

Tecumseh & the Pan-Indian Confederation

In the two centuries prior to the War of 1812, Native Americans had either been pushed out by European settlers or forced to sign treaties which tended to benefit the other side. The Europeans were not the only ones capable of guile. For example, on more than one occasion Britain signed land treaties with the Iroquois Confederation for land the Five Nations did not actually control. In practice, this meant the Iroquois benefitted from selling the land belonging to another nation. The Thirteen Colonies and New France expanded their influence through the signing of treaties; however, something changed in the early 19th century making the whole treaty process more difficult. Actually, it's not that something changed but rather that *someone* emerged who was both capable and willing to challenge the signing of any future treaties with Indians. He belonged to the Shawnee Nation and his name was Tecumseh.

In the 16th Century, the Shawnee dwelled in the Virginia/Pennsylvania area. They had the misfortune of being one of the first indigenous peoples forced to leave their ancestral homeland because of the encroachment of white settlers. In fact, they were forced to move westward (twice) to escape the expansion of white settlements. The fate of the Shawnee was shared by dozens of other nations, e.g. Potawatomi, Huron, etc. The Shawnee were essentially mercenaries (or professional soldiers). They were hired by militarily weaker peoples to defend and/or fight for them. Though the Shawnee lived in towns and were accomplished agriculturalists, their additional talent as warriors meant they were adaptable and mobile; and their mobility meant they had made important contacts with indigenous groups living well inside the interior of North America. These contacts, and their reputation as warriors, proved useful for two reasons: firstly, the fearsome (albeit weakened) Iroquois ceded land to them in the Ohio Valley in 1788 where they settled for the third and final time; and secondly, the military network established by the Shawnee Nation enabled them to spread a message to the Indian nations of the West, i.e. the Americans were coming. As early as the 1680s, the Shawnee had warned their clients and allies about the threat posed by the whites. By the early 1800s warnings turned into an active attempt by Tecumseh to establish a pan-Indian Confederacy spanning what remained of North America not yet settled by whites. In particular, the pan-Indian Confederacy was established to stop the westward expansion of the United States.

A confederacy spanning the entire continent of North America required effective leadership and organization. In order to establish such a confederation, it would take a special person capable of

bringing a multitude of Indian nations from across the continent together. Tecumseh was such a person. He was a Shawnee war captain. He was also an effective orator; moreover, he earned the respect of many native leaders when he defended Indian rights by openly opposing the signing of the *Treaty of Fort Wayne* (1809). In this treaty, a delegation of half-starved Delaware, Potawatomi, Miami, and Kickapoo Indians, agreed to give away 12,000 square kilometers to the United States. Although neither Tecumseh nor the Shawnee had any claim on the land sold, he insisted that Indian land was held in common by all tribes; therefore, no land could be sold without the agreement of *every single Indian nation then residing in North America*. Due to the pressure placed upon the Americans by Tecumseh the *Treaty of Fort Wayne* was the final treaty signed by the Americans with an Indian delegation. Tecumseh's interference actually led to open warfare between the United States and his Indian alliance. In fact, the Americans abandoned diplomatic approaches for expanding their presence westward for the remainder of the 19th century. Instead of treating with Native Americans the United States would eradicate and remove the unwanted Indians.

The Shawnee knew full well that they could not retreat forever. At some point, they had to make a stand. Their only hope of success was to unify native peoples into a single, powerful military force before it was too late. If Indians stood as one against the Americans, then there was hope they might hold on to their lands. Unfortunately for Tecumseh and his dream of a confederacy, indigenous peoples were not in full agreement with one another when it came to the "American Problem." Some tribes hoped that if they accommodated the United States they would be spared the fate of the Shawnee, e.g. The Civilized Tribes (Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Choctaw). Consequently, Tecumseh found it impossible to convince entire tribes to join his cause. Instead, he had to settle for individual villages, ones often dissenting from the wishes of their mother tribes, joining him. Another reason why some nations chose not to join his confederacy was that some groups did not feel the need. They felt they lived well out of the reach of the Americans. The Dakota of the Great Plains, for instance, reasoned that even the infamous American lust for land would be satisfied well before they got to Dakota Territory. The Dakota were wrong. The Dakota did not understand the Americans like Tecumseh and they lost their land like every other indigenous group. The only difference between the Dakota and Indian Confederacy was timing: whereas the Confederacy was destroyed at the Battle of the Thames in 1813, the Dakota lost everything by 1862 during the U.S-Dakota War (a small war part of the larger genocidal Indian Wars fought by the United States as it settled the West).