

Andrew Jackson and the “Children of the Forest”

By *BILL BIGELOW*

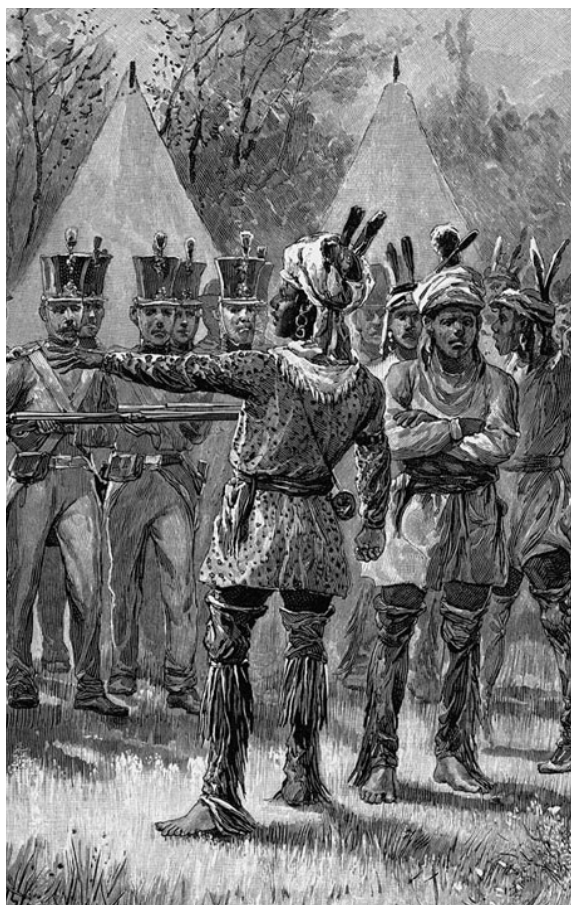
AN UNFORTUNATE BUT RECURRING feature of U.S. history has been the tendency of political leaders to lie to the American people. The mainstream media have often simply reported these lies with little or no critique, functioning as “stenographers to power,” to borrow from the title of a book by media critic Norman Solomon. This is not to say that everything government leaders tell us is a lie. However, an informed and skeptical public is perhaps the best defense against statements that mask policies that undermine human rights, at home and abroad.

A U.S. history course should seek to nurture this informed skepticism in students. It should encourage them to question the premises of textbooks, newspapers, films, and speeches of political leaders. It should ask them to check assertions against historical evidence.

The speech Andrew Jackson delivered to Congress in December 1830 is a good example of how leaders rely on widespread ignorance to promote their policies. For example, anyone even remotely familiar with the Cherokee people at the time would know that it was ludicrous to characterize them as “a few savage hunters.” Some people surely knew that this was a wildly inaccurate description, but didn’t care because they supported Jackson’s Indian policy. But others almost certainly assumed that, since Jackson is president, he must know best. In instances such as this, people’s critical capacities, or lack of them, have life and death consequences. In my experience, students find it exhilarating to discover that they have the knowledge and ability to critique the pronouncements of a U.S. president.

Materials Needed:

1. Copies for students of the Cherokee and Seminole roles from the Cherokee/Seminole Removal role play (if you did not do this activity with students).
2. Copies for students of the speech “Andrew Jackson: On Indian Removal.”



U.S. soldiers capture Seminole leader Osceola.

Suggested Procedure:

1. There are numerous ways of using Jackson’s speech to promote students’ critical skills. If you chose *not* to do the Cherokee/Seminole Removal role play, you might begin by asking students to count off into two groups. Half should read the Cherokee role and half the Seminole role (see pp. 6 and 10 in the role play). Tell students that soon President Andrew Jackson is coming to class and that he will argue that both groups—the Cherokees and Seminoles—as well as all Indians east of the Mississippi River, should be moved west of the Mississippi River, by force if necessary. (You’ll play Jackson, but at this point you needn’t tell them that.) Their task will be to research the Cherokee and Seminole (and if you like, the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek) and be prepared to give evidence about why these people should be permitted to stay on their land. I’ve found that even a class period in the library is sufficient time for students to find lots out about these nations.
2. Seat the students in rows, remind them that they are Seminoles and Cherokees, and, as Jackson, read aloud the excerpts of his speech (pp. 4-5)—the more drama on your part, the better. Afterwards, allow students to question you, press conference fashion. (There’s a good chance that your students, like mine, will be tripped up by some of the SAT words in Jackson’s speech—pecuniary, consummation, inanimate, etc.—and so I review the vocabulary list with students before launching into the speech.)
3. If the class did complete the Cherokee/Seminole Removal role play, all the better. They could do more library research (see above), or simply represent critical journalists at the time and raise sharp questions of “Jackson” after the speech.

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4. Following the speech and press conference, here are some questions that people may want to consider:
 - What do you believe was true in Jackson’s speech? What don’t you believe?
 - What is Jackson’s definition of “civilized”? of “savage”?
 - Could the Cherokees or Seminoles be classified as “a few savage hunters”? If not, why does Jackson use this expression?
 - What facts must a listener be ignorant of in order to believe Jackson’s speech?
 - How might enslaved African Americans have reacted to Jackson’s speech? In what ways are they included or excluded?
 - How are enslaved African Americans deeply affected by the policy of Indian removal?
 - What is “progress” to Jackson?
 - Jackson says, “Doubtless it will be painful to leave the graves of their fathers, but what do they do more than our ancestors did or than our children are now doing?” Is this a fair comparison?
 - Why does Jackson believe that the policy of the U.S. government “toward the red man is not only liberal but generous”?
 - Jackson calls the eastern Indians “children of the forest.” What does this description imply about the relationship between whites and Indians?
5. Ask students to write a critique of Jackson’s speech. They might complete this assignment as an “op-ed” piece in a northern paper or as a letter to Jackson as if they were a Cherokee or Seminole. They might write from the standpoint of a Cherokee several years later who traveled west on the Trail of Tears in 1838 or from the point of view of an enslaved

African American who was uprooted by his or her owner to move west onto better cotton land. One of my students wrote her paper as a letter to the U.S. government today demanding that Andrew Jackson's portrait be removed from the \$20 bill.

6. I ask students to begin to write the critique in segments. I first read them several sample introductions, written by students in previous years. We talk about how an introduction functions both as attention-getter and promise-giver. It should grab, but also must indicate a direction, offer a reader some sense of what's to come. Students begin their introductions in class, and after they write for a while I ask for a few volunteers to share what they've come up with. Here are a couple that might spark some ideas for students:

Sit! Lie down! Roll over! This is what you see us as, isn't it Mr. Jackson? "Savage hunters," "savage habits." Who, us? Mr. Jackson, we're not savages, nor do we practice savage habits. Only savages force a people to move from their roots. Only savages justify killing for profit with pretty lies.

"Children of the forest"? ... What exactly do you mean by this, Mr. Jackson? Perhaps you mean a people who have been brought up by trees, a lowly bush, or a pack of wolves. Do you mean that the Indians, mere "savages," know nothing about the world other than how to survive in the wilderness? Now you'd like to help by moving them westward so that your states and people may "advance rapidly in

population, wealth, and power." That's all fine for you but what about the Indians?

7. Students often lash out at the target of their critique—in this case, Jackson—without offering direct references to a given text. I want them to know that name-calling does not constitute a critique. I ask students to lift one quote from Jackson's speech and analyze it. For example, Rachel Knudson writes, *"To justify the Indians having to 'leave the graves of their fathers,' you mention that your forefathers 'left all that was dear in earthly objects. Our children by the thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new homes in distant regions.' Seek is the key word. Your forefathers were not forced but sought a land in which they could grow in population and expand their religion."* Ask students to share some of their writing to inspire and offer examples to one another.
8. As Linda Christensen points out, too often teachers—perhaps especially social studies teachers—*assign* essays, but don't *teach* them. The more we can teach the components of critical writing, the better the results will be. ■

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Andrew Jackson

On Indian Removal

[Message to Congress, December 6, 1830]

IT GIVES ME PLEASURE to announce to Congress that the benevolent policy of the government, steadily pursued for nearly 30 years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching to a happy consummation. Two important tribes have accepted the provision made for their removal at the last session of Congress, and it is believed that their example will induce the remaining tribes also to seek the same obvious advantages.

The consequences of a speedy removal will be important to the United States, to individual states, and to the Indians themselves. The pecuniary advantages which it promises to the government are the least of its recommendations. It puts an end to all possible danger of collision between the authorities of the general and state governments on account of the Indians. It will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters. By opening the whole territory between Tennessee on the north and Louisiana on the south to the settlement of the whites it will incalculably strengthen the southwestern frontier and render the adjacent states strong enough to repel future invasions without remote aid. It will relieve the whole state of Mississippi and the western part of Alabama of Indian occupancy, and enable those states to advance rapidly in population, wealth, and power.

It will separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites; free them from the power of the states; enable them to pursue happiness in their own way and under their own rude institutions; will retard the progress of decay, which is lessening their numbers, and perhaps

cause them gradually, under the protection of the government and through the influence of good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community. These consequences, some of them so certain and the rest so probable, make the complete execution of the plan sanctioned by Congress at their last session an object of much solicitude.

Toward the aborigines of the country no one can indulge a more friendly feeling than myself, or would go further in attempting to reclaim them from their wandering habits and make them a happy, prosperous people.

Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country, and philanthropy has been long busily employed on devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth. What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12 million happy people and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion?

The present policy of the government is but a continuation of the same progressive change by a milder process. The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the eastern states were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites. The waves of population and civilization are rolling to the westward and we now propose to acquire the countries occupied by the red men of the South and West by a fair

exchange, and at the expense of the United States, to send them to a land where their existence may be prolonged and perhaps made perpetual.

Doubtless it will be painful to leave the graves of their fathers; but what do they do more than our ancestors did or than our children are now doing? To better their condition in an unknown land our forefathers left all that was dear in earthly objects. Our children by thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new homes in distant regions. Does humanity weep at these painful separations from everything, animate and inanimate, with which the young heart has become entwined? Far from it. It is rather a source of joy that our country affords scope where our young population may range unconstrained in body or in mind, developing the power and faculties of man in their highest perfection. These remove hundreds and almost thousands of miles at their own expense, purchase the lands they occupy, and support themselves at their new homes from the moment of their arrival. Can it be cruel in this government when, by events which it cannot control, the Indian is made discontented in his ancient home to purchase his lands, to give him a new and extensive territory, to pay the expense of his removal, and support him a year in his new abode? How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing to the West on such conditions? If the offers made to the Indians were extended to them, they would be hailed with gratitude and joy.

And is it supposed that the wandering savage has a stronger attachment to his home than the settled, civilized Christian? Is it more afflicting to him to leave the graves of his fathers than it is to our brothers and children? Rightly considered, the policy of the general government toward the red man is not only liberal but generous. He is unwilling to submit to the laws of the states and mingle with their population. To save him from this alternative, or perhaps utter annihilation, the general government kindly offers him a new home, and proposes to pay the whole expense of his removal and settlement.

It is a duty which this government owes to the new states to extinguish as soon as possible the Indian title to all lands which Congress themselves have included within their limits. When this is done the duties of the general government in relation to the states and the Indians within their limits are at an end. The Indians may leave the state or not, as they choose. The purchase of their lands does not alter in the least their personal relations with the state government.

May we hope, therefore, that all good citizens, and none more zealously than those who think the Indians oppressed by subjection to the laws of the states, will unite in attempting to open the eyes of those children of the forest to their true conditions, and by a speedy removal to relieve them from all the evils, real or imaginary, present or prospective, with which they may be supposed to be threatened. ■