

The Indian Frontier in the Age of Jefferson

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The history of North American frontiers is the story of the interaction of many peoples over time and within the context of place. Complex and not easily told, it involves a host of issues, such as race, class, gender, politics, economics, culture, religion, and military affairs, to name only a few of the more important matters that historians consider when explaining the broader subject of frontiers. The history of the Indian frontier in the age of Jefferson is the story of conflict and cooperation between Indians and whites in areas that both claimed. Often it is more about a struggle for power by Indians and whites than a history of cooperation, but it is always about cultural interaction over time and space. Yet, it is just not a simple story of whites versus Indians. Native American culture was too complex for the creation of a monolithic force to prevent the acquisition, if not seizure of Indian lands. Just as the Spanish, French, British, and Americans formulated and executed different policies for dealing with the Indian nations within the territory that each claimed, the Indian nations also had different policies and plans for coping not only with the Europeans and Americans, but also with each other.

The history of the Indian frontier, then, is the story of self-interest, violence, and dispossession and not of a linear progression of the frontier as a boundary line of westward movement. Rather the term "Indian frontier" better describes the zone or region of encounter where whites and Indians interacted. Ultimately conflict and eventual conquest are central themes, although such an outcome was never predetermined. One should speak then in terms of frontiers, rather than a frontier. The plural or multiple nature of frontiers in American history is never more evident than when studying the relationships between Indian, European and Anglo-American cultures on the North American continent. Moreover, even if the frontier can be considered a neutral region for interaction, the participants, both Indian and white, who competed for that space and place were not homogeneous, monolithic groups. Rather, many frontiers existed simultaneously and changed constantly.

The French, British, and Spanish used the term "frontier" as an unsettled or slightly populated area that both Indians and whites used, if not shared. It was an area that each culture wanted as its own, but also one in which both made accommodations for the other based on their own cultural, economic, political and military needs. The Americans, however, had a far different concept of land holding: a strict concept of separate space. Soon after the War for Independence, they pursued a policy of extinguishing Indian title to lands with cession treaties that gave legal title to specific lands that white settlers could purchase as their own. Often violence initiated by white settlers who squatted on Indian lands preceded the cession treaties designed to protect settlers and drive the Indians away. American frontier policy, based on assumptions of racial and cultural superiority as well as an insatiable desire for land, expansion, and empire, then, emphasized exclusion of Indian people from white society rather than inclusion and integration. During the early nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson played the leading role in obtaining Indian lands for white settlement and assisted in the Indians' acculturation, that is, their adoption of white cultural practices such as farming, education, and Christianization. He also advocated moving Indian nations west of the Mississippi River if they refused to adopt white culture and assimilate into white society.

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Indian policy in the age of Jefferson begins with the conclusion of the American Revolution. On 3 September 1783, the Treaty of Paris officially ended the war between Great Britain and the United Colonies. But it did not bring peace to the trans-Appalachian frontier nor mention the Indians, who learned of it the following spring as government officials and others spread the news among the nations in the West. Beyond the mountains, white settlers now pressed incessantly for access to Indian lands, often risking their lives by crossing north of the Ohio River to take it. The government of the new nation, operating under the Articles of Confederation, wanted to gain access to those lands and keep the peace. But it struggled to institute a systematic process for the acquisition of Indian lands, and it proved woefully unable to prevent the westering frontier people from going where they would and taking what they wanted.

During the War for Independence, the national government attempted to gain control of Indian and white relations, particularly regarding the ownership and acquisition of Indian lands. Article IX of the Articles of Confederation gave Congress the “sole and exclusive right and power of regulating . . . the trade and managing all affairs with the Indians, not members of any of the states, provided that the legislative right of any state within its own limits be not infringed or violated.” Unfortunately, this provision did not provide an effective governmental procedure for dealing with Indian and white land problems. Essentially, the Articles of Confederation merely continued the British precedent of recognizing the Indians’ possessory right to the soil. Nevertheless, Article IX implied that Indian lands could be legally acquired through negotiations between the national government and the tribes and documented with cession treaties.

Individual efforts to purchase or squat on Indians lands, however, forced the national government to clarify its authority under the Articles to prevent white settlers and speculators from encroaching and provoking violent retribution. On 22 September 1783, Congress proclaimed that it alone had the power to prohibit and forbid “all persons from making settlements on lands inhabited or claimed by Indians, without the limits of jurisdiction of any particular state, and from purchasing or receiving any gift or cession of such lands or claims without express authority and direction of the United States in Congress assembled.” Thereafter, any purchases from Indian nations or settlements on tribal lands without congressional permission were “null and void.” Although this congressional proclamation clarified the power of the central government over Indian lands beyond state boundaries, it suggested that the states could deal with Indian land problems within their own borders, an impression that portended trouble for the years to come, particularly in the South.

After the War for Independence, the new American government attempted to exert authority over tribal lands by treating the Indians like conquered nations, because most of the trans-Appalachian Indians had supported the British during the war. As losers in the great war for empire, they were expected by the white Americans to pay a price for choosing the wrong side in that contest. Consequently, government Indian commissioners, who made treaties with the various Indian nations, arbitrarily drew boundary lines and took lands without compensation. Although the commissioners promised governmental protection for the newly defined Indian territory, in reality white settlers encroached with impunity, and the national government had neither the will nor the power to keep them off Indian domain. Instead, the government worked to gain Indian land cessions in order to sell those lands and help pay the national debt and

provide farms for soldiers who had fought during the war. In doing so the government refused to recognize the Indians right to the soil because they, like the British, were a conquered people. The national government also operated on the premise that the Americans were a magnanimous people, and as victors, would dictate land policy to the Indians, who had mistakenly fought on the losing side during the Revolutionary War. This Indian land policy, however, failed from the very beginning, because the nations at whom it was directed did not agree and refused to accept the principles on which it was based.

The Indians whom the new government forced to cede lands viewed the War for Independence as no more than a continuation of the long running, though intermittent, fighting among whites to gain control over the eastern seaboard and of their own persistent struggle to keep whites off Indian lands. They had not sued for peace, and they did not consider themselves defeated. Moreover, they had no intention of ceding large tracts of land without receiving any compensation. Given this conflict over who would take and who would keep land as a matter of right, the new nation had no assurance of peace at a time when the government most needed it. The new nation could not afford an Indian war because the army was too weak and government coffers too empty to defeat the western nations individually or collectively.

By 1786, the Indian policy of the central government under the Articles of Confederation was in shambles. The western Indian nations resisted the execution of treaties that required them to cede substantial portions of their lands, and a general Indian war seemed likely. Fortunately, Henry Knox, secretary of war, foresaw the impending danger on the trans-Appalachian frontier and the implications to the success of the new nation of a major Indian war. Knox believed the central government had to return to the British and colonial policy of purchasing land from the Indians instead of taking it by forcing treaties on them. Accordingly, he recommended the granting of retroactive compensation for Indian lands already ceded in the Northwest, as well as the purchase of future land cessions, because the Americans would surely want additional lands and the Indians needed to be kept friendly and agreeable to that possibility. Essentially, Knox believed the government had three options for shaping Indian policy on the trans-Appalachian frontier: First, it could abandon all desire for future acquisitions. Second, it could take as much land as it desired, provided that it had the required military power. Or, third, it could acquire Indians lands in a manner that would keep the peace and satisfy both parties to the negotiations. By 1786, the first two alternatives were not viable, but payment for Indian lands would keep the peace and achieve the desired end of aiding American expansion. No viable alternative existed; necessity dictated a change in Indian policy concerning the acquisition of tribal lands.

By late in Summer 1787, Congress had turned away from a policy of coercion for the acquisition of Indian lands to one of conciliation and purchase. This policy, acknowledged in the Northwest Ordinance, promised the Indians that the government would not take lands without their consent. It also had an added advantage: the northern tribes on the trans-Appalachian frontier were familiar with it, because the British and the northern colonies had long used this procedure for the acquisition of Indian lands. Unstated, but clearly understood by whites, was the principle that the government would still acquire the lands that it wanted, but it would do so by negotiating cession treaties, rather than by using force. Problems remained, however, because this policy was based on the assumptions that the Indians had a “right to the soil” in the trans-

Appalachian region, but also that they would willingly sell their lands and that white settlers would not encroach on Indian domain before its sale to the federal government.

With the reorganization of the central government under the Constitution in 1789, Congress held broad powers to regulate commerce and deal with the Indians. Accordingly, in July 1790, Congress attempted to manage the acquisition of Indian lands by passing the first Indian Trade and Intercourse Act. Congress intended this act to make the concept of the acquisition a workable policy by means of negotiated purchase through cession treaties. The Trade and Intercourse Act prohibited individuals or states from acquiring Indian lands, unless those lands first passed to the federal government in a cession treaty. By so doing, the act recognized the right of Indian title by possession. Both President Washington and Secretary Knox hoped this policy would keep the peace and enable the orderly sale of Indian lands to the federal government whenever needed. Once the federal government had the military power to demand a cession treaty and enforce its provisions, the cession treaty became a viable instrument of national policy for gaining access to Indian lands.

Several years later, in 1796, Congress authorized the president to use force to remove settlers from Indian lands, but the federal government had no intention of guaranteeing the boundaries of the Indian nations in perpetuity. Rather, federal policymakers assumed that the Indian territories would be gradually pushed westward, because the Indians would willingly sell their lands and retreat as settlers advanced. The federal government did not have the resources to keep whites from encroaching on Indian lands, nor did the state and local governments have the will to strictly enforce the removal of whites from Indian territory. At best, the federal government could only make the withdrawal of the tribes and the cession of Indian lands as orderly and as peaceful as possible. As a result, federal Indian policy made clashes between the two civilizations inevitable, and the new policy proved scarcely more equitable to the Indians than during the Confederation period, when lands were taken by right of conquest. Consequently, many white Americans began to adopt the attitude that the Indian problem would never be solved until all of the tribes had been moved west of the Mississippi River.

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When Thomas Jefferson assumed the presidency in 1801, Indian affairs became a major focus of his administration. As secretary of state during the Washington administration, Jefferson had advocated the protection of the Indians but not at the expense of endangering whites. As president, he forcefully sought the acquisition of Indian lands. In his first annual message to Congress, Jefferson anticipated the “settlement of the extensive country remaining vacant within our limits.” These empty lands, of course, were those used by the Indians for hunting and fishing, but once the Indians became settled farmers they would no longer need those seemingly empty and unused lands. Jefferson intended to purchase them for the expansion of white settlers in frontier areas. Peace, land purchases, and civilization, that is, the education and Christianization of the friendly nations, were principles of Jefferson’s Indian policy.

When Jefferson took office in 1801, however, the white frontiersmen and women were demanding additional land cessions from the Indians. Jefferson soon realized that the frontier farmers had no desire to incorporate Indian agriculturists into white American society. Still, he mistakenly thought that the Indians would be willing to accept the benefits of white civilization

and sell their unneeded lands. He was convinced that if the Indians owned their own small farms, they would eventually be acculturated and assimilated into American society.

This policy of cultural adaptation would free large tracts of Indian lands for white settlers. Agriculture would encourage the acceptance of private property and provide a secure foundation for a self-sustaining church and an orderly civil government. Farming would also help prevent starvation and make life less tenuous during the winter. Most important, Indian farmers would need less land than those who relied on the hunt for sustenance. Usually government agents to the tribes and missionaries attempted to introduce white agricultural practices by giving the Indians plows, livestock, and agricultural instruction.

When Jefferson met with various Indian delegations, he encouraged them to give up the hunt, accept the plow, and enjoy the secure life that came with it. In early January 1802, he told a group of Indians who visited Washington that “We shall, with great pleasure, see your people become disposed to cultivate the earth, to raise herds of useful animals and to spin and weave, for their food and clothing. These resources are certain; they will never disappoint you: while those of hunting may fail, and expose your women and children to the miseries of hunger and cold. We will with pleasure furnish you with implements for the most necessary arts, and with persons who may instruct you how to make use of them.” For Jefferson, private property and the agricultural life would not only enable the Indians to have the best possible life; they would also enable the Indians and whites to live together in peace while freeing large tracts of land for white settlement. With this reasoning, Jefferson could justify the acquisition of additional lands for the purpose of national expansion. The Indians would benefit incidentally from the loss of their lands, because they would become small-scale farmers.

About that same time, Jefferson expressed a more callous view by noting that the policy of the federal government was to lure the Indians to agriculture and to encourage them to cede their lands. Jefferson wrote: “To promote this disposition to exchange lands which they have to spare and we want for necessities, and which we have to spare and they want, we shall push our trading houses, and be glad to see then good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individual can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands. . . . In this way our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States or remove beyond the Mississippi.”

Jefferson was invariably an optimist about his Indian policy, but he was wrong in his assessment. Instead of amicably settling down to an agricultural life, as white civilization knew it, and willingly selling unneeded lands, the Indians became increasingly reluctant to part with the lands that they held for agriculture and hunting.

An indication of the growing desire of the Indians to retain their lands came as early as Summer 1801. At that time, members of a Cherokee delegation told Secretary of War Henry Dearborn that while they believed the United States government did not want to take their lands, they knew the “frontier people” did. The Cherokee leaders poignantly asked how they could be expected to follow the wishes of the federal government and increase their agricultural activities if, at the same time, they lost their lands to white settlers or had to sell more land to the

government. Indeed, the Cherokees and other southern Indians, such as the Creeks and the Choctaws, had reason to worry, because the frontier people in the South were impatient to seize control of Indian lands. The pressure that Georgia placed on the Creeks, for example, was so great that this nation requested the federal government to post soldiers on its land to keep the frontier settlers from taking tribal property.

During his first term in office, then, Jefferson had thought out his Indian policy. First, he intended to purchase Indian lands on the southern and western frontiers, particularly along the Mississippi River in order to provide a well-defended border between the French in Louisiana and the Spanish in Florida. Second, the Indians would be civilized, that is, taught to read and write English, Christianized, and taught to cultivate the soil in the tradition of white farmers. Third, he would increase the trading houses among the Indians, where they would be encouraged to buy goods that they could not afford and thereby acquire debts that could only be paid by the sale of lands. Once encircled by federal domain, the Indians in the interior would be increasingly forced to live as small-scale farmers, as the white population continued to decrease the game and press for their lands. Jefferson also wanted to keep his Indian trading and civilization programs secret, at least from the Indians. Otherwise, he feared that they would reject both because they had become increasingly reluctant to sell their lands. He also favored driving west of the Mississippi River the Indians “foolhardy enough to take up the hatchet” against his policy.

Indeed, the idea of moving the Indians to the west side of the Mississippi River originated with Thomas Jefferson. Once there, he believed, they would be far from the corrupting influences of white civilization and have time to learn agriculture and to become educated and civilized before they had further contact with white society. The Louisiana Purchase, which gave the United States a vast domain in which to place the Indians, made Jefferson's idea viable, because it enabled the federal government to trade or exchange western land for Indian land east of the Mississippi River.

Without question, the most important aspect of Jefferson's Indian policy involved moving the eastern nations west of the Mississippi River. In 1803, Jefferson wrote that if any tribe made war on the United States, he proposed “the seizing of the whole country of that tribe, and driving them across the Mississippi as the only condition of peace.” Jefferson had contemplated Indian removal months, if not years, before the Louisiana Purchase. In 1805, he offered the Chickasaws a land exchange, and in 1808, made the same offer to the Choctaws as well as the Cherokees, who wanted to become citizens of the United States and keep their lands. Some eastern nations had already voluntarily moved west of the Mississippi River in the eighteenth century and others would continue to do so before 1830, when forced removal became national policy. They moved west fleeing white expansion, government civilization programs, and tribal warfare as well as seeking better hunting grounds. Still, Thomas Jefferson established the federal Indian removal policy for the nations that rejected white civilization or waged war on the United States.

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By the end of Jefferson's presidency, his Indian policy was clear. Reduced to the essentials, it provided for the following:

- 1) keeping the peace by protecting both whites and Indians from each other;
- 2) using trading posts to create debts the Indians could settle by selling their lands;

- 3) using agents to prevent Indian alliances with Britain, France, and Spain and to gain land cessions;
- 4) exchanging lands east of the Mississippi River for lands west of the river and removing the Indians to the Louisiana Territory; and
- 5) securing Indian lands as the price for peace whenever hostilities occurred.

Jefferson executed his Indian policy under the constitutional authorization for Congress to regulate trade and his power to make treaties for the purchase of Indian lands with the advice and consent of the Senate. Although Jefferson's policy was coercive, he firmly believed the Indians must become acculturated and assimilated into white society. Yet this policy was flawed from its inception because he believed the Indians would rationally agree to sell their lands whenever the federal government wanted to buy it for white settlers. This policy assumed that the Indians would give up their cultural, economic and social values and traditions, particularly regarding land-ownership.

Jefferson's plan for a rational, orderly and systematic Indian policy quickly disintegrated, because civil and military authorities could not prevent whites from settling on Indian lands. The army was too weak to guarantee Indian boundaries and evict white settlers who intruded. Jefferson understood white soldiers could not shoot white settlers to protect Indian lands. Political as well as military reality prevented such action. Because Jefferson could not guarantee Indian lands, and because he believed that ultimately those lands would be settled by whites, he avidly sought their purchase whenever possible.

Jefferson's land purchases through the cession treaty process also created internal division among the tribes and fed a growing native nationalism. By 1807, this nativist movement, led by the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and the Prophet, ended Jefferson's acquisition of Indian lands. Increasingly he turned his attention to the prospect of war with Great Britain, the Indian attacks in the Northwest, and both the Spanish and Indian attacks in the Southwest.

Overall, however, Jefferson had no interest in preserving Indian culture within white America. With white diseases, war, the liquor trade, and the depletion of game animals, Jefferson saw no future for the Indians except those who sold tribal lands, became small-scale farmers, adopted white culture, and intermarried with whites. The only hope the Indians had for survival, Jefferson believed, was to adopt white culture, and he accepted the responsibility for government education and agricultural programs initiated during the Washington administration. "In truth," he wrote, "the ultimate point of rest and happiness for them is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people." Yet Jefferson's Indian policy, which sought peace, civilization and, most important, the acquisition of Indian lands, had no mechanism other than cession treaties to achieve it. Government agents and religious missionaries confronted a host of Indian leaders, who, with the exception of the Cherokees, did not have a politically centralized decision-making process. In 1808, the Cherokees had organized a national government and drafted a constitution, but other tribes--particularly the northwestern and western Indians--had no such organization. Among them, tribal councils involved factional debates between autonomous villages. The Indian nations did not have a single political authority that could negotiate with the federal government and make binding decisions on behalf of all

members of the Indian nation. Moreover, Jefferson's Indian policy required male hunters to assume the traditionally female role of agriculturists and to recognize leadership based on wealth rather than war, diplomacy, and kinship, particularly among the northern and western Indians. Moreover, Jefferson's legacy of permitting white encroachment on Indian lands, followed by armed conflict and land cessions, did not provide for the guarantee of Indian land boundaries by either law or force.

Near the end of his administration, Jefferson considered the state of Indian affairs a vindication of his policy of civilization, particularly for the southern Indians who made the most progress in adopting an agricultural life. By the time Jefferson left the presidency in 1809, he had acquired more than 200,000 square miles of Indian territory in more than thirty treaties with approximately a dozen of tribes. Most of these lands were along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, which increasingly confined the Indians between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River where they would be easier to control while government agents pursued more treaties for the cession of their lands.

After Jefferson left the presidency, his successors continued his policy of land acquisition, civilization (meaning education and Christianization), and removal. Many Americans accepted his policy for dealing with the Indians, although the frontier people favored removal or extermination rather than education and integration. Overall, however, Jefferson's ideas became the foundation of Indian policy during the nineteenth century, with his plans for education and Christianization providing the moral justification for the seizure of Indian lands.

Jefferson's Indian policy, then, essentially advocated the integration of Native Americans into white culture and demanded the rejection of Indian culture while offering isolation and segregation to the Indians who refused to accept it. Given the aggressive nature of frontier men and women, who sought land as a matter of personal right rather than acquisition based on law, and the inability and unwillingness of the federal government to prevent their encroachment on Indian lands, Jefferson had few, if any, viable alternatives. Jefferson believed that he could only keep the peace by acquiring Indian lands and removing those nations who were unwilling to meld into white society. Even so, Jefferson's Indian policy was neither equitable nor humane, and its legacies of dispossession, poverty, and isolation remain on the Indian reservations in the American West in the twenty-first century.