

NPS  
# 232

Theme XV  
Westward Expansion and  
Extension of the National Boundaries, 1830-1898

MILITARY AND INDIAN AFFAIRS  
(sub-theme)

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## Part I

### A SUMMARY OF THE THEME

Throughout the course of North American history, the conflict between the white and red races is a recurring theme. Friction began in the earliest colonial years, and was ever present until the end of the 19th century. At times, it burst into open warfare that brought death and destruction to the frontier, and required arduous and costly campaigns of suppression. Although a wide cultural gulf separated the two races, the basic and continuing cause of conflict lay in the land requirements of a westward moving frontier. The Indian stood in the path of expansion, occupying land coveted by the whites. Inevitably, he had to yield.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Indian gradually retreated west from the Atlantic seaboard towards the Mississippi River. Sometimes he went peaceably, for habitable land seemed plentiful. At other times, he defended his homeland, only to be expelled by force of arms. Often he allied himself with one colonial power against another, but this never won him more than a temporary reprieve.

By the end of the American Revolution, the frontier confronted the Indian barrier in the Trans-Appalachian West. How

to remove the barrier became a major issue to the young nation, and provided a topic for much bitter debate in and out of Congress. Many Americans urged extermination as the only solution; others, more numerous, advocated a conciliatory approach. The latter prevailed, and for the next century the United States tried to solve the Indian problem by peaceful means. Hallmark of this policy was the treaty. At solemn gatherings, representatives of the Great White Father dispensed presents and concluded treaties with tribal leaders. Usually the treaties guaranteed the Indians new lands farther west in exchange for lands then occupied, and incorporated mutual pledges of lasting peace. But the lasting peace was normally little more than a brief suspension of hostilities. The peaceful approach consistently failed to avert war.

The causes were complex and the results probably inevitable. But largely at fault was the treaty system itself. It assumed that Indian tribes were sovereign nations, and that their chiefs could insure the observance of treaties. The power of the chiefs, however, was not that absolute, nor the system of tribal government that simple. Moreover, all factions of a tribe could rarely be assembled at one time and one place, and the absent factions did not consider the treaty binding on them. In short, loose tribal organization fostered political irresponsibility, something

the whites never understood. On the other hand, many treaties were foisted on the Indians by questionable methods, and disregarded by the whites when expedient. Despite these drawbacks, the treaty system was used for almost a century.<sup>1</sup>

It first came into widespread use early in the 19th century, when the Government attempted to gain title to Indian lands in the Northwest Territory. A few tribes accepted the terms peacefully, but the majority resisted, and for over a decade the Ohio frontier was a scene of bloody warfare. Finally, the eastern tribes were subdued and, after ceding their lands by treaty, withdrew into the Trans-Mississippi Valley. This area, however, was already filling with white settlers who had no intention of sharing their land with Indians. Besides, such voluntary Indian removals failed to vacate eastern lands quickly enough to suit the white settlers. Many Americans therefore demanded the forcible removal of all tribes to the plains west of the 95th meridian. Early explorers had labeled this region the "Great American Desert," and had confidently predicted that it was unfit for white habitation. Here, a "Permanent Indian Frontier" might be established and the Indians deported, guaranteed land in perpetuity, and freed from

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1. For a complete discussion of the treaty system, see Loring B. Priest, Uncle Sam's Stepchildren: The Reformation of United States Indian Policy, 1865-1887 (New Brunswick, 1942).

the corruptive influence of white man. So thought Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, and his plan, laid before Congress in 1825, gained official sanction.

### Indian Removal

Treaties with the eastern tribes secured assent to removal. These treaties guaranteed protection enroute to the Indian Country, resettlement aid, land ownership in perpetuity, a degree of self-government, and even representation in Congress. Few of these promises were kept. Inefficiently and often heartlessly, the United States escorted almost 80,000 Indians to the Indian Country between 1825 and 1842.<sup>2</sup> To insure their isolation Congress in 1832 laid the foundation of the reservation system by creating, as an agency of the War Department, the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Two years later, it went a step further. A comprehensive regulatory code, the Indian Intercourse Act of 1834, set the limits of the Indian Country and barred all but licensed white men from the region.

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2. See John C. Ewers, The Role of the Indian in National Expansion (Washington: National Park Service, 1938), 97-98; Grant Foreman, The Last Trek of the Indians (Chicago, 1946). Originally, Indian Country included modern Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. After 1854, when Kansas and Nebraska Territories were organized, Indian Country meant modern Oklahoma and was usually known as Indian Territory.

Prominent among the dispossessed peoples were the Five Civilized Tribes: the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. For many years they had lived in the southern parts of the United States, and therefore shared a similar culture and history. Some had their own laws and constitutions, and the Cherokees even boasted an alphabet, invented a few years previously by Sequoya.

Despite their affinity, the Five Civilized Tribes, soon after their arrival in Indian Territory, found themselves at odds with one another and with their neighbors over land ownership. Conflicting treaty guarantees and errors in Government boundary surveys created intertribal friction that threatened, on many occasions, to explode into open warfare. To restore peace, the Government sent soldiers to Indian Territory. They built Forts Gibson and Towson in 1824, and Forts Leavenworth, Washita, and Arbruckle in succeeding years.

Although the troops prevented hostilities, a common threat from the west also tended to minimize dissension. The Kiowas, Comanches, and Wichitas, natives of the Indian Country, resented the newcomers, and in 1834 expressed their resentment in war upon their unwelcome neighbors. Unable to defend themselves against so formidable an aggressor, the immigrants called upon