

Why were there conflicts between Indians and the United States government?

Opposing governments find it hard, if not impossible, to co-exist on one piece of land. That is why the relationship between Indians and the U.S. government is perhaps unique in the history of the world.

Traditionally, an expanding country entered a territory and conquered the citizens there. They made slaves of the native people. The action was brutal but swift. The effect was *devastating*, but both societies adapted and got on with new lifestyles.

In North America, particularly in the United States, things were not traditional. The U.S. government never “conquered” the Native Americans. Legally, each tribe is recognized as separate. Each is a sovereign (self-governing) nation living within the United States. Indian nations elect their own officials and make their own laws within the borders of their own lands. The federal government reserves the right to make all final decisions concerning what to do with Indian land.

This unusual co-existence has religious and political roots. The Europeans who claimed North America defined themselves as Christians. Their religious beliefs discouraged war simply for the sake of land, so their rulers created the Doctrine of Discovery as a guide.

What is the Doctrine of Discovery? This policy separated land in the “New World” in a way that seemed fair to the Europeans. In their eyes, land belonged to the government of the explorer who discovered it. Since the discovering country was not at war with the native people, it needed to define natives’ role. The doctrine made the Indians the “rightful occupants” of the land, while giving legal ownership to the European governments. Therefore, the Europeans had to buy the rights, or obtain them legally, to use the land. They could not simply violate the Indians’ rights.

In addition, when the government made a land treaty, it had to provide whatever the Indians had previously received from the land. This included food and shelter or, at least, the resources for them.

The most common legal document dealing with tribal lands was the treaty. Between 1778 and 1871, the government negotiated more than

400 treaties with Indian tribes, called “nations” in those documents. All the agreements contained four specific policies:

1. *To acknowledge Indian rights to occupy and use tribal lands;*
2. *To offer to protect the Indians and their rights;*
3. *To provide government services in exchange for tribal lands; and*
4. *To prevent anyone other than the U.S. itself changing the status of tribal lands.*

The Americans’ belief in the Doctrine of Discovery had two main effects on Indian-U.S. government relations:

1. *It stopped the U.S. from trying to conquer the Indians; and*
2. *It recognized Indian tribes as sovereign nations.*

Thus, the federal government treated tribal lands as *protectorates* (nations under a stronger nation’s protection). It was “holding Indian lands ‘in trust’ for the day when the tribes would be strong enough to defend their legal title.”

How did people feel about property ownership? In the beginning, Europeans believed that there was enough land in the New World to satisfy the needs of both societies. The Indians, wanting to get along with the newcomers, were willing to share. As more and more Europeans poured onto the eastern coast, however, they needed more and more land.

The earliest land transactions between the colonists and the Indians led to mistrust on both sides. That was because their ideas of property were so different. The Europeans, particularly from England, saw individual land ownership as the ultimate goal, a sign of success. In the Old World, a person’s importance in the community was based on how much property he owned.

In contrast, the Indians saw individual land ownership as impossible. The Great Spirit had made the land and given it for use. They used the land for hunting, fishing and farming, but it belonged to the Great Spirit. They used it collectively, but no one person could own land.

When colonists bought tribal land, they meant to buy it on a permanent basis. When Indians sold land, they were only selling the rights to it for a limited period of time, as in renting. Naturally, when the Indians saw the colonists making permanent settlements and drastic changes in

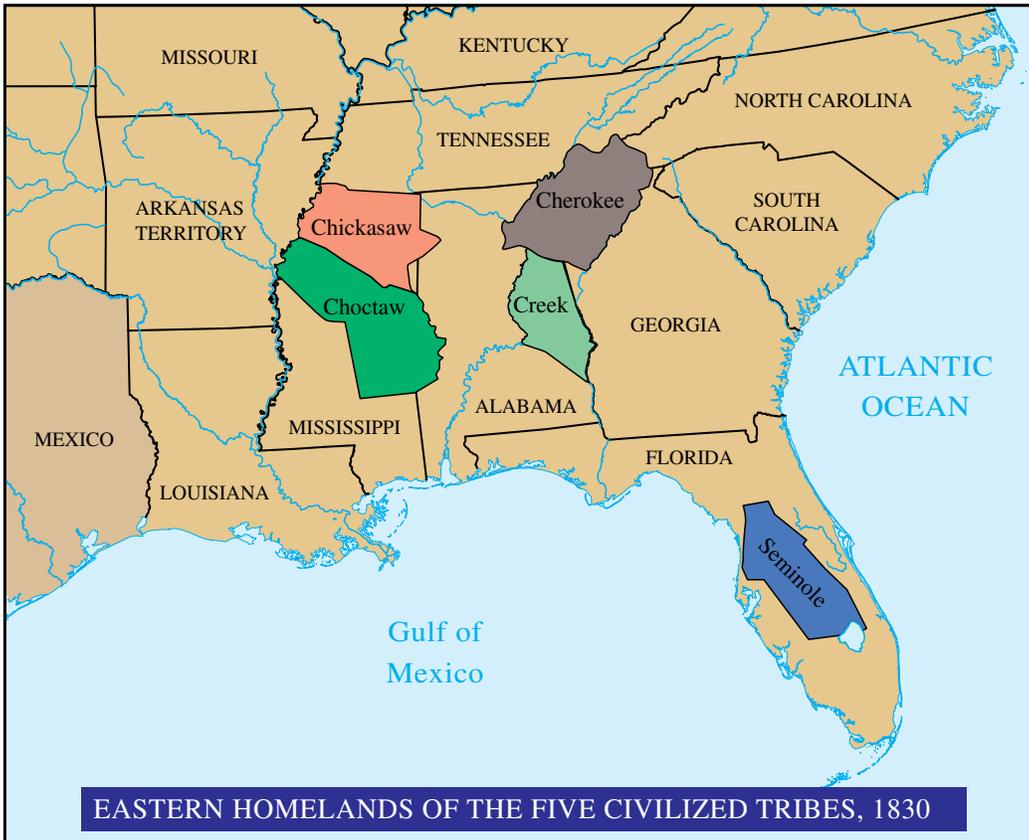
Do You Know?

An Oklahoman, Sylvan Goldman, invented the first shopping cart June 4, 1937.

the land, they felt cheated and threatened. When the Indians objected to these uses of land, the colonists also felt cheated and threatened.

How did viewpoints differ about family, work, religion, and nature? Other cultural differences fed the misunderstanding between the two groups of people. They held very different views of family, work, religion, and nature.

For instance, colonists believed that personal acquisition of property



showed strong character marked by industry and hard work. They considered individual wealth a sign of success. They emphasized independence and self-sufficiency and saw the *extended* family as important for the success of a farm, as an emotional tie, or as a responsibility (such as in injury or illness). The settlers enjoyed festive occasions but considered them a bit wasteful. They thought it was irresponsible to relax during planting or

harvesting time.

Tribal philosophy, by contrast, emphasized interdependence. What belonged to one member of the tribe belonged to another, and everything was for the good of all. The *extended* family was extremely important. To provide fellowship with friends and relatives, feasts and religious ceremonies were numerous.

Colonists believed physical labor was the sign of a worthy person and that agriculture kept man close to God. Therefore, most colonists were farmers. The main work was handled by the father, who directed the rest of the family members in their work. He saw to it that no one could be lazy.

In the tribal community, farmwork and manual labor were women's

work. Tribes respected men for their abilities as hunters and warriors or for their leadership in councils. Farmwork, in particular, was humiliating to an Indian male.

The traditional Indian sought to be close to nature by showing respect for the land and its creatures. He looked at the earth as his mother because it provided the animals and other resources essential to life. Hunting societies used only small spaces of ground to grow food, because plowing the land was like assaulting a mother. Fences, too, were a *desecration*, since the land existed for everyone's benefit.

Colonists tried to be close to God by farming the land, watching seeds turn to plants, and so on. These were the ways of God and, therefore, should be the ways of man. Property owners put up fences to protect the land each colonist had acquired through his own hard work.

Colonists came to the New World for several reasons. Some had been oppressed for their religion. Some had been economically or politically oppressed. Others were fulfilling a business agreement. Still others were escaping prison. All of them came from a crowded continent with shortages of food, shelter, and clothing. Private land ownership there determined survival, and a social class system largely determined land ownership.

When the colonists arrived, approximately 800,000 Indians lived in North America. They had lived for many generations in a land seemingly unlimited in its ability to provide the necessities of life. They saw no need for private land ownership.

These and other cultural differences aggravated the misunderstandings between the Native Americans and the white settlers. Hostilities grew on both sides. Indians looked at colonists as poachers encroaching on tribal ground and began to attack frontier settlements to protect their lands. The colonists considered the Indian less intelligent, less moral, and even less human. A large number became convinced of Indian inferiority. Some colonists even began to see Indians as evil and undeserving of the land made by a Christian God for His Christian people.

More than anything else, the desire for land made whites hostile toward Indians.

Why did white colonists think they had an “Indian Problem?”

The “Indian Problem” was actually the white people's problem of securing the best agricultural lands without violating too harshly their own Christian ethics. At times Europeans, and then Americans, used Christianity as a tool to condemn the Indians and to take their land.

Do You Know?

Known as the Antique Capital of Oklahoma, Jenks is home to the state's best variety of antique stores, gift shops, galleries, museums, crafters malls, and collectible retailers.

According to Arrell M. Gibson, author of *The American Indian* (D.C. Heath, 1980), “Puritans held mixed attitudes about whether or not Indians were capable of achieving salvation and thus being worthy of Christian attention.” Certain settlers came to believe that the only way to teach Indians what they should know about God and the Bible was to isolate them from their way of life.

Thus, in 1638, colonists *established* a reservation at New Haven for the Quinnipiac tribe. They forbade the tribal members from leaving the reservation or selling any of the land. Somehow, the white settlers convinced the Indians to cooperate, and they set up several of these tracts of land, called “plantations.” They called the native people there “praying Indians.” The colonists claimed these reservations were for the good of the tribes, but by the 1670s, the tribes began to see them as a way for whites to steal land.

What was King Phillip’s War? In 1675, a Wampanoag chief, King Phillip, led his people against the Massachusetts settlers. The next year, King Phillip was killed, and his wife and children were sold into slavery. King Phillip’s War was ended. It cemented white belief that Indians were bloodthirsty savages. Puritan leaders preached that Indians were the devil’s people and that it was the “duty of good Christians to exterminate them.”

Who were the Quakers? Only Pennsylvania treated Indians with respect and fairness. In 1682, William Penn signed a treaty recognizing Indian ownership of land. The treaty made guidelines for long-term leasing of tribal lands, rather than purchasing land outright. In 1726, however, the Quakers lost control of the government, and the 1682 treaty was abolished. The new government offered a \$130 bounty for the scalp of an adult Indian male and \$50 for the scalp of an adult Indian female.

What was the Northwest Ordinance? During the American Revolution, many Indian tribes became allies of the British. After 1783, for a short time, Americans claimed the “rights of conquest,” because the Indians had been defeated along with the British. Referring to “reparations of war” (payment for war losses), American militia rounded up Indians and confiscated their lands. However, the Revolution had used so much of the American war funds that further warfare would have been impossible. So, when tribes showed signs of agitation over “reparations,” the young U.S. scraped together enough money and gifts to pay for confiscated lands. It kept the land, appeased the tribes, and avoided

another war.

The U.S. government returned to the policy previously held by the British government. It said Indians were entitled to occupy their land, but the government actually owned it. In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance included this paragraph:

The utmost faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in the property, rights, and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.

Early leaders such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Henry Knox believed that the Native Americans would gradually adapt to white culture. They would be “Americanized,” fitting into American society. However, pressure for land was great. The ideals of the Northwest Ordinance became nothing more than ink on paper. Government policy turned into a continual search for legal means by which to obtain tribal lands.

The “Indian Problem” only grew larger in the 1800s. Government solutions included *assimilation*, removal, and allotment.

What is assimilation? Thomas Jefferson did not feel the Indians were inferior people. He favored *assimilation*. (Another term for this is *acculturation* or joining the majority’s culture). He also believed strongly in the *agrarian* society. He encouraged programs to convince the Indians to give up hunting and become farmers. Education appeared to be the best tool to “Americanize” the natives, so it became common for treaties to provide schooling for Indian children.

Soon missionary societies became involved in education. Missionaries moved into tribal regions and *established* schools for the youngsters and churches for the adults. Since an illiterate person cannot read scripture, clergy saw education as a way to save souls. They taught English, religion, and academic subjects, as well as the values and lifestyle of whites.

In many cases, missionaries endeared themselves to the tribes with whom they worked and spoke on behalf of the natives to an indifferent public. Often, however, Christianity divided a tribe, separating it into

Do You Know?

Anadarko is home to the only authentic Indian City in the United States. It is located in the beautiful Washita river valley in southwest Oklahoma.

two distinct parts, the Christians and the non-Christians, who had nothing to do with each other. These divisions permanently weakened tribes, and they became easy marks for land-seekers.

Meanwhile, Congress tried to regulate trade and protect the Indians from dishonest businessmen. It required traders to have licenses in order to deal with Native Americans. This led to the Federal Factory System. In 1796, the government ordered the construction of factories (trading posts) on the frontier. It made them convenient to tribal homelands and hired government employees to run them.

Federal agents had tried to be *diplomatic* in efforts to win Indian land but often failed. Congress hoped that trade would accomplish what agents had been unable to. It created the trading system with the finest of goals and the fairest of policies. Posts bought Indian furs at market price. In exchange, they sold quality manufactured goods to the Indians at cost. Liquor was not a legal trade item.

The problem arose when officials realized that credit could be used to obtain Indian property. For example, the government could extend generous credit to the tribes and let them run up large bills and then persuade tribes to *cede* portions of their lands to satisfy debts. Even Jefferson was guilty of prompting the trading posts to encourage Indians to use more credit.

What did “removal” mean for Indians? By this time, a few Indians had already moved themselves to western lands. As early as 1785, a few Cherokees, dissatisfied with a treaty, chose to move from their Eastern homeland into present-day Arkansas. In the early 1790s, other groups decided they could not cope any longer with the land hunger of the Americans and moved west. The Bowl, a chief of the Chickamauga Cherokees, attacked a group of white traders in 1794. This happened at the same time as Cherokee-American negotiations, and the government said the attack had endangered those discussions. Authorities *exiled* The Bowl with his followers to the West. Other dissatisfied Cherokees followed voluntarily.

By 1813, one-third of the Cherokee tribe lived west of the Mississippi River. They became known as the Western Cherokees and later the “Old Settlers.”

The idea of “removal” as a formal program arose in 1802. The state of Georgia made an agreement with the federal government that year. In the Georgia Compact, the state gave up its claims to territorial lands west of it in exchange for \$1,250,000. The federal government prom-

ised to *abolish* Indian title to Georgia lands as soon as possible.

It is not known how seriously the U.S. took its obligation to Georgia in 1802. The next year, however, the U.S. made the Louisiana Purchase. Almost immediately, areas beyond the Mississippi River began to look like the answer to the “Indian problem.” Not everyone agreed. Some congressmen argued that removal was *impractical*. They said they could not restrain land-hungry whites from crossing the river. Their assumption was correct, but it was probably made more in opposition to Jefferson than in support of the Indians or on the basis of practicality.

The President believed that assimilating Indians into the Anglo-American world was the ideal solution. For those who could not adapt to the white man’s ways, he suggested removal. He proposed to exchange land in the West for land in the East and remove Indian tribes from white encroachment.

Soon, however, American citizens insisted on complete removal. Although a lot of Southeastern tribesmen were speaking English, wearing European-styled clothing, and building beautiful frame and brick homes, whites were not satisfied. Southern Indians had assimilated, even to owning slaves and competing in the business world, but whites saw them as a threat to their own success. They wanted the Indians removed.

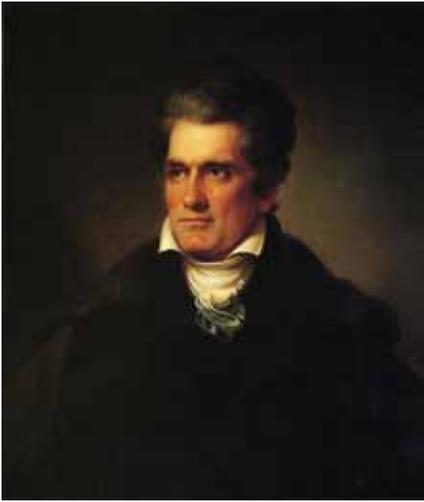
The War of 1812 played a big part in shaping pioneer attitudes. When a number of tribes allied with the British, many Americans considered it treason. They demanded that the government punish all Indians. They considered tribal removal and confiscation of tribal lands a just punishment. This was despite the fact that Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and many Creeks had remained loyal to the U.S. government. They had fought under General Andrew Jackson against the British.

In fact, the only people who supported the British were the Red Sticks, a *militant* faction of the Creeks. When Jackson fought against the Red Sticks, loyal Creeks and Choctaws volunteered and assisted him. The Red Sticks also attacked settlers in an attempt to drive them out. Jackson had the help of other Indians in that fight, too.

What were “allotments?” “*Allotment in severalty*” was a way to divide tribal lands into homesteads with one family per allotment. A homestead was usually 80 to 160 acres. The purpose was to free large tracts of tribal lands, which the government could open for white settlement. It would also complete the conversion of tribes from common ownership of land to individual ownership. Secretary of War Henry

Do You Know?

Bob Dunn, a musician from Beggs, Oklahoma, invented the first electric guitar in 1935.



Portrait of John C. Calhoun by Rembrandt Peale
Gibbs Museum of Art

Knox had once suggested it as a method of “civilizing” the Indians.

In 1816, after removal became the popular cry, Secretary of War William H. Crawford proposed *allotment* as an alternative. First, he believed, it would satisfy the Indians who were already assimilated and opposed to moving. Secondly, it would free the others, those who could not adjust to nontribal living, to move in a group. However, frontiersmen and their Congressmen rejected allotment. They would only be satisfied with complete removal of the Indians to the West.

Who was John C. Calhoun? President James Monroe took office in 1817. He appointed John C. Calhoun as Secretary of War. Calhoun was the main creator of removal as a solution to this long conflict. Like Jefferson, though, he favored education before removal. Calhoun believed that if Indians were taught white ways, they would see that removal was best for them.

Educational programs went into effect, supported by the churches, government, and tribes. The Choctaws made such swift progress that Calhoun decided to focus on them first for removal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the government justify confiscating Indian lands?
2. How did the purchase of the Louisiana Territory affect the problem of taking Indian lands?
3. How did the European Doctrine of Discovery influence government and Indian relationships?
4. How did whites and Indians view one another?
5. What three ways did governmental policies encourage *acculturation* and *assimilation* of Indians?
6. How did the War of 1812 intensify the problems between the Indian and the white man?
7. Which were the “civilized” Indian tribes of the Southeast?
8. Why were these tribes considered civilized?
9. Consider what you know about the weather and geography of Florida and Oklahoma. To what changes did the Seminoles have to adapt?
10. In the presidential election of 1828, who had voting rights?