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Ashley Dunbar

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Native Americans: A Study of Their Civil War Experience

Ashley Dunbar

Abstract: Native Americans played a vital role in the history of the United States of America. During the unrest and upheaval of the Civil War, many Native Americans pledged their allegiance to the Union or Confederacy. The Native Americans assembled armies and participated in the battles. Their loyalty was important, as the Union and Confederacy recognized that Native American involvement could influence the war's outcome.

The war also affected the Native Americans—during the war they faced division among their tribes while endeavoring to make ends meet; after the war, they struggled to exist without slavery while coping with broken promises and territorial growth.

This research will focus on the Native Americans' role during the Civil War and their condition after the war. This research will show tribes made their decisions during the Civil War based on survival, preserving their identity, and remaining independent from the United States government. This study will explain how slavery affected the Native Americans' allegiance and how their decisions shaped the American experience in the Civil War. Finally, this research will examine the effect of the war on Native American women and how the Native Americans' relationship with the United States was altered by territorial expansion and broken treaties.

Many historians have studied Native Americans and written numerous books about the tribes in North America. Sources vary from slim monographs to 50-volume texts published by the Smithsonian Institution and Chelsea House Publishers. However, the voice of Native Americans is lacking because most sources are written from a European perspective. According to historian Francis Flavin, "It can be argued that no character in the pantheon of American historical figures has been cast and recast, interpreted, reinterpreted, and misinterpreted more frequently than the American Indian."¹

In relating the story of Native American tribes during the Civil War, most of the research focuses on the "Five Civilized Tribes" of the Southeast: the Cherokees, the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, and the Seminoles. Many of the primary documents—such as letters and speeches—that survived the war are written in English. Since the larger tribes, such as the Cherokees and Creeks, sided with the Confederacy, the majority of research has primarily focused on their involvement.

Indian Territory: Blue or Grey?

By the 1830s, Andrew Jackson had removed many Native Americans from their lands in the southern United States. Most tribes were relocated into the Midwest in what was labeled “Indian Territory,” as they were promised by the government to be given land and to be considered nations of their own.² When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Union and Confederacy realized that a strong alliance with the Five Civilized Tribes would be a wise relationship to maintain. The Indians could bring men to fight, as well as show support for state’s rights toward the governing system in Washington.³

Some of the tribes owned slaves and had taken those slaves with them in the relocation to Indian Territory in the 1830s. The New York Times published on August 16, 1861, that “the question of slavery in the Indian Territory, and in the states to be created out of territories of the United States, brought about the dissolution of the Union, and the present civil war.”⁴ This would prove to be a huge aligning factor for the Confederacy and a major bargaining chip for the Union.

When the Confederacy broke from the Union, a fight for sympathies ensued. Both sides needed sympathy from anyone who would fight for them. The Confederacy knew that schisms would occur among and within Native American tribes due to the conflicts of slavery, so they planned accordingly.

Leaders such as John Ross and Stand Watie were considered half-bloods by tribal standards, which Moulton talks about in his work, “John Ross: Cherokee Chief.” Half-bloods had a parent who was a full-blooded Indian while the other parent was of European descent. Ross was only one-eighth Cherokee⁵ while Watie was two-thirds. They spoke English and had some European traits, but they were raised in Cherokee society with Cherokee traditions. However, their half-blood status may have affected their relations within their tribe and impacted who supported their leadership. Their struggles as leaders in the Civil War, with the breaking of alliances by the United States government and the constant battle of having to choose sides in a splitting nation’s war, were not just the struggles of Native American leaders at the time. Ross and Watie were part white American, and they shared sentiments from both sides.

The Confederacy wisely sent representatives to speak with the five tribes. Because some Native Americans owned slaves and due to the general rift between full-blooded and mixed-blooded Indians, the Confederacy was able to take advantage of their differences. Arkansas Governor Henry M. Rector said to John Ross of the Cherokee nation, “Your people, in their institutions, productions, latitude, and natural sympathies, are allied to the common brotherhood of the slaveholding States.”⁶

Rector had a good point. The 1830s removal had left the Native Americans bitter with the United States government, not only because of their relocation, but also due to their lack of observing post-removal treaty promises regarding land. The South, which these Indian nations would always be associated with, was based on an agricultural economy of small landowners

who used slaves to produce cotton or tobacco. This was in stark contrast to the North, which was constantly growing in industry. Regarding the economy, Native Americans in the South were tied to the Confederacy. Agriculture was a way of life prominently characteristic of the South during the Civil War—sympathies, institutions, and latitudes were one-sided.

The Confederacy offered a trump card in their proposed alliance with Native Americans: the promise to protect and stand up for the independence of the Indian nations and to provide more broad-minded treaties with them than the United States had in the past.⁷ These two factors excited, yet divided, the Five Civilized Tribes. The Creeks, Cherokees, and Seminoles seemed to be the tribes most divided over the propositions of the Confederacy. Many Native Americans used their cause for neutrality as being in favor of separate Indian nations from the United States. This would not entitle them to step in when they had political issues.⁸

However, with the growing support for the Confederacy from the Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Choctaws, those staying neutral were becoming more targeted. The Native Americans who did not want to side secluded themselves from those who had sided. Native Americans from the Five Civilized Tribes who decided to remain neutral moved into northern Kansas as an attempt to avoid the growing conflict on the horizon in Indian Territory.

In a few months, the Confederate Indians had assembled an army. After the first action near Springfield, Missouri, in August 1861, Confederate Indians from the Creeks and Cherokee decided to launch an attack on the neutrals' camp.⁹ After that experience, the neutral Native Americans signed up to assist the United States.¹⁰

The Chickasaws, in particular, seemed to be tied closely with the Confederacy and white Americans during this time. Arrell Gibson points out several reasons: the closing of governmental institutions due to the war, blood ties to Whites, and the presence of slaves. Gibson states that the Civil War upset most aspects of the Chickasaws' national identity. Schools and academies were closed and used for hospitals and barracks by troops¹¹ while the “well established institution of slavery committed [them] to an inevitable alliance with the Confederacy” and they fought the Union as a means to defend that institution.¹² Ancestry of the mixed blood Indians tied most of them to Southern white families.¹³ Southerners, whether White or not, were also fighting for the institution of slavery. Slavery was not just an Indian problem or a Southern problem. This controversy stretched across the nation.

The advantages of the Native Americans fighting for the Confederacy lasted as long as the Confederacy was on the winning side of the war, however. The major tribes who had joined the Confederacy saw their governments and economies shattered.¹⁴ While the Five Civilized Tribes were more financially tied to the South through agriculture and slave trade, they tried to reach out to the Union but to little avail. John Ross, the Cherokee chief, made a call to Washington asking for support, but Washington was silent. Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State, William Seward, had “advocated the appropriation of the land of the Five Civilized Tribes for white homesteaders” in 1860.¹⁵ Conveniently, Washington used the rebellion of the Native tribes as an excuse to take their land.

These actions had done nothing, of course, to make the Native Americans want to stand on the side of Washington. In an article in *The New York Times*, the United States government issued the following statement:

As the matter now stands, all those tribes that have united with the Confederates will be treated as traitors by the United States Government. Their annuities and allowances of whatever nature will be stopped. Furthermore the engagements which the United States Government entered into with them for their perpetual and peaceful occupancy of the territory are no longer obligatory on the United States, and they will be driven out of the territory.¹⁶

The article stated that Republicans in the northwest had already proposed to give that land to Blacks who would become free during the Civil War. This gave the neutral Indians a nudge to side with the Union. Of course, this battle for allegiance was not only experienced by Native Americans. Whites who remained neutral were under constant pressure to pick a side, join a force, and show support.

Everyone fighting was destitute and without basic necessities, but remaining neutral essentially meant support from no one. Native Americans and White Americans alike realized that whether with the Union or with the Confederacy, sides had to be chosen. Americans soon learned that no matter the situation or side, the overall picture remained the same. The United States was at war with itself, and no one was at an advantage.

Native American Slave Owners and the Confederacy

The Cherokee Nation, prior to the Civil War, was located between Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas. The Cherokee Nation and about five other Indian tribes had been relocated to this area as the progression of development on the East Coast expanded. The Cherokees considered themselves to be separate from the United States at the time of the Civil War. Treaties made with them were upheld, but laws passed by them were optional to keep. The Cherokees also were not part of the Confederacy when the party emerged.¹⁷

One of the reasons Native Americans were affected during the Civil War was due to some tribes' customs of having slaves. Christian missionaries from many denominations had been sent from the north prior to the Civil War.¹⁸ Most preached against slavery and would even purchase slaves with the intent of releasing them. This was seen as abolitionism by the Cherokees and also as a sign of picking sides if they went along with what the missionaries were preaching. The Cherokees were severely torn.

John Ross had ordered his people to stay neutral, saying: "In regard to the pending conflict between the United States and Confederate States, I have already signified my purpose to take no part in it whatever Our country and institutions are our own."¹⁹ What Ross did not realize, however, was how much the rest of the nation, torn or united, wanted the Cherokees to be on

their side. The Cherokees were the largest of the Five Civilized Tribes, and they would be speaking measures for other tribes to follow if they chose one side over the other. The Cherokees had influence; the Indian Territory was a valuable grain- and livestock-producing area with important access routes to Kansas and Texas.²⁰ The Cherokees were the most desirable ally due to their “wealth, location, and large population.”²¹ Ross’s only concern was to maintain independence both of his people and of their land.

The Confederacy seized the opportunity. Although John Ross had claimed neutrality for the Cherokee nation, there were opposing forces. Ross’s political party consisted of full-blooded Native Americans who did not hold slaves, but a separate group primarily of half-bloods who did own slaves also existed.²² The Confederacy recognized this and acted quickly.

Albert Pike, an attorney from Little Rock, Arkansas, was sent to negotiate terms with the Cherokee nation. He was proposing something that would put John Ross in a precarious position. Pike revealed “that he intended to treat with the leaders of the mixed-bloods if Ross refused to negotiate.” The Confederacy knew exactly what kinds of things the Cherokees had been trying to obtain since 1846, and made sure Pike proposed them: money, power, and protection.²³

Stand Watie, a Cherokee leader who would become a general for the Confederacy, organized the Knights of the Golden Circle, or the Southern Rights party. This was the beginning of a new wave of factionalism within Indian Territory. When support for the Southern Rights party began openly supporting the Confederacy, conflicts within Cherokee lands broke out. A split was going to occur, whether Ross wished them to stay neutral or not.²⁴

With this in mind, Ross eventually commissioned “to raise a regiment for defense of the Nation and ultimately for service to the Confederate cause.”²⁵ While this may be seen as a means of uniting the two opposing forces within the Cherokee Nation, there was still a distinction between who believed in the Confederate cause and who did not.

The Cherokees were not the only nation affected by the issue of slavery, nor were they the only Indian nation to own slaves. The Chickasaws were committed to the institution of slavery. John Harrison, a man who grew up in the Creek nation, wrote about life and customs before the Civil War. Harrison mentioned several times how slaves were part of everyday life and how things changed after the war was over. Before the war, Harrison says “the slaves were made to card the wool and cotton and would spin it on the spinning wheel into thread and then reel it and run it through the loom to make their own cloth.”²⁶ This was typical of other Indian and white slave owners.

During the war, Harrison wrote about the split within his own nation, saying “there was a faction, however, that did not care to be bound to the treaty [of Albert Pike]” and those Indians went to Kansas.²⁷ The split that was happening in the United States was becoming more personal. The war was beginning to split his tight-knit nation. After the war, in 1866, when Harrison returned to Indian Territory with his mother, he wrote, “the negroes were freed and mother knew nothing more to do than to return to the locality . . . where [we] had lived.”²⁸ Like

the rest of the post-war South, Harrison would begin to learn how to cope with a lifestyle that excluded slavery.

Native American Women

The Civil War did not only affect the men who fought for the Union and Confederacy. The war greatly changed the home life of the wives, children, and families of those involved. White women and Native American women were at home caring for parents, grandparents, and children while the husbands, fathers, and brothers were fighting.

Iroquois women experienced a major shift in their roles as wives during the Civil War. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the shift from being a woman whose realm was outside the house to inside the house was taking place. More white Americans were teaching Native American women that their realm was in the house.²⁹ Women no longer gardened or harvested crops like they used to and that aspect of the Iroquois women's identity rapidly disappeared.

The Iroquois were not relocated to the plains of Oklahoma or Kansas. They were a tribe centralized in and around present day New York, and so they were encompassed by their White counterparts. Iroquois children were sent to White schools and educated by White missionaries in the ways of White living. This was seen, through missionary eyes, as teaching from "the bottom up," hoping that the children would teach White customs to their parents.³⁰ However, with the war affecting the Native Americans' economic status, school was difficult to afford in the North and South.

In the Cherokee nation, things were equally hard. Confederate Cherokee general Stand Watie wrote letters to his wife about the war. In one letter, his wife, Sarah, wrote him and said, "I wanted to send [the children] to school but the board is 200 a month apiece and 12 in provision what must I do . . . I will have to look to you for advise about the children schooling. I don't know how about the board it is high every wher."³¹ If paying for schooling was too expensive for women who were receiving little to no money, women were most likely not going to send their children to school.

Another issue that arose within the Cherokee nation was that of marriage between Indians and white or black suitors. As Katja May, a historian in the Creek and Cherokee tribes, points out, "Cherokee laws were more concerned with protecting Cherokee women from unscrupulous white grooms: In order to marry a Cherokee woman, a white man had to get the signatures of at least ten 'Cherokees by blood.'" She also says that black immigrants also intermarried on the same terms as whites. This was done, by both sides, as a means of finding protection within those lands.³² Sometimes interracial marriage helped citizens receive perks from the government. Most of the time, though, it did not.

Congress offered pensions to families with lost or injured relatives if the incident could be traced and proved. Many Native American families received aid, but this policy also contributed more hurt than help to some. Achsah Halftown Shongo was an Iroquois widow who lost her

husband in the 1860s when he drowned after falling off a boat in the Ohio River. To receive pension, Shongo had to prove her husband had drowned, bring in documentation to prove that she had married her husband when she was 14, and swear that “she had not lived with any man since her husband’s death.” The irony was that Shongo could neither read nor write, and no one from her original wedding party was still alive. She did not receive pension from the government until 1903, when she was finally able to prove her case.³³

Shongo’s case was not strictly a Native American problem. These particular problems seemed to be a white-made issue. Iroquois women were originally raised in their realm of the outdoors—they planted, grew, and harvested food, which could then be used for their own household and sold to make a profit. But the White culture promoted taking women out of their outdoor realm and sticking them in the house. Therefore, their ability to accomplish tasks once natural to them was slowly weeded out of Iroquois living. Assimilation not only removed the unique identity held by each Native American tribe in the United States, but assimilation also took away their voices.³⁴

Achsah Shongo lost her one means of income, and women across the United States during the Civil War were losing loved ones and their financial support. Native American struggles during this time, while brought about through conflicts with white Americans, were still representative of every person’s struggles during the war.

Western Expansion and the Breaking of Treaties

Expansion happened despite the war and affected the growing United States. Those who did not move into the unknown West read about the expansion in newspapers or letters. Those who did move past the known borders of the current states and territories were looking for land and a new beginning. Both whites and Indians experienced upheaval because of the movement west during the war.

With the Indian removal and relocation in years prior to the Civil War, old ways of life had to be organized into the new places Indians were located. Between the Five Civilized Tribes, about 5,000 slaves were brought into Indian Territory. Despite the move from familiar to unfamiliar, Native Americans were still looking to reestablish their tobacco- and cotton-based economy.³⁵

With Native American sympathies being divided like the land they were living on, feelings from white settlers in the West were changing. The Sioux Uprising in 1862 dismantled the calm disposition that had been expected of the Dakota tribes in the present-day Minnesota area. Mary Ann Clark Longley Riggs was a pioneer missionary at the time of the war, and the letters that she wrote to her family showed this sudden change in attitude. The theme of most of those correspondences was of ignorance—the Indians didn’t know how to be civilized and needed to be taught the Christian ways of the White peoples. On May 10, 1838, in a letter to her mother and father, Riggs writes:

You would smile at their gaudy ornaments, could you see them dressed with blanket, curiously, though coarsely, painted, bracelets & armbands of brass, holes in their ears, & sometimes noses, through which bits of lead have been thrust and fastened. Add to these, paint, feathers & beads in abundance for the head & face, & I think you can conjecture the visage & garb of these sons of the prairie.³⁶

She goes on to regard them positively as her missionary efforts are successful. However, in September 1862, shortly after the Sioux Uprising started, her letters changed. In one letter to her husband, Riggs warns him not to expose himself to “Indian treachery & cunning” because she feels “there is no wickedness of which they are incapable.”³⁷ What Riggs did not realize was that the Sioux had been tired of promises made by the government and white men that were never fulfilled. This lack of following through with the treaty was due to the Civil War.

The Sioux Uprising was triggered by the United States government’s failure in meeting treaties that promised food, money, and land along the Minnesota River to the Sioux. Instead, the money barely reached the Sioux or was given to fur traders in the area who claimed the Sioux owed them money. As well, the government kept the food promised to the Sioux in warehouses as a blackmail tool until they assimilated to farming their land. These broken promises proved fatal to the Sioux because of the harsh Minnesota winters and the decreasing numbers of buffalo herds due to an increase of settlers.³⁸ Mary Riggs was bitter about the savagery but oblivious of these conditions.

However, President Lincoln tried to encourage both white and Native parties to remain peaceful when the nation was still at war. Of the more than 300 Indians who took part in the Sioux Uprising, Lincoln identified 38 of “the more guilty and influential of the culprits” and hung them the day after Christmas in 1862. While the number of punished was reduced to 38, this was still the largest mass execution the country had staged.³⁹ While rebellion seemed to be more of a personal vendetta from the government’s perspective, the uprising was still tied to the fighting during the Civil War. Many people were starving due to the poor economy and their inability to get food. The Sioux Indians were different; they took a stand against the government that had promised them resources and had neglected to follow through with those promises.

A few years after the Civil War ended, Philip Sheridan, a Union General, used the Sioux Uprising as an excuse to begin his Indian campaigns in the west. Sheridan had become an expert at exterminating Native Americans during the war by using starvation as a tactic in the Shenandoah Valley campaign. He spoiled their winter foodstuffs and forced them to escape through intense winter cold and snow “where most died of starvation or froze to death.”⁴⁰ In the expanding nation, Sheridan was still concerned with getting rid of the threats he had seen in the war and focusing his efforts in the western theatre.

This did nothing for the Union cause of recruiting Native Americans into their army. The battles at Wilson’s Creek in August 1861 and Pea Ridge in March 1862 were two of the first major battles that included active Native American participation. Wilson’s Creek was the second

major battle of the Civil War and the first west of the Mississippi River.⁴¹ The battle was a Confederate victory, and a positive result for Stand Watie and his troops, who had fought well in that battle. Watie's performance was the deciding factor for John Ross to woefully side with the Confederacy and keep his Cherokee nation from splitting.⁴²

The Confederate Indians who fought at Wilson's Creek would go to Pea Ridge, Arkansas. Not satisfied with Confederate General Pike's formation style of "tenpins, white-man-style, to be struck by the iron bowling balls," the Indians felt more at home fighting from "behind rocks or up in trees."⁴³ With these tactics, a Confederate success could have happened, but the killing of General Ben McCulloch threw the Confederate army into chaos. The Battle of Pea Ridge resulted in a Union victory. The result allowed the Union army to go into Indian Territory. John Ross was taken prisoner and shipped up to Philadelphia, where he continued to run his government. He remained firmly committed to the Confederacy, even as it began to decline.⁴⁴

After these two battles, the Western theatre of the war became more like guerilla warfare for Native Americans. Catawbas, or Indian slave catchers, appeared within the various nations, and the Comanche Indians would become experts at playing the Union and the Confederacy off one another for their own benefit.⁴⁵ Comanche Indians in the west, like some Whites in the north, turned in a fair share of captives to U.S. agents, participating in slavery and captive trade. They did this mainly on the terms of receiving ransoms in cash or goods.⁴⁶

Native Americans stopped relying on false treaties signed with the government and started to take their nation's fate into their own hands as "conflict between Union forces and Native Americans erupted in Minnesota, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico."⁴⁷

The Sand Creek Massacre was one of the most devastating events of the Civil War for Native Americans. The attack featured the outright slaughter of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians and the beginning of another wave of Native American rebellion toward the government of the United States.⁴⁸ Sand Creek would come to represent the face of the United States government to the majority of Indians looking to gain what they had spent the majority of the war fighting for: their own lands for their own nations.

There were underlying political causes that led to this happening that the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians could do nothing about. John Evans, who was a territorial governor in Colorado, wanted to become the state governor. He found Colonel John M. Chivington, who had previously been a Methodist minister but wanted the title of an Indian fighter. Together, they would maneuver the United States government to allow them to raise the Third Colorado Cavalry. This group of men was assigned to serve for 100 days and remove the "threat" of violent Indians in the Colorado territory.⁴⁹

Colonel John M. Chivington was fighting under the American flag for the sole purpose of fighting Indians.⁵⁰ He wanted to be a hero, and this seemed like the perfect way to don the title with the opportunity to show his valor. What he neglected was the relationship between the United States and the Cheyenne and Arapaho nations. This failure would prove devastating at the time of the nation's Civil War.

President Lincoln had given the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians an American flag as a sign of union between the United States and the two tribes. On the day of the Sand Creek Massacre, these tribes were displaying that flag proudly. Chivington and his men did not acknowledge that treaty. These Indian tribes were a threat, according to John Evans—this was another battle of many that had to be won.⁵¹ The aftermath of the massacre reflects the Native American experience as one shared by more than those tribes. After the massacre, remaining Cheyennes and Arapahoes went to their Lakota allies and together declared war on the United States.⁵²

In 1888, an article titled “A Reckless Slaughter” appeared in *The Omaha Daily Bee*. Second Lieutenant Heber M. Creel, remembering the massacre years later, told the Omaha Daily Bee that, “he consented . . . to relate because it was a matter that has never been set right in the pages of history.”⁵³ Creel did not want the nation to believe this atrocity was acceptable or tolerable because the nation had been at war.

The Sand Creek Massacre was a step backward for Native Americans who had been promised good relations with the United States government and also with the Confederacy. The Native Americans went from trusting governments to a general suspiciousness. When the war ended, the Native Americans felt empty, misrepresented, and dissatisfied.

While nothing can compare to the atrocities performed by Chivington and his Third Colorado Calvary to the Cheyenne and Arapaho, violent acts by the government were present throughout the war.

The passing of Black Codes throughout the United States catered to only the white men in prominent positions of power. In Louisiana, this discriminating legislation acted as a new kind of slavery, targeting free blacks who were unemployed. Southerners were told that hiring free blacks would be taking them away from their previous employers or their plantation owners.⁵⁴

After the war, treaties made with the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations explicitly allowed white men to come onto Indian territory and demand land. This could be done easily if they had served as missionaries for three or five years, or if they had been appointed officials in those territories. The land demanded could be as much as they wanted up to 640 acres but they could not impede on schools or other public institutions.⁵⁵ Southerners had to equally deal with the United States governing the uses of the land that had once belonged to them. The nation was uniting again under one government, and those who had rebelled were beginning to feel the result.

New Land and New Treaties: The Aftermath of the Civil War

At the surrender of Lee’s Army at Appomattox Court House, a Seneca Indian named Ely Parker was present; he had served as the secretary to Ulysses S. Grant. He was the only Native American present, and he was seen as being the representative for the bridge between non-American Indians and American Indians.⁵⁶ Out in the west, General Stand Watie and his men would be the last of the Confederacy to cease fighting.⁵⁷ Watie, toward the end of the war, wrote to his wife Sarah:

Sometimes I examine myself thoroughly and I will always come to the conclusion that I am not such a bad man at last as I am looked upon. God will give me justice if I am to be punished for the opinions of other people, who do not know my heart I can't help it. If I commit an error I do it without bad intention. My great crime in the world is blunder, I will get into scrapes without intention or any bad motive. I call upon my God to judge me, he knows that I love my friends and above all others, my wife and children, the opinion of the world to contrary notwithstanding.⁵⁸

General Watie also spoke of being opposed to killing women and children earlier in the same letter. His morals ranked higher than most officers who fought in Indian Territory during and after the Civil War.

With the Confederacy no longer existing, the United States government worked to repair relations. The rebelling Indian nations received the same treatment the South did regarding treaties. The U.S. government took advantage of the rebelling Indian nations and used their rebellion as an excuse to confiscate their land.⁵⁹ The United States federal officials declared that the Cherokees and Creeks had forfeited all their land and previous treaty rights by their rebellion.⁶⁰

The transition was difficult for all Americans, especially Native Americans. The Five Civilized Tribes were already use to the way white Americans dealt and handled land, built on land, and used the land as private property. The tribes in the west were a different story. One of the major cultural differences between white and Native Americans at the time was that these tribes struggled to grasp the idea that a person could “possess legal title to a piece of land and use it to exploit it as he or she saw fit.”⁶¹ The tribes in the west believed that land belonged to everyone and should be treasured and used in such a way that future generations could later enjoy it.

However, the western tribes eventually started to assimilate into white traditions. In 1887, the United States government passed the Dawes Act. The Dawes Act “aimed to reform the ‘weaknesses’ of Indian life—the absence of private property and the nomadic tradition—by forcing Indians to be farmers and landowners.” The legislation also emphasized the treatment of Indians not as tribe members but as individuals, calling for the breakup of reservations.⁶²

Some Native Americans were still trying to reform to the new ways of government. The end of the war caused an uproar for Indian nations all over the continent. The United States encountered a precocious and steady growth away from pre-Civil War patterns. Slavery had been abolished, and Indian nations broke up. Populations moved west to expand the United States, and the road to reconstruction began.

Conclusion

The importance of Native American involvement in the war extends beyond the stereotype of an oppressed people being pushed out of their homelands. Their experience was unique and tragic, yet familiar. While the atrocities they experienced by white men cannot be justified, some of the major themes of the war can be applied as a way to relate their experience with other groups.

Through the struggles of picking sides when the Civil War began, both White Americans and Indians were caught in a place of fighting against those similar to themselves. John Ross and Stand Watie, two prominent figures within the Cherokee Indian Territory, disagreed with what to do. Watie believed in fighting for the Confederacy—he later became Brigadier General—while Ross wanted to remain neutral. In the end, the Cherokee nation sided with the Confederacy, beginning a wave of choosing allies in the Indian Territory nations.

Americans faced the same dilemma. When the Southern states began to secede from the Union, Americans had to pick their alliances. The nation's divide tore families apart and will forever be written in the pages of our nation's history as the bloodiest war fought on American soil.

Whether politically or economically tied to one side or another, Native Americans faced the hardship of being pushed aside when they had been promised treaties by the United States government. Both the Union and the Confederacy promised them many things—representation within their houses of leadership, land, independence and freedom.

However, no one was treated fairly. Those who remained neutral were no better than those who chose sides. Every Native American and White American faced the possibility of starvation or the loss of family. More than 600,000 individuals died during the Civil War. Women lost their husbands and went through much trouble to gain support from the government for their families.

Native American involvement in the Civil War reflects the struggles of an oppressed people. However, their involvement quiets the stereotype of helpless citizens being shafted by a heartless government. Native Americans stood up for what they wanted and fought bravely to attain that. By their involvement, they showed the character of the American spirit. Native Americans and White Americans both fought for an idealistic nation. Both wanted freedom, and both supported their views strongly. Through the eyes of the Native American experience in the Civil War, we see the experience of all Americans in one of the most devastating times in United States history.

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- ⁴² Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 73.
- ⁴³ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fort Sumter to Perryville, Vol. I*, 286.
- ⁴⁴ Robert M. Utley, 75. Also: Indian participation in the Battle of Fredericksburg on December 10-11, 1862, should be noted. A photograph in the Library of Congress archive shows injured Native American sharpshooters. This is interesting for the case of involvement, because it shows a more important role that Native Americans were playing: they weren't just soldiers. They were being given equal opportunities and positions as the White soldiers they were fighting beside.
- ⁴⁵ Pekka Hämäläinen, 313.
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