

# INDIAN REMOVAL OR DISPOSSESSION

From a historical perspective, the year 1820 may be viewed as marking the two hundredth anniversary of European settlers' invasion of Native America, a period during which native tribal nations were substantially reduced in their numbers and lands by force of germs and force of arms. In 1620 the *Mayflower* pilgrims landed in Provincetown Bay, making their way farther up Cape Cod, eventually to found Plymouth Plantation on Indian lands. In 1630 a fleet of Puritans from England arrived, and soon Massachusetts Bay Colony was established, also on lands occupied by indigenous—native—people. Indians mostly sided with the British during the Revolutionary War and, having chosen the losing side, were forced to make the best deal they could with the citizens of the new United States. Native people again sided with the British in the War of 1812, with assurances that this time the king would not lay down the tomahawk until Indian rights and claims were fairly met. Nonetheless, at the war's end in 1815 England left its Indian allies no better off than they had been before.

In the next half century, from 1820 to 1870, Americans continued to displace tribal nations from the Southeast, Southwest, and the eastern plains, violently reducing the number of California Indians by some two-thirds. Andrew Jackson, who had defeated the Creeks of southern Georgia in 1814, forcing them to cede no fewer than twenty million acres of land to the United States, was elected president in 1828. An important part of Jackson's program was "Indian Removal," the relocation of southeastern tribes to lands (already occupied by other native peoples) west of the Mississippi.

The Cherokees of Georgia were a major target for removal. By the time of Jackson's election the Cherokees had a written language, a constitution modeled after that of the United States, and the first newspaper (the Cherokee *Phoenix*, established in 1828) to publish in an indigenous language and in English. Many Cherokee people had converted to Christianity and had extensive agricultural plantings. Large Cherokee landholders also owned slaves. In response to Jackson's removal policy, the Cherokees sent a number of "memorials"—documents roughly having the status of petitions—to Congress arguing their sovereignty (that is, their legal status as domestic *independent* nations). They also published these in their newspaper and encouraged papers in the East sympathetic to the Cherokees' plight to reprint the memorials.

Nonetheless, in 1830 the Indian Removal Act, granting the president the authority to enter into treaties with the eastern tribes for their removal west of the Mississippi, was passed by Congress. Jackson immediately worked for the removal of the Cherokees and also of the other four so-called Five Civilized Tribes, the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles. Cherokee removal by federal troops under General Winfield Scott in 1838 gave rise to the Trail of Tears, the bitter trek in winter to Indian Territory, present-day Oklahoma, a forced march in which some four thousand persons out of a population of thirteen thousand died.

Less well known is the suffering of some of the midwestern tribes. The Winnebagos, for example, whose home was in the area of the Wisconsin River, ceded land no fewer than seven times in the period from 1829 to 1866, moving some six times, their population declining by 50 percent. As a result of the Black Hawk War of 1832, the last Indian war fought (mostly) east of the Mississippi, Chief Black Hawk's Sauk people of Iowa were seriously restricted. As we shall also note below in regard to King Philip's War in the seventeenth century, to call what happened to Black Hawk's people a "war," Herman Viola believes, "stretches all credulity, for at most 70 whites lost their lives, whereas nearly all of the Indian group of 500 men, women and children perished" (quoted in Kennedy, "Margaret Fuller," p. 7).

Following the Mexican-American War of 1848, American victory led not only to massive land acquisitions—Arizona, New Mexico, and southern California—but to conflict with Navajo and Apache people in those areas. The California gold rush of 1849 brought a great number of prospectors to the territory, many of whom regarded the local Indians as less than human, often shooting them on sight. As the U.S. commissioner of Indian Affairs, Adam Johnson, himself acknowledged, "The majority of [California] tribes are kept in constant fear on account of the indiscriminate and inhuman massacre of their people" (quoted in Jennings, p. 366).

In 1862, while the attention of the northern states was primarily focused on the Civil War with the South, Indians once more required attention. In Minnesota, crowded by the advancing Euro-Americans, upset by the delay in payments agreed to by the U.S. government in exchange for their lands, and with many of their people starving, a large number of Santee Sioux along with some Wahpeton and Sisseton Sioux attacked settlements in Minnesota, killing some five hundred settlers and soldiers. When the uprising was put down, in addition to those Indians killed, wounded, and imprisoned, 303 Santees were sentenced to be hanged. Notified of the sentences, President Abraham Lincoln (who as a young man had fought against Black Hawk's Indians) asked to review the trial records. A report to the president concluded that those records showed a failure to differentiate between Indian people guilty of capital crimes and those guilty of far lesser infractions. In the interest of justice Lincoln commuted the sentences of all but thirty-eight of the condemned Indians. Yet by May 1863 the remaining Santee nonetheless began to be shipped out of the state to the Crow Creek reservation on the Missouri River in Dakota Territory.

About this time in the Southwest, Kit Carson was enlisted by the government to help pacify the Navajo. Carson's policy of destroying their crops, livestock, and peach orchards forced the Navajo to submit, leading in 1864 to the Long Walk in winter from Fort Canby and Fort Wingate to Fort Sumner in New Mexico. Many Navajo people did not survive the journey or the captivity.

We have already mentioned Chivington's 1864 raid in Colorado Territory against the peaceful encampment of Black Kettle and his people at Sand Creek. With the end of the Civil War in 1865, former Union troops became available for duty on the plains and in the Southwest. Thus it was that in 1868 the Civil War general George Armstrong Custer, soon to achieve legendary status for his "last stand" against the Cheyenne and Lakota (Sioux) on the Little Bighorn River in 1876, managed to do what Chivington had not: to kill Black Kettle, who was this time camped with his people on the Washita River. Custer and his men killed 103 Cheyennes, only 11 of them men of fighting age.

By the time the Bureau of the Census declared the "frontier" closed in 1890, most of the country's Indian nations had been reduced in numbers, penned on reservation lands, or both, and American destiny, as the nineteenth century approached its end, could be seen to have manifested itself in the achievement of domination "from sea to shining sea."