

**A Reassessment of President Jackson's Motivations Behind His Indian Removal
Policy**

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For his heroic acts during the War of 1812 and his popularity as an advocate of the common people, Andrew Jackson has been viewed as one of the nation's greatest presidents. Many of his policies were deeply controversial, however. Perhaps the best example of this was his policy of Native American removal, by which most of the Natives living east of the Mississippi were forcefully removed from their homeland. Under the *Indian Removal Act*, passed by Congress in 1830, thousands of Native Americans were evicted and relocated, including sixteen thousand Cherokee people (Bowers 95). During the appalling journey, which the Cherokee people called *The Trail of Tears*, more than twenty-five percent lost their lives (Bowers 95). While most historians agreed that this systematic and coercive removal was horrendous and inhumane, they disagreed as to how much blame President Jackson deserved. Supporters of Jackson viewed him as a pragmatic politician who genuinely acted with the Native Americans' best interest at heart and who did his best in difficult times to protect and advance the nation (Bowers 97). His critics see him as a scheming hypocrite who shared the greed of southern states' people and pursued the removal of Indians at any cost (Bowers 101). Frankly, Jackson was more concerned with his own political position than with the welfare of Native Americans and thus was largely responsible for the atrocities and injustices suffered by them. To better understand the issue of Native American removal and the reasons for pursuing it in the first place, previous efforts to address it must be considered. Native American displacement policy was not new; it had been addressed prior to Jackson's administration. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson proposed the Indians be encouraged to move to the newly acquired territory of the Louisiana Purchase (Parins 13). Under his agrarian concept of the nation, Jefferson envisioned a country of farmers. Years later, as the American population and economy expanded, President James Monroe suggested that Congress pass legislation to fulfill Jefferson's

plan of voluntary relocation; he argued it was the Indians' only chance at survival since it would give them time to "civilize" (Parins 13). The fundamental difference between the previous efforts to deal with the Indian issue and the new one pursued by Jackson was that the earlier ones were voluntary. Andrew Jackson was the first President to employ a more aggressive and forceful approach.

After the 1820's the south began an era of westward movement, as the cotton industry shifted from the coastal states to the newly settled Mississippi Valley (Norton 332). As plantation owners moved into the already occupied lands of the Native American Nations, plantation owners quickly became proponents of their removal. They desired the land not only for agricultural benefits, but also for the gold and transportation routes found in the lands of the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Creeks (Parins 9). An unrelenting wave of pressure for Indian removal was directed to the Federal Government. Having committed to economic development and westward expansion from the start, Jackson could not fail in his promise to the nation and had to act quickly. He made it clear to Congress on December 1829 that he intended to pursue a policy based on force, rather than one based on persuasion (Parins 13). Although Jackson claimed to be acting in both the country's and the Indian's best interest, the evidence showed that he was disinterested in and even hypocritical towards the American Indians. Though the policy was depicted as beneficial to the Native Americans, its true intent was to clear the lands at any cost.

In Jackson's first inaugural speech, he promised a humane and just policy, based on respect for Native American "rights and wants" (Bowers 103). Before long, his Secretary of War, John Eaton, persuaded the Choctaw people to sign a treaty that would remove them from their ancestral homelands in Mississippi. The coercive eviction of a people from their homeland

is neither humane nor just. To make matters worse, Jackson removed Thomas L. McKenney as head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs because he was a “warm friend of the Indians” (Bowers 103). Moreover, Jackson appointed John Berrien over William Wirt as Attorney General because he distrusted Wirt in matters of Native American removal (Bowers 103). If Jackson really wanted to promote Native American “rights and wants”, then it was unreasonable to get rid of the people that would stand for and advocate those rights and wants. The Jacksonian Native American policy was indeed hypocritical and contradictory.

Proponents of Jackson argue that his dominant goal was to “preserve the security and well-being of the United States and its Indian and white inhabitants” (Bowers 97). Jackson himself declared his concern for Native Americans in his inaugural speech to Congress: “Our conduct toward these people is deeply interesting to our national character”(Kennedy 281). However, Jackson disapproved of the 1831 Supreme Court case, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, which ruled that Native American tribes had the unquestionable right to their lands and could lose title only by voluntarily giving it up (Kimberly). Jackson disapproved of the decision by suspending the previously negotiated six-thousand dollar annuity to the Cherokees (Kimberly 106). The following year in *Worcester v. Georgia*, Chief Justice John Marshall further clarified the Native American position by declaring them as distinct political communities in which “the laws of Georgia can have no force” (Norton 256). New Jersey Senator, Theodore Frelinghuysen, supported the Native Americans’ innate right to the land. In his famous speech that opposed Native American Removal he argued that, “by immemorial possession, as the original tenants of the soil, they hold a title beyond and superior to the adverse pretensions of our Confederation and subsequent Union” (Kennedy 282). However, as the Cherokee Nation celebrated the “glorious news,” as Phoenix editor Elias Boudinot called it, Jackson expressed disagreement

towards the Supreme Court's decision when he, according to newspapers of the time, was quoted: "John Marshall has made his decision: now let him enforce it" (Norton 256). Evidently, Jackson's attitude towards both cases did not reflect his goal of preserving the security and well-being of the Native American inhabitants and instead portrayed his true intent of encouraging their removal, to the point of refusing to enforce Supreme Court decisions. His conscious disregard for the decisions of the Court showed that he was clearly motivated by a desire to acquire the land that white settlers longed for at any cost.

Jackson's refusal to recognize Native American nations as civilized and sovereign contributed to his hypocritical policy. Those who view Jackson as a pragmatic politician argue that the only viable solution to the "Indian problem" was removal since "neither adequate protection nor quick assimilation of the Indians was possible" (Bowers 100). These claims that portrayed the Native American people and their culture as inferior are disproved by the fact that the Native Americans of the Southwest were actually an economically self-sufficient culture and lived under common law. The Cherokees devised an eighty-six-character phonetic alphabet that allowed for a written language, developed a Cherokee language Bible, and established a bilingual tribal newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix* in 1828 (Norton 255). Furthermore, The Cherokees also had a formal government with a bicameral legislature, a court system, and a written constitution modeled after that of the United States (Norton 255). Economically, the Cherokees transitioned from an economy of hunting and agriculture to one based on trade and currency (Norton 255). The Native Americans' willingness to abandon their ancestral practices of hunting and agriculture in an effort to assimilate into American culture debunks the argument that the Native Americans were incapable of blending in and adapting. Evidently, there was no

need to “teach them the arts of civilization,” as Jackson asserted in his inaugural speech to Congress (Kennedy 281).

Upon deeper examination of Jackson’s Native American policy, one can conclude that he may not deserve to be amongst the nation’s greatest presidents. His legacy was tarnished by the display of hypocrisy he exhibited during his service. His policies and actions were morally wrong and in some cases illegal. His refusal to enforce Supreme Court decisions constituted a grave failure of the system of checks and balances. Because of his refusal to recognize Native Americans as sophisticated people, failure to enforce Supreme Court decisions, and constant contradictions in his policy, one can conclude that President Andrew Jackson was a hypocrite who did not act in the Native American’s best interest. He was clearly motivated by the desire to please his southern constituents and expand the country across the gold-rich, fertile lands of the Native American Indians. The suffering of the natives through the *Trail of Tears*, which ruptured ancestral Native American communities and ended the lives of thousands, was a direct result of President Andrew Jackson’s hypocrisy.

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