

Tecumseh and Pushmataha Debate War at the Choctaw and Chickasaw Council (1811)

Introduction

Tecumseh was a Shawnee warrior and chief born outside of Chillicothe, Ohio in 1768. The Shawnee supported the British during the Revolution, only to watch the Ohio Territory fall under American control following the war. The 1787 Northwest Ordinances encouraged Americans to move westward to the Ohio Territory where they encountered Indian Nations like the Shawnee, Delaware, and Mingo. President George Washington ordered troops into Ohio to ensure the safety of white colonists, resulting in the first wave of Indian removal. Under the command of General “Mad” Anthony Wayne, US troops waged war against the Indians living in the Northwest Territory. Tecumseh joined the Independence movement, fighting in several battles, including the final and bloodiest, the Battle of Falling Timbers in 1794. The first Indian removal happened in the wake of Falling Timbers as thousands of Indians were forced to leave Ohio for Indian Territory (now Indiana).

In 1809, General William Henry Harrison coerced several Indian tribes living in the region to cede three million acres of land to “white settlers.” Harrison made a fortune (while in and out of office) from the land he secured as part of the Treaty of Greenville. Facing another removal, Indians across the Great Lakes region formed a Pan-Indian Independence Movement. In 1811, Tecumseh, now a leader of the Independence movement, travelled to the southern Nations hoping to rally support for the resistance movement.

While Tecumseh campaigned in the South, US troops now under the direction of General/Governor Harrison, attacked the religious community established by Tecumseh’s bother and Shawnee prophet, Tenskwatawa at Tippecanoe (the Shawnee called it Prophetstown). Tenskwatawa died in the ensuing Battle of Tippecanoe, and Tecumseh returned to Indian Territory on the eve of the War of 1812. Tecumseh and many Shawnee allied with the British, while the Choctaw and Chickasaw allied with the Americans. Tecumseh died in 1813 during the Battle of the Thames in Southwest Ontario, Canada.

Pushmataha was Chief of the Six Towns, referring to most of the Choctaw and Chickasaw living in the Lower Mississippi Valley. He fought with the Americans during the Revolution. and championed cooperation with them afterward. While Tecumseh called for a Pan-Indian Alliance to resist further American expansion, Pushmataha strongly disagreed. In 1811, the situation on the northern frontier (the Great Lakes region) was more perilous than Pushmataha’s southern region. Ultimately, none of the southern Indian Nations joined the resistance. In fact, Pushmataha fought under General Andrew Jackson against the Seminole during the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Following the end of the War in 1815, the United States ceded millions of acres of land from the Great Lakes Nations. Despite the alliance with Pushmataha and the Choctaws,

the United States proceeded to aggressively remove the southern Nations as well, culminating with the Indian Removal Act of 1831, one of Andrew Jackson's signature pieces of legislation while President.

The following account of the debate between Tecumseh and Pushmataha were recorded in the 1880s based on Choctaw oral histories. As a result, it's difficult to assess the accuracy of the actual dialogue¹.

Primary Source

In view of questions of vast importance, have we met together in solemn council tonight. Nor should we here debate whether we have been wronged and injured, but by what measures we should avenge ourselves; for our merciless oppressors, having long since planned out their proceedings, are not about to make, but have and are still making attacks upon those of our race who have as yet come to no resolution. Nor are we ignorant by what steps, and by what gradual advances, the whites break in upon our neighbors. Imagining themselves to be still undiscovered, they show themselves the less audacious because you are insensible. The whites are already nearly a match for us all united, and too strong for any one tribe alone to resist; so that unless we support one another with our collective and united forces; unless every tribe unanimously combines to give a check to the ambition and avarice² of the whites, they will soon conquer us apart and disunited, and we will be driven away from our native country and scattered as autumnal leaves before the wind.

But have we not courage enough remaining to defend our country and maintain our ancient independence? Will we calmly suffer the white intruders and tyrants to enslave us? Shall it be said of our race that we knew not how to extricate ourselves from the three most to be dreaded calamities – folly, inactivity, and cowardice? But what need is there to speak of the past? It speaks for itself and asks, “Where today is the Pequot? Where the Narragansetts, the Mohawks, Pocanokets³, and many other once powerful tribes of our race? They have vanished before the avarice and oppression of the white men, as snow before the summer sun. In the vain hope of alone defending their ancient possessions, they have fallen in the wars with the white men. Look abroad over their once beautiful country, and what see you now? Naught but the ravages of the pale-face destroyers meet your eyes. So it will be with you Choctaws and Chickasaws⁴! Soon your mighty forest trees, under the shade of whose wide spreading branches you have played in

¹ Excerpt from: H. B. Cushman, [History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez](#) (Greenville, Texas: Headlight Printing House, 1899), 310-17. Believed to be in the public domain. See also: [Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought, Vol 1: Origins Through the Civil War](#)

² What does avarice mean?

³ The Pequot, the Narragansetts and Pocanokots tribes were part of the Algonquin Nation that lived in present-day New England. What happened to the Pequots near Mystic, CT in 1637? All three tribes fought with Metacom during King Phillip's War – what happened to the Algonquins after the war? The Mohawk were part of the Iroquois Confederacy living in present-day upstate New York, and had aligned with the British against the Algonquins throughout the seventeenth century. Tecumseh refers to them as a Nation destroyed by Americans as well. Why?

⁴ The Choctaw and Chickasaw were among the most powerful Indian Nations in the southern states and territories, along with the Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee.

infancy, sported in boyhood, and now rest your wearied limbs, after the fatigue of the chase, will be cut down to fence in the land which the white intruders dare to call their own. Soon their broad roads will pass over the grave of their fathers, and the place of their rest will be blotted out forever.

The annihilation of our race is at hand unless we unite in one common cause against the common foe. Think not, brave Choctaws and Chickasaws, that you can remain passive and indifferent to the common danger, and thus escape the common fate. Your people too, will soon be as falling leaves and scattering clouds before their blighting breath. You too will be driven away from your native land and ancient domains as leaves are driven before the wintery storms.

Sleep not longer, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, in false security and delusive hopes. Our broad domains are fast escaping from our grasp. Every year our white intruders become more greedy, exacting, oppressive and overbearing. Every year contentions spring up between them and our people and when blood is shed we have to make atonement whether right or wrong, at the cost of the lives of our greatest chiefs, and the yielding up of large tracts of our lands. Before the palefaces came among us, we enjoyed the happiness of unbounded freedom, and were acquainted with neither riches, wants, nor oppression. How is it now? Wants and oppressions are our lot; for are we not controlled in everything, and dare we move without asking, by your leave? Are we not stripped day by day of the little that remains of our ancient liberty? Do they not even now kick and strike us as they do their black-faces? How long will it be before they will tie us to a post and whip us, and make us work for them in their corn fields as they do them? Shall we wait for that moment or shall we die fighting before submitting to such ignominy⁵?

Have we not for years before our eyes a sample of their designs, and are they not sufficient harbingers of their future determinations? Will we not soon be driven from our respective countries and the graves of our ancestors? Will not the bones of our dead be plowed up, and their graves be turned into fields? Shall we calmly wait until they become so numerous that we will no longer be able to resist oppression? Will we wait to be destroyed in our turn, without making an effort worthy of our race? Shall we give our homes, our country, bequeathed to us by the Great Spirit, the graves of our dead, and everything that is dear and sacred to us, without a struggle? I know you will cry with me. Never! Never! Then let us by unity of action destroy them all, which we now can do, or drive them back whence they came. War or extermination is now our only choice. Which do you choose? I know your answer. Therefore, I now call on you, brave Choctaws and Chickasaws, to assist in the just cause of liberating our race from the grasp of our faithless invaders and heartless oppressors.

The white usurpation in our common country must be stopped, or we, its rightful owners, be forever destroyed and wiped out as a race of people I am now at the head of many warriors back by the strong arm of English soldiers⁶. Choctaws and Chickasaws, you have too long borne with grievous usurpation inflicted by the arrogant Americans. Be no longer their dupes. If there be one here tonight who believes that his rights will not sooner or later be taken from him by the avaricious American pale-faces, his ignorance ought to excite pity, for he knows little of the

⁵ Public shame or disgrace.

⁶ Remember this is the eve of the War of 1812. British troops are still in Canada and on the northern border, and border security was one of the major causes of the war. This should be in your notes.

character of our common foe. And if there be one among you made enough to undervalue the growing power of the white race among us, let him tremble in considering the fearful woes he will bring down upon our entire race, if by his criminal indifference he assists the designs of our common enemy against our common country. Then listen to the voice of duty, of honor, of nature and of your endangered country. Let us form one body, one hear, and defend to the last warrior our country, our homes, our liberty, and the graves of our fathers.

Choctaws and Chickasaws, you are among the few of our race who sit indolently at ease. You have indeed enjoyed the reputation of being brave, but will you be indebted for it more from report than fact? Will you let the whites encroach upon your domains even to your very door before you will assert your rights in resistance? Let no one in this council imagine that I speak more from malice against the pale-face Americans than just grounds of complaint. Complaint is just toward friends who have failed in their duty; accusation is against enemies guilty of injustice. And surely, if any people ever had, we have good and just reasons to believe we have ample grounds to accuse the Americans of injustice; especially when such great acts of injustice have been committed by them upon our race, of which they seem to have no manner of regard, or even to reflect. They are a people fond of innovations, quick to contrive and quick to put their schemes into effectual execution, no matter how great the wrong and injury to us; while we are content to preserve what we already have. Their design is to enlarge their possession by taking yours in turn; and will you, can you, long dally, O Choctaws and Chickasaws? Do you imagine that that will not continue longest in the enjoyment of peace who timely prepare to vindicate themselves, and manifest a determined resolution to do themselves right whenever they are wronged? Far otherwise. Then haste to the relief of our common cause, by consanguinity⁷ of blood you are bound, let the be not far distance when you will be left single-handed and alone to the cruel mercy of our most inveterate foe.

Pushmataha Opposes Tecumseh

It was not my design in coming here to enter into a disputation with anyone. But I appear before you, my warriors and my people not to throw in my plea against the accusations of Tecumseh; but to prevent your forming rash and dangerous resolutions upon things of highest importance, through the instigations of others. I have myself learned by experience, and I also see many of you, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, who have the experience of years that I have, the injudicious⁸ steps of engaging in an enterprise because it is new. Nor do I stand up before you tonight to contradict the many facts alleged against the American people, or to raise my voice against them in useless accusations. The question before us now is not what wrongs they have inflicted upon our race, but what measures are best for us to adopt in regard to them; and though our race may have been unjustly treated and shamefully wronged by them, yet I shall not for that reason alone advise you to destroy them, unless it was just and expedient for you so to do; nor, would I advise you to forgive them; though worthy of your commiseration, unless I believe it would be to the interest of our common good. We should consult more in regard to our future welfare than our present.

⁷ Descended from the same ancestor; part of the same family.

⁸ Showing poor judgement.

What people, my friends and countrymen, were so unwise and inconsiderate as to engage in a war of their own accord, when their own strength, and even with the aid of others, was judged unequal to the task? I well know causes often arise which force men to confront extremities, but, my countrymen, those causes do not now exist...Remember the American people are now friendly disposed toward us. Surely you are convinced that the greatest good will result to us by the adoption of and adhering to those measures I have before recommended to you; and, without giving too great a scope to mercy or forbearance, by which I could never permit myself to be seduced, I earnestly pray you to follow my advice in this weighty matter, and in following it resolve to adopt those expedients for our future welfare. My friends and fellow countrymen! You now have no just cause to declare war against the American people, or wreak your vengeance upon them as enemies, since they have ever manifested feelings of friendship towards you. It is besides inconsistent with your national glory and with your honor, as a people, to violate your solemn treaty; and a disgrace to the memory of your forefathers, to wage war against the American people mere to gratify the malice of the English.

The war, which you are now contemplating against the Americans, is a flagrant breach of justice; yea, a fearful blemish on your honor and also that of your fathers, and which you will find if you will examine it carefully and judiciously, forebodes nothing but destruction to our entire race. It is a war against a people whose territories are now far greater than our own, and who are far better provided with all the necessary implements of war, with men, guns, horses, wealth, far beyond that of all our races combined, and where is the necessity or wisdom to make war upon such a people? Where is our hope of success, if thus weak and unprepared we should declare it against them? Let us not be deluded with foolish hope that this war, if begun, will soon be over, even if we destroy all the whites within our territories, and lay waste their hopes and fields. Far from it. It will be but the beginning of the end that terminates in the total destruction of our race. And though we will not permit ourselves to be made slaves, or like inexperienced warriors, shudder that the thought of war, yet I am not so insensible and inconsistent as to advise you to cowardly yield to the outrages of the whites, or willfully to connive at their unjust encroachments but only not yet to recourse to war, but to send ambassadors to our Great Father at Washington, and lay before him our grievances, without betraying too great eagerness for war, or manifesting an tokens of pusillanimity. Let us, therefore, my fellow countrymen, form our resolutions with great caution and prudence upon a subject of such vast importance, and in which such fearful consequences may be involved.

Heed not, O, my countrymen, the opinions of others to that extent as to involve your country in a war that destroys its peace and endangers its future safety, prosperity and happiness. Reflect, ere it be too late, on the great uncertainty of war with the American people, and consider well, ere you engage in it, what the consequences will be if you should be disappointed in your calculations and expectations. Be not deceived with illusive hopes. Hear me, O, my countrymen, if you begin this war it will end in calamities to us from which we are now free and at a distance; and upon whom of us they will fall, will only be determined by the uncertain and hazardous event...

check the voices of NA book for early sources – collection of sources from 4 empires?