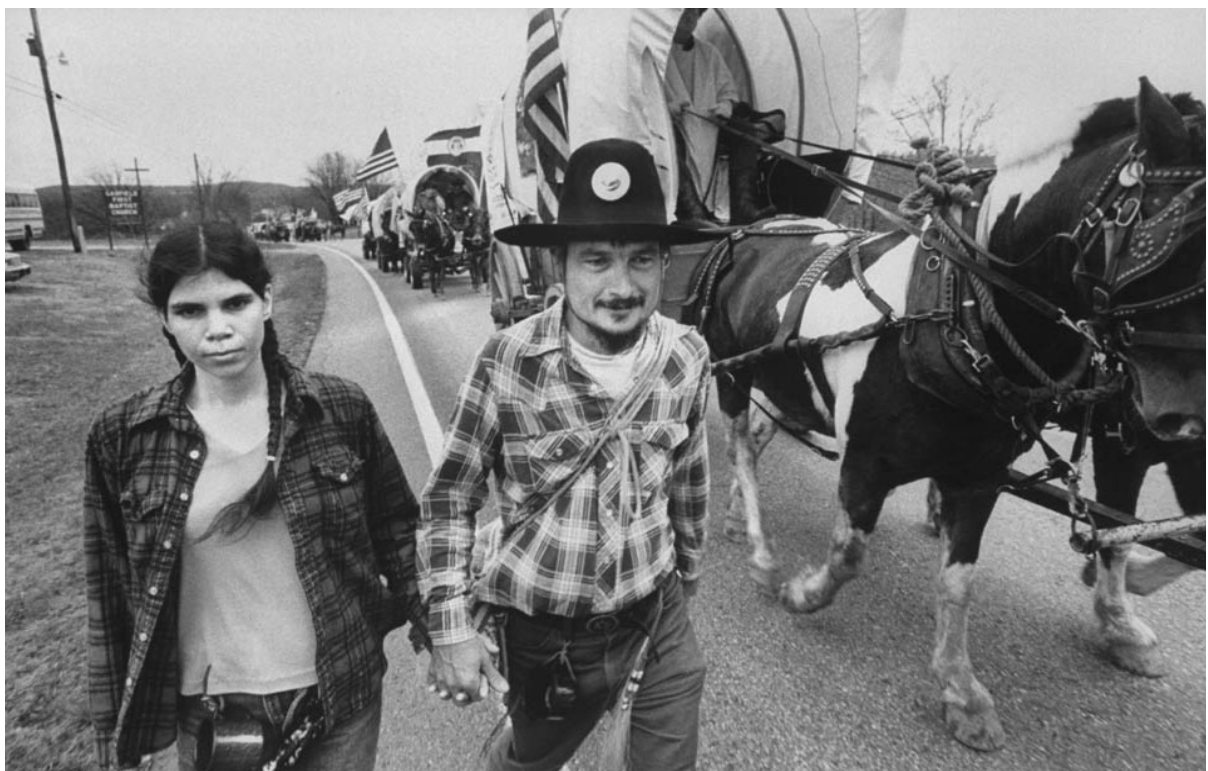


The Cherokee/Seminole Removal Role Play

By *BILL BIGELOW*

IN HER BOOK *A CENTURY OF DISHONOR*, published in 1881, Helen Hunt Jackson wrote, “There will come a time in the remote future when, to the student of American history [the Cherokee removal] will seem well-nigh incredible.” The events leading up to the infamous Trail of Tears, when U.S. soldiers marched Cherokee Indians at bayonet-point almost a thousand miles from Georgia to Oklahoma, offer a window into the nature of U.S. expansion—in the early 19th century, but also throughout this country’s history. The story of the Cherokees’ uprooting may seem “well-nigh incredible” today, but it shares

important characteristics with much of U.S. foreign policy: economic interests paramount, race as a key factor, legality flaunted, the use of violence to enforce U.S. will, a language of justification thick with democratic and humanitarian platitudes. The U.S. war with Mexico, the Spanish-American War, Vietnam, support of the Contras in Nicaragua, the Gulf War, and the invasion and occupation of Iraq come readily to mind. These are my conclusions; they needn’t be my students’. Our task as teachers is not to tell young people what to think but to equip them to search for patterns throughout history, patterns that continue into our own time.



Ed Lallo/TimeLife Pictures/Getty

Tobi and Larry Brown retrace the Cherokees’ 1,000-mile Trail of Tears journey. The Browns were part of a 1988 reenactment.

The Cherokees were not the only indigenous people affected by the Indian Removal law and the decade of dispossession that followed. The Seminoles, living in Florida, were another group targeted for resettlement. For years, they had lived side by side with people of African ancestry, most of whom were escaped slaves or descendants of escaped slaves. Indeed, the Seminoles and Africans living with each other were not two distinct peoples. Their inclusion in this role play allows students to explore further causes for Indian removal, to see ways in which slavery was an important consideration motivating the U.S. government’s hoped-for final solution to the supposed Indian problem. The role play encourages students to explore these dynamics from the inside. As they portray individuals in some of the groups that shaped these historical episodes, the aim is for them to see not only what happened, but why it happened—and perhaps to wonder whether there were alternatives.

In previous years of teaching this role play, I did not include a “Missionaries and Northern Reformers” role. The omission of a sympathetic white role left students with the impression that all white people in the country were united in the quest to forcibly move Indian tribes and nations off their lands. In fact, white people as diverse as the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and the Tennessee frontiersman-turned-Congressman, Davy Crockett, opposed the Indian removal bill. The vote in the U.S. House of Representatives in favor of removal was 102 to 97—an overwhelming majority. Nonetheless, it’s important that students recognize the racial and cultural biases of even those who considered themselves the Indians’ friends and allies. As indicated in their role, missionaries described Cherokee families as “having risen to a level with the white people of the United States.” Thus, as we seek to inform students of important currents of social reform in U.S. history, we need to do so with a critical eye.

The aim is for students to see not only what happened, but why it happened—and perhaps to wonder whether there were alternatives.

Materials Needed:

1. Construction or other stiff paper for placards; crayons or markers.
2. Copies of the role-play roles—enough for every student to have a role.

Suggested Procedure:

1. [First, a suggestion to you on how to read these lesson procedures. Rather than reading all these in one, two, three order, it may be more clear if you review the student readings in the order they are mentioned in these instructions. This will help you imagine the role play more easily, and encounter it as students might.]

Read with students “Indian Removal Role Play: Problems to Consider” (p. 5). Show them on a map how far it is from Georgia and Florida to Oklahoma. Tell them that each of them will be in a group representing one of five roles: Cherokees, the Andrew Jackson Administration, Plantation Owners and Farmers, Missionaries and Northern Reformers, and Black Seminoles. All of them are invited to a hearing to discuss the Indian Removal Bill before Congress. They should consider the resolution, and in their presentations should be sure to respond to the three questions:

whether they support the bill, what questions they have of other groups, and how they will react if the bill passes or fails. This last question encourages students to see that simply because Congress decides something does not necessarily mean people will passively accept that decision.

[**Note:** The teacher plays the Congressman (they were all men back then, of course) who runs the hearing, but an option is to select a few students to join you or to run the meeting on their own. This choice has

the advantage of giving students a group of peers as an audience for their presentations. The disadvantage is that those who run the hearing have little to do during the session of negotiation between groups, and sometimes become targets for other students' ire if they manifest the slightest inconsistency in calling on people to speak.]

2. Have students count off into five groups. Students from each respective group cluster together in small circles throughout the classroom. They should begin by reading their assigned role. You can urge students into their characters by asking them to write "interior monologues" (the possible inner thoughts) about their concerns in 1830; they might invent a more detailed persona: a name, a place of birth, family, friends, etc. This is especially valuable for students in those groups (plantation owner/farmers and missionaries/northern reformers) that include people in somewhat different circumstances. Students in each group might read these to one another. You can interview a few individuals from different groups, so others in the class can hear.
3. Distribute placards and markers to students and ask them to write their group name and display it so that everyone can see who they represent.
4. In each group, students should discuss their ideas on the questions they will be addressing at the Congressional Hearing. Remind them that an important question to consider is what they will do if Congress decides against them. Will they resist? If so, how? If not, what might happen to them? When it seems that students have come to some tentative conclusions, ask them to choose half their group to be traveling negotiators. These people will meet with people in the

It's important that students recognize the racial and cultural biases of even those who considered themselves the Indians' friends and allies.

other groups to share ideas, argue, and build alliances. Remind students that each of their roles includes different information, so this is an opportunity to teach each other. (To ensure maximum participation of students in the class, travelers may not meet with other travelers, but only with seated members of other groups. Travelers may travel together or separately.)

5. Begin the teaching/negotiating/alliance-building session. These discussions should last until students seem to be repeating themselves—perhaps 15 or 20 minutes, depending on the class. During this period, I circulate to different groups, and occasionally butt in to raise questions or point out contradictions. Don't skip this step; it may be the time students are most engaged in their roles.
6. Students should return to their groups to prepare the presentations they'll make at the Congressional Hearing. In my experience, if they write these out, they think more clearly and raise more provocative points. Encourage them to use the information in their role sheet, but not merely to copy it.
7. The class should form a large circle, students sitting with their respective groups. I structure the hearing by allowing one group to make its complete presentation. Then either I or the students running the hearing raise a few questions. After this, members of other groups may question or rebut points made by the presenting group. This process continues until we've heard from all the groups. The more cross-group dialogue that occurs, the more interesting and exciting the meeting.
8. As a follow-up writing assignment, you might ask students to stay in their roles and comment on the Congressional Hearing—whose remarks most angered or troubled them? At what points did they feel most

satisfied with the deliberations? Or you could ask them to speculate on what happened in real life and why. Some discussion or writing questions include:

- What do you think actually happened to the Cherokee and the Seminole people?
 - Might there have been tensions between the Cherokees and Seminoles? Why?
 - Which group might have been in a better position to resist removal? Why?
 - What reasons did some groups offer for why the Indians should be moved? What were their real motives?
 - Why were the Seminoles such a threat to the southern plantation owners? Do you remember some of the laws that were passed to keep Indians and blacks divided in early America?
 - In real life, a slim majority of U.S. representatives and senators voted to remove the Indians. What arguments might they have found most persuasive?
 - Do you think that all those Congressmen who voted against Indian removal did so because they cared about the Indians? Can you think of other reasons Congressmen from northern states wouldn't want the southern states to expand onto Indian territory?
- Do you think the missionaries would have been as sympathetic toward the Seminoles as they were toward the Cherokees? Why or why not?
 - Do you see any similarities in the situations faced by the Cherokee and Seminole peoples and situations faced by any other groups in U.S. history? in our society today? in other parts of the world?
9. After discussion, you might assign students to do some research to see what actually happened to the Cherokee and the Seminole peoples. Pages 96 to 98 in Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993) provide a good short summary of what happened to the Cherokee along what came to be called the Trail of Tears. Chapter 4, "The Finest Looking People I Have Ever Seen," in William Loren Katz's *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York: Atheneum, 1986) is a valuable resource for learning more about how the Seminoles were affected by the events depicted in the role play. ■



© Bill Bigelow. This article was previously published in *Beyond Heroes and Holidays*, a publication of Teaching for Change. To order *Beyond Heroes and Holidays*, visit www.teachingforchange.org or call 800-763-9131.



AP Photo

Waynetta Lawrie, left, of Tulsa, Okla., stands with others at the state Capitol in Oklahoma City, in March 2007, during a demonstration by Cherokee Freedmen and their supporters.

Bill Bigelow (bill@rethinkingschools.org) is the curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Teaching for Change (pubs@teachingforchange.org) directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

Rethinking Schools
www.rethinkingschools.org

Teaching for Change
www.teachingforchange.org

Indian Removal Role Play

Problems to Consider

THE YEAR IS 1830. There is a bill before the United States Congress that would provide funds (\$500,000) to move all Indians now living east of the Mississippi River to “Indian Territory” (Oklahoma) west of the Mississippi River. The Indians would be given permanent title to this land. The money would pay the Indians for any improvements made on the land in the East where they’re now living. It would also cover the expenses of their transportation and for a year in their new homes in Indian Territory.

The U.S. Congress has decided to hold hearings on this bill and you are invited to give testimony and to question other individuals who will give testimony. The main question for discussion is:

Should all Indians living east of the Mississippi River be moved, by force if necessary, west of the Mississippi River to Indian Territory?

Questions for each group to consider in planning your presentation:

1. Do you support the Indian Removal Bill? Why or why not?
2. What questions do you have for members of the other groups that will be in attendance?
3. What will you do if Congress passes this bill? What will you do if Congress does not pass this bill? ■

Cherokee

YOUR PEOPLE HAVE LIVED for centuries in the area the whites call “Georgia.” This is your land. At times you’ve had to fight to keep it.

You’ve had a hard time with whites. Ever since they began settling in Georgia they have continued to push west, plowing the land, growing cotton and other crops. Long ago, as early as 1785, the Cherokee Nation won the right to their land by a treaty with the United States government. The United States recognized the Cherokee people as part of an independent country and not subject to the laws of the United States. After the U.S. Constitution was approved, the U.S. government signed another treaty with the Cherokee—in 1791, when George Washington was president. Article Seven of the Hopewell treaty said, “The United States solemnly guaranty to the Cherokee nation all their lands not hereby ceded.” In other words, the U.S. government agreed not to push the Cherokee out of the land where they were living.

But now the U.S. government is about to break its own treaty and steal your land. Many whites have already bribed and tricked some of your people out of their land. The whites say they need it to grow cotton and other crops, and miners have been trespassing in the foothills looking for, and finding, gold. These whites say you have no right to the land, that you’re savages. Last year, in December of 1829, the state of Georgia passed a law saying that you are under *their* control, and must obey their laws, their wishes. This

new law forbids anyone with any Cherokee blood from testifying in court, or protesting the plans to move you out of your land. But you didn’t vote for this Georgia government, and besides, you have a treaty with the federal government that says you are citizens of an independent country. When the U.S. government made a treaty with you, that proved you are a nation.

The Cherokee are one of the five “civilized tribes.” It was the whites themselves who taught you much of this “civilization.” You have well-cultivated farms. By 1826, members of your Cherokee nation owned 22,000 cattle, 7,600 horses, 3,000 plows, 2,500 spinning wheels, 10 saw mills and 18 schools. Like southern whites, some of you also owned black slaves. In 1821, Sequoya, a brilliant Cherokee Indian, invented an 85-character alphabet and now most Cherokee can read and write. It’s said that more Cherokee people are literate than are whites in Georgia. You even have a newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix. You’ve adopted a written Constitution very similar to that of the United States. Many of your leaders attended white schools in the East. Even by the white man’s standards you’re as “civilized” as they are, if not more so. But still they want to kick you off your land and move you to a place west of the Mississippi River—a place you’ve never even seen. You must continue to argue your case if you are to survive as a people. ■

Andrew Jackson Administration

YOU'RE THE PRESIDENT of the United States. You must deal with a serious problem in the state of Georgia. This past December, 1829, the state government said that all the land belonging to the Cherokee nation would from then on belong to Georgia. The Cherokee would have no title to their land and anyone with Cherokee blood wouldn't even have the right to testify in court. The Georgians want the Cherokee moved, by force if necessary, west of the Mississippi River. They support the Indian Removal Act, now before Congress. There is a place called "Oklahoma" set aside for all the Indians in the East, including the Cherokee. Personally, you agree that Georgia has a right to make whatever laws they want, but the Cherokee have treaties signed by the U.S. government guaranteeing them their land forever. Of course, you personally never signed any of those treaties.

You're getting a lot of pressure on this one. On the one hand white missionaries and lots of northerners say that Georgia is violating Cherokee rights. Cherokee supporters point out that the Indians have done everything they can to become like civilized white people: they invented an alphabet, started a newspaper, wrote a constitution, started farms, and even wear white people's clothes. Many church groups supported your election in 1828, and you want their support when you run for re-election in 1832. On the other hand, a lot of farmers and plantation owners would like to get on that good Cherokee land. Recently, gold was discovered on Cherokee territory, and gold-seekers are already starting to sneak onto their

land. Your main base of support was in the South, especially from poor and medium-sized farmers.

From your standpoint, you have to look after the welfare of the whole country. The main crop in the South is cotton—it is a crucial crop to the prosperity of the slave-owning South and to the new cloth factories of the North. Cotton, grown with slave labor, brings in tremendous profits to slaveowners and you're a slaveowner yourself, so you understand their concerns. There is excellent land being taken up by the Cherokee, as well as some of the other Indian tribes in the region: the Creeks, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole—though some of these have already moved west. This land could be used to grow cotton for the world. The exports of cotton to England and other countries are vital to the health of the economy. Cotton sent north is building up young industries and you can see there is great potential for manufacturing in the North.

The Seminole Indians who live in Florida represent a special problem. For years, they have taken in escaped slaves from southern plantations. Sometimes, they've even raided plantations in order to free slaves. They are a threat to the whole plantation system in the South. A number of years ago, you ordered the U.S. military to attack the Seminoles in Florida and had their farms burned. The proposed Indian Removal Act would get rid of the Seminoles forever by moving them to Indian Territory. The escaped slaves living with them would then be taken away from them and sold. ■

Plantation Owners and Farmers

*All I ask in this creation
Is a pretty little wife and a big plantation
Way up yonder in the Cherokee Nation.*

THAT'S PART OF A SONG people like you sing as you wait for the Cherokee to be kicked out of Georgia. Then you and your family can move in.

Some of you are poor farmers. You live on the worst land in Georgia and other parts of the South. The big plantation owners with all their cotton and slaves take up the best land and leave you the scraps. You've heard that the Cherokee land in Georgia is some of the most fertile land in the country. Best yet, the government of Georgia is having a lottery so that even poor farmers like you will have an equal shot at getting good land. One of the reasons you voted for Andy Jackson for president is because you knew he was an Indian fighter who beat the Creeks in a war and then took their land away from them. That's your kind of president. The Cherokee are farmers too. They grow corn, wheat, and cotton. If you're lucky, you'll be able to move onto land with the crops already planted and the farmhouse already built. Others of you aren't quite as poor; you have some land, and grow corn and raise hogs, but you, too, would like to move onto better land.

And some of you are big plantation owners, who grow cotton on your land and own many slaves. You live in Georgia near the coast. The problem is that cotton exhausts the soil, so that after a number of years, your land is not as

productive as it once was. You need new land with soil that hasn't been used to grow cotton for years and years. As of now, the Cherokee are living on the land that rightfully belongs to the state of Georgia. The Georgia legislature recently voted to take over that land and divide it up so that whites like you could move onto it. That's a great law, but some people in Congress and around the country want to stop you from taking this territory from the Cherokee. What's the problem? There is a place set aside for the Cherokee and other Indians west of the Mississippi River. They belong with their own kind, right? Remember, the whole country—no, the whole world—depends on cotton. Your plantation and plantations like yours are what keep this country strong and productive.

But you have another big problem. In Florida, many escaped slaves live side by side with the Seminole Indians. Slaves throughout the South know about this haven for runaways. In fact, sometimes the Seminoles and escaped slaves raid plantations, burn them down, and free the slaves. You won't stand for this. The Seminole communities must be destroyed and the Indians shipped off to Indian Territory along with the Cherokee. As for the escaped slaves who live with them, they need to be recaptured and either returned to their rightful owners or put up for sale. There's also some good land in Florida that you might want to move onto once the Seminoles are gone. ■

Missionaries and Northern Reformers

SOME OF YOU ARE WHITE Christian missionaries who live amongst the Cherokee people or once did. You are not plantation owners, gold prospectors, bankers, or military people. You are simply individuals who want to preach the word of God and do what's right. You are of many different Christian denominations. At great sacrifice, you moved away from the comfort of civilization to go live in much more difficult conditions.

You believe that the Cherokee people have made great progress advancing toward civilization. According to a resolution your missionary group recently passed, some Cherokee families have “risen to a level with the white people of the United States ...” Most Cherokee now wear clothes like white people and have given up their original Indian dress. Women wear decent gowns, that cover their bodies from neck to feet. Before, the women had to do the hard work of tending the corn using hoes. Now, the men do the farming with plows. They are a much more industrious people, and own more property and better houses than in the past. Slowly some are becoming Christians and—thankfully—are forgetting their old Indian superstitions. As your resolution points out, “Ancient traditions are fading from memory, and can scarcely be collected ...” When the whites came upon the Cherokee, the Indians were in a “purely savage state.” But this is no longer the case. Many Indians and whites are beginning to intermix. This is

good, as it brings Indians in closer contact with civilization.

You don't know a single Cherokee who wants to leave home and go west across the Mississippi River. As your resolution states, there is “an overwhelming torrent of national feeling in opposition to removal.” And you ought to know: you live with these people. You are reluctant to take sides in political arguments, but you have to bear witness to what you see and hear.

Those of you who live in the north have read the writings of the missionaries who live amongst the Cherokee. They don't want to steal the Cherokee land, so they have no reason to lie. Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen from New Jersey has spoken eloquently about the Cherokee situation. He calls the Cherokee “the first lords of the soil.” The senator puts himself in the Indians' position and asks, “If I use my land for hunting, may another take it because he needs it for agriculture?”

It's true that the richest Cherokee—about 10 percent—own some black slaves. Some of you are abolitionists, who want all slavery to end, and don't approve of this. However, almost everyone who ever traveled in Cherokee territory agrees that the Cherokee do not treat their slaves as harshly as the whites treat theirs. Most slaves in Cherokee country have some rights, and individuals in families are almost never sold away from each other. But slavery is slavery, and some of you don't approve of *any* slavery. ■

Black Seminoles

YOU ARE BLACK and you are Indian, members of the Seminole people in Florida. You are descended from enslaved Africans who ran away from British plantations in Georgia over a hundred years ago and came to settle with Indians who left their lands farther north. This was before the United States was even a country. You are a free person. Some of the black people who live in Seminole communities ran away from slavery in the last few years. Others were bought from white slaveowners by Seminoles. These people are still called slaves, but are not treated as slaves. They can marry anyone, can't be sold away from their families, can travel where they want, have their own land, and carry guns. But every year they must pay part of their crops to other Seminoles as a kind of tax.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 is now being considered by the U.S. Congress. It calls for all Indians east of the Mississippi River to be forced off their lands and moved to a place called "Indian Territory" west of the Mississippi River. Full-blooded Seminoles would be moved. But for you, a *black* Seminole, they would make you a slave and sell you in one of the Southern slave markets. You would be forever separated from your community, your friends, your family. You will never allow this to happen.

The white plantation owners in Georgia and throughout the South are threatened by the Indians, free blacks, and escaped slaves living

peacefully side by side. They know that their slaves hear about these Seminole communities and want to run away to join them. The Seminole communities are a kind of symbol of freedom to enslaved black people throughout the South. In the past, your people have attacked plantations and freed the slaves on those plantations, and brought them to Florida to live with you and become Seminoles. The whites also want to steal your land so they can grow their cotton with slave labor.

President Andrew Jackson is one of the biggest slaveholders in Tennessee. Some years ago, when he was a general in the army, he ordered his troops to attack your people and destroy your farms and homes. You know that in this debate about Indian removal he is not on your side.

He also wants to move the other Indian nations in the Southeast, especially the Cherokee. You don't have much to do with the Cherokee. You know that they own large numbers of black slaves, though they say they treat them better than do the white plantation owners. But if this law passes, they will try to move them too.

The United States government and the white plantation owners call the Seminoles "savages." But you have farms and raise horses, cattle, hogs, and chickens. And unlike white plantation owners, you know what freedom means. What is "civilized;" what is "savage"? ■