANSON

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

DAVID RYAN GLAUBER

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Book Review

Remini, Robert V. *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2001. 317 pages.

When the name Andrew Jackson is uttered, two images usually come to mind. One is that Jackson was the founder of the Democratic Party. The other is that Jackson fought against Indians and was responsible for the Trail of Tears. The focus of this review will be on the latter. Many Americans believe that Jackson was a cruel, heartless man for taking land away from Indians, defying the Supreme Court, and for forcing Indians to migrate west, in what is known as the Trail of Tears. However, author Robert Remini, in his book, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, argues that Jackson's policy of removing Indians from their land was not intended to be cruel punishment. He explains that Jackson was trying to save the "Five Civilized Nations" from being wiped out by white settlers. This is not a revisionist interpretation, but is an attempt to view the events that happened as they were seen by eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans.

Remini describes Jackson as a man with a fighting spirit, who would never let go of grudges, but was an honorable man who defended the law when called upon and protected the weak and the sick from being exploited no matter the consequences.¹ Jackson's compassion and courageousness were the reasons why his men in the Tennessee militia nicknamed him "Old Hickory," for his determined spirit and having his officers' turn their horses over to the sick and the wounded on their way back home from a battle.² Jackson's humbleness stems from his ancestors who came to America because

¹ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 15.

² *Ibid.*, 60.

of economic troubles in their homeland, which continued to exist in their new home in South Carolina. From Jackson's ancestors' troubled arrival in America, Remini recounts the life of Andrew Jackson, who was told from an early age by his widowed mother, Elizabeth, to believe that Indians were savages who were out to kill the white man. Remini explains that this hatred for Indians that existed amongst frontiersmen towards Indians is not fully understood by modern Americans and that is why many Americans consider Jackson to be a ruthless killer of Indians.³

Remini explains that "Those like Andrew who lived on the frontier accepted as indisputable fact that Indians had to be shunted to one side or removed to make the land safe for white people to settle and cultivate."⁴ This attitude, however, created problems for white settlers, because the more they settled or squatted on Indian land, the more the Indians would attack them. The Indians felt that white settlers did not want to co-exist with them and that they were trying to push them off their land. At the same time, the white settlers believed that the Indians, who they considered to be inferior, were taking up land that should clearly belong to the United States. But this land that whites had taken away from the Indians, hurt the tribes' chances for survival because Indians needed large fields to hunt for bison.

While there was a hostile existence between the two cultures, their meetings with each other resulted in Native Americans beneficially acquiring many American tools and pieces of equipment, which was supposed to help make their lives easier. This new dependence on American goods, which was supposed to help improve their lives, actually put many Native American tribes into debt. During the administrations of John Adams

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Ibid., 15.

and Thomas Jefferson, three out of the Five Civilized Nations, the Cherokees, Creeks, and Chickasaws, were forced to sign numerous treaties to absolve their debts.⁵ These treaties required the Indians to cede part of their land to the US government and after they were signed, Jackson saw it as his responsibility to uphold the treaties.⁶ At the same time, however, Jackson would not stand for Americans squatting on land that still belonged to the Indians. He felt that it was his responsibility “to take all persons and stock, found trespassing on the Indian Territory, and deliver them over to the civil authority for prosecution,” since their squatting made it more dangerous for Americans who legally settled in a former Indian territory.⁷

Nevertheless, many tribes deeply resented having their land taken away from them as a result of their unpaid debts and this resentment inevitably transferred into more attacks by Indians on the whites who settled on their land.⁸ Remini, who was sympathetic to the American nationalism and manifest destiny of the time, insists that these continued attacks left Jackson no choice but to conclude that all Indians had to be forced to migrate west of the Mississippi. Remini insists that Jackson came to this conclusion because he felt it was a matter of national security and there was no alternative.

The Indians in Remini’s story are portrayed as mercenaries for aiding England and Spain in attacking Americans. In actuality, these Indian tribes were struggling for survival and desperately needed the financial assistance offered to them by England and Spain. The fact that Americans were encroaching on their land gave them extra reason to

⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁶ Ibid..

⁷ Ibid., 57

⁸ Ibid., 13.

ally with England and Spain.⁹ However, Jackson believed that these European powers were interfering with the sovereignty of the United States. While this may be true, Remini fails to look at the flip side of the situation. While Indian attacks against Americans can never be tolerated or condoned from an American perspective, the Indians were trying to defend themselves and fight off Americans who were threatening to take away their lands, and which forced the Indians into debt and subsequently into alliances with England and Spain. What this means is that the Indians were looking out for their own sovereignty and national interests, while Jackson saw things from his own perspective.

Jackson, possibly unintentionally, is portrayed as a conniver during the Creek War. During this war, Jackson came to the rescue of the Creeks, when a “radical” group of Upper Creeks, known as the Red Sticks, started a civil war within the tribe because the majority of Creeks were passive in their resistance to America and accepted its terms and desires.¹⁰ After pillaging through the villages of the Upper Creeks and leaving them begging for mercy, as they starved, because of the destruction of their lands, Jackson wanted to take land away from them, as well as the friendly Creeks, who he promised to protect.¹¹

From Jackson’s perspective, it is explained that because of the influence that the Spanish and British had over the Indian groups, it was necessary to force all Indian groups to move west of the Mississippi. America felt compelled to declare war against England in 1812 partially because of these Indian attacks that were being financed by the British in New Orleans. Spain and England also supported Indian attacks from Florida,

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

where Americans in Georgia and in the Carolinas were the targets. This ultimately resulted in Jackson's seizure of Florida in 1819. So, for America's national interest and security, it was clearly necessary to break those alliances and force the Indians to move west.¹² When bribery and intimidation were not successful in getting Indians to leave their lands, Remini explains that Jackson saw forced removal as his only option.¹³

Attempting to improve Jackson's image in his dealings with Native Americans, Remini sympathetically explains that Jackson "showed genuine feelings of concern for [the welfare of Indians]...provid[ing that] their welfare and rights did not collide with those of the United States. He explained that Jackson "never intended or imagined the horror that accompanied removal and that he acted out of a fierce nationalism and an overwhelming concern for the nation's security, and unity."¹⁴ With that said, Remini backtracks to say that he does not condone the Trail of Tears that resulted in the death of half of the eight thousand Cherokees that were forced to move west, but that the popular sentiment at the time did condone it.¹⁵

Jackson and His Indian Wars by Robert Remini successfully takes the reader back in time to understand the mindset and attitudes of Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. While he may not condone the actions of Jackson, he implies that if he were living in that era, without the knowledge that he has now, he probably would have supported Jackson's actions as well. His arguments are logical and sound and they offer a reasonable addition to historical scholarship on the treatment and attitudes towards Native Americans. He has used countless primary sources from prominent figures of the

¹¹ Ibid., 84.

¹² Ibid., 85

¹³ Ibid., 205.

¹⁴ Ibid., 228.

time, including the papers of Thomas Jefferson, John C. Calhoun, and of course, Andrew Jackson. He also uses newspaper accounts, journals, magazines, and books in his study of the Indian Wars. To assist the reader, he provides a chronology of events at the beginning of the book that the reader can easily flip to at any time to see dates in order to put an event into a larger perspective. A bibliography is also added so that the reader can further study this topic. Overall, Robert Remini has written a smooth flowing narrative that should be read by any historian who wants to get a new perspective on understanding Jackson's actions towards Indians.