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AMERICAN IMPERIALISM AND THE TRAIL OF TEARS

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DR. GANSON

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BY

DAVID RYAN GLAUBER

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American Imperialism and the Trail of Tears

In pre-Colonial America, the Cherokee Indians were widely spread out over the southeastern part of the present-day United States. Their civilization “extended from the Ohio River south almost to present-day Atlanta, Georgia, and west from present-day Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina across the present-day Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, toward the Illinois River.”¹ However, by 1819, the Cherokees had lost ninety percent of this land to the young American nation.² This was largely because the Cherokees, like other Indians, overspent beyond their means in their efforts to acculturate with Americans.³ In exchange for dismissing their debts, American military generals, including General Andrew Jackson, a born frontiersman, tried to intimidate the Cherokees and other Indian groups into taking bribes in exchange for a piece of their land.⁴ Frontiersmen, like Jackson, wanted to drive the Cherokees and other Indian groups west of the Mississippi because the Indians often attacked them when they encroached upon their land. The frontiersmen also fiercely hated the Indians, viewing them as mercenaries for siding with foreign nations, like England and Spain, who were encouraging and financing Indian attacks against Georgians.⁵ So, the rivalry and bitterness that existed between the two groups made co-existence impossible.

While Americans had a right not to tolerate these Indian attacks, the fact remains that the Indians were trying to defend themselves and fight off Americans who were encroaching upon their lands and coercing them to leave. In defending their territory,

¹ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period: A New Estimate of Cherokee Population Losses,” ed. William L. Anderson, *Cherokee Removal: Before and After* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 78.

² Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 61.

³ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

however, the Indians incurred great debts. As a result of this debt, they entered into alliances with England and Spain, who provided the Indians with the financial assistance they needed to meet their basic needs.⁶ As it turns out, the Indians were looking out for their own sovereignty and national interests, but Jackson saw things from his own perspective.

After it was discovered that the Indians were serving as mercenaries, American hatred of Indians increased enormously. The state of Georgia was leading the charge against the Cherokees, trying to take away their land, claiming that the Cherokees were interfering with their sovereignty.⁷ As a result of this and the anti-Indian sentiment that existed in America, the United States Congress was able to pass the Indian Removal Bill on May 28, 1830.⁸ Under this act, Jackson, now President of the United States, was given the power to buy land from Indian nations who voluntarily agreed to relocate to Indian Territory, west of the Mississippi.⁹ Jackson used his newfound power, eagerly and aggressively signing seventy treaties with various Indian nations during his administration.¹⁰ With these treaties, Jackson was successful in chasing off most eastern Indians from their ancestral home during his presidency.

Attempting to justify his actions to the US Congress and the American people, Jackson portrays the relocation of Indians as a sympathetic, good will gesture on his part. Satz explains that Jackson's position was that the Indian Removal Act was a necessity because it "enable[d] the federal government to place the Indians in a region where they

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Theda Perdue "The Conflict Within: Cherokees and Removal," ed. William L. Anderson, *Cherokee Removal: Before and After* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 55.

⁸ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 64.

⁹ Ronald N. Satz "Rhetoric Versus Reality: The Indian Policy of Andrew Jackson," ed. William L. Anderson, *Cherokee Removal: Before and After* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 30.

would be free of white encroachment and jurisdictional disputes between the federal and state governments.”¹¹ This, however, was just a ploy, as Jackson really wanted to move them west because they interfered with America’s desire for expansion. One needs to understand that the Cherokees were attacking Americans because they were fighting for their existence. Even after the Indian Removal Act was enacted, the Cherokees continued to fight the strong pressure they were facing to leave the last remnants of their land by trying to show America that they indeed had redeeming qualities.

In order to avoid removal, the Cherokees tried extensively to show that they were becoming more like Americans.¹² They explained to the United States that their children were now attending school in record numbers and were becoming “productive members of society.”¹³ Wilms asserts that the Cherokee’s cultural landscape definitely “resembled and perhaps sometimes surpassed their white frontier neighbors.”¹⁴ He believes that the “Cherokees living in Georgia prior to removal in 1838 were probably the most thoroughly acculturated Indians in nineteenth century America.”¹⁵ As a result of their acculturation and their victory in the *Worcester v. Georgia Supreme Court* case, which declared that Indians had property rights that could not be ignored, the Cherokee leader, Chief John Ross felt reassured that the Cherokees were going to be safe and that they could not and would not be forced to move.¹⁶ This all changed, however, with the signing of the Treaty of New Echota on December 29, 1835.

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹ Ibid., 30.

¹² Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 62.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Douglas C. Wilms “Cherokee Land Use in Georgia,” ed. William L. Anderson, *Cherokee Removal: Before and After* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 63.

The Treaty of New Echota was a treaty between five hundred Cherokee Indians and the United States government. Under the provisions of this treaty, the Cherokees “committed them[selves] to removal and stipulated that they would trade their lands in the East for Five million dollars and land in Indian Territory.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, the agreement is not that simple. This is because none of the five hundred Cherokees who signed the treaty were elected officials. The Indians who signed this treaty, signed under their own accord, without the approval of the twenty-one thousand member Cherokee nation.¹⁸ As a result, the Cherokee nation viewed this treaty as fraudulent.¹⁹ But, the United States Congress did not view it that way. By a one-vote margin, the US Senate ratified the treaty on May 23, 1836. Officially, the Cherokees now had two years to move out of their land peacefully, or else the United States government would forcibly remove them.²⁰

Seeing the battle to remain on their lands as futile, four thousand Cherokees moved west to Indian Territory. The rest, approximately seventeen thousand Cherokees, remained to support their leader, Chief John Ross in his protest against removal.²¹ Unfortunately, their efforts were disregarded by President Jackson, who ignored the decision of the Supreme Court in *Worcester v. Georgia*, which said that the Cherokees had property rights and could not have their land taken from them. As a result, the Cherokees did not stand a chance to keep their land. General Winfield Scott, who was personally appointed by President Jackson, along with seven thousand of his men,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period,” 80.

¹⁹ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 64.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period,” 78, 80.

proceeded to forcibly remove the Cherokees after the two year grace period of the Treaty of New Echota expired.²²

Since Americans hated the Cherokees, as they hated all Indians, Jackson was able to get away with disregarding the Supreme Court on the issue of Cherokee property rights. So, after the expiration of the grace period on the Treaty of New Echota, General Winfield Scott began to brutally round up the Cherokees. His “soldiers forced people from their homes without even giving them an opportunity to collect their few belongings...[and] family members were separated – husbands from wives and parents from children.”²³ After being rounded up, they were put in stockades on their land that were built to contain them.²⁴ Chief John Ross explained to his nation at this time that “When the strong arm of power is raised against the weak and defenseless, the force of argument must fail. Our Nation has been besieged by a powerful Army and you have been captured in peace from your various domestic pursuits.”²⁵ When removal finally came, in 1838, Andrew Jackson was no longer President, but he was still without a doubt responsible for orchestrating this removal. Jackson and the American nation had decided that they no longer wanted to co-exist with the Cherokees.

From the stockades, the Cherokees were sent to one of three different points, where they waited to be transported by steamships “down the Tennessee and Ohio rivers to the Mississippi [river].” From there, Indians had to travel by foot to get to the promised land, Indian Territory.²⁶ On this long, arduous trek, known as the Trail of Tears, the Cherokees faced many problems. Women on this journey had an especially

²² Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 64.

²³ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁴ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period,” 80.

²⁵ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 56.

difficult time because they were “vulnerable to rape and because many of them were pregnant.”²⁷ Nevertheless, it was the women in the group that kept the Cherokee nation united, which was increasingly becoming socially divided as a result of the removal.²⁸ They felt that it was essential for all of the Cherokees to band together on the journey in order to survive.

It was very difficult to survive the Trail of Tears because they had to rely on rations from the US government since they were not allowed to take any of their food or other possessions with them. As a result, many Cherokees succumbed from starvation everyday. Their lack of nourishment also resulted in their contracting various illnesses, including influenza, measles, and dysentery.²⁹ The granddaughter of one survivor of the trail recalls hearing that the Cherokees “would go for two or three days without water, which they would get just when they came to a creek or river as there were no wells to get water from.”³⁰ As a result of this poor treatment, historians estimate that four thousand Cherokees died on their way to Indian Territory, but Russell Thornton, through extensive calculations, estimates that the number of Cherokees who died may have been twice as many.³¹ So, the journey west was hell for the Cherokee nation.

Robert Remini tries to defend Jackson for his part in the Trail of Tears, saying that he “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.”³² He adds that Jackson “showed genuine feelings of concern for [the welfare

²⁶ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period,” 80.

²⁷ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 57.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period,” 83.

³⁰ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 72.

³¹ Russell Thornton “The Demography of the Trail of Tears Period,” 83.

³² Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars*, 228.

of Indians]...provid[ing that] their welfare and rights did not collide with those of the United States.”³³ While no pity was shown towards the Cherokees in their round up or on the Trail of Tears, Remini sums it up perfectly. The Cherokees interfered with America’s desire to expand, so they had to be removed. It also needs to be mentioned that “Jackson profited both personally and politically from his adamant removal policy. He claimed nearly one hundred thousand acres of Cherokee land, which he then put up for sale in Philadelphia.”³⁴ This indicates that Jackson’s removal policy was driven by a desire for personal gain with a justifiable, patriotic spin to legitimize the removal of the Cherokees.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis*, 61.

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