7.5: Native American Power and the United States

The Jeffersonian rhetoric of equality contrasted harshly with the reality of a nation stratified along the lines of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Diplomatic relations between Native Americans and local, state, and national governments offer a dramatic example of the dangers of those inequalities. Prior to the Revolution, many Indian nations had balanced a delicate diplomacy between European empires, which scholars have called the Play-off System. Moreover, in many parts of North America, indigenous peoples dominated social relations.

Americans pushed for more land in all their interactions with Native diplomats and leaders. But boundaries were only one source of tension. Trade, criminal jurisdiction, roads, the sale of liquor, and alliances were also key negotiating points. Despite their role in fighting on both sides, Native American negotiators were not included in the diplomatic negotiations that ended the Revolutionary War. Unsurprisingly, the final document omitted concessions for Native allies. Even as Native peoples proved vital trading partners, scouts, and allies against hostile nations, they were often condemned by white settlers and government officials as "savages." White ridicule of indigenous practices and disregard for indigenous nations’ property rights and sovereignty prompted some indigenous peoples to turn away from white practices.

In the wake of the American Revolution, Native American diplomats developed relationships with the United States, maintained or ceased relations with the British Empire (or with Spain in the South), and negotiated their relationship with other Native nations. Formal diplomatic negotiations included Native rituals to reestablish relationships and open communication. Treaty conferences took place in Native towns, at neutral sites in Indian-American borderlands, and in state and federal capitals. While chiefs were politically important, skilled orators, such as Red Jacket, as well as intermediaries, and interpreters also played key roles in negotiations. Native American orators were known for metaphorical language, command of an audience, and compelling voice and gestures.
Throughout the early republic, diplomacy was preferred to war. Violence and warfare carried enormous costs for all parties—in lives, money, trade disruptions, and reputation. Diplomacy allowed parties to air their grievances, negotiate their relationships, and minimize violence. Violent conflicts arose when diplomacy failed.

Native diplomacy testified to the complexity of indigenous cultures and their role in shaping the politics and policy of American communities, states, and the federal government. Yet white attitudes, words, and policies frequently relegated Native peoples to the literal and figurative margins as “ignorant savages.” Poor treatment like this inspired hostility and calls for pan-Indian alliances from leaders of distinct Native nations, including the Shawnee leader Tecumseh.

Tecumseh and his brother, Tenskwatawa, the Prophet, helped envision an alliance of North America’s indigenous populations to halt the encroachments of the United States. They created pan-Indian towns in present-day Indiana, first at Greenville, then at Prophetstown, in defiance of the Treaty of Greenville (1795). Tecumseh traveled to many diverse Indian nations from Canada to Georgia, calling for unification, resistance, and the restoration of sacred power.

Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa’s pan-Indian confederacy was the culmination of many movements that swept through indigenous North America during the eighteenth century. An earlier coalition fought in Pontiac’s War. Neolin, the Delaware prophet, influenced Pontiac, an Ottawa (Odawa) war chief, with his vision of Native independence, cultural renewal, and religious revitalization. Through Neolin, the Master of Life—the Great Spirit—urged Native peoples to
shrug off their dependency on European goods and technologies, reassert their faith in Native spirituality and rituals, and cooperate with one another against the “White people’s ways and nature.” Additionally, Neolin advocated violence against British encroachments on Indian lands, which escalated after the Seven Years’ War. His message was particularly effective in the Ohio and Upper Susquehanna Valleys, where polyglot communities of indigenous refugees and migrants from across eastern North America lived together. When combined with the militant leadership of Pontiac, who took up Neolin’s message, the many Native peoples of the region united in attacks against British forts and people. From 1763 until 1765, the Great Lakes, Ohio Valley, and Upper Susquehanna Valley areas were embroiled in a war between Pontiac’s confederacy and the British Empire, a war that ultimately forced the English to restructure how they managed Native-British relations and trade.

In the interim between 1765 and 1811, other Native prophets kept Neolin’s message alive while encouraging indigenous peoples to resist Euro-American encroachments. These individuals included the Ottawa leader “the Trout,” also called Maya-Ga-Wy; Joseph Brant of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee); the Creek headman Mad Dog; Painted Pole of the Shawnee; a Mohawk woman named Coocoochee; Main Poc of the Potawatomi; and the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake. Once again, the epicenter of this pan-Indian resistance and revitalization originated in the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes regions, where from 1791 to 1795 a joint force of Shawnee, Delaware, Miami, Iroquois, Ojibwe, Ottawa, Huron, Potawatomi, Mingo, Chickamauga, and other indigenous peoples waged war against the American republic. Although this “Western Confederacy” ultimately suffered defeat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, this Native coalition achieved a number of military victories against the republic, including the destruction of two American armies, forcing President Washington to reformulate federal Indian policy. Tecumseh’s experiences as a warrior against the American military in this conflict probably influenced his later efforts to generate solidarity among North American indigenous communities.

Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa articulated ideas and beliefs similar to their eighteenth-century predecessors. In particular, Tenskwatawa pronounced that the Master of Life entrusted him and Tecumseh with the responsibility for returning Native peoples to the one true path and to rid Native communities of the dangerous and corrupting influences of Euro-American trade and culture. Tenskwatawa stressed the need for cultural and religious renewal, which coincided with his blending of the tenets, traditions, and rituals of indigenous religions and Christianity. In particular, Tenskwatawa emphasized apocalyptic visions that he and his followers would usher in a new world and restore Native power to the continent. For Native peoples who gravitated to the Shawnee brothers, this emphasis on cultural and religious revitalization was empowering and spiritually liberating, especially given the continuous American assaults on Native land and power in the early nineteenth century.
Tecumseh’s confederacy drew heavily from indigenous communities in the Old Northwest and the festering hatred for land-hungry Americans. Tecumseh attracted a wealth of allies in his adamant refusal to concede any more land. Tecumseh proclaimed that the Master of Life tasked him with the responsibility of returning Native lands to their rightful owners. In his efforts to promote unity among Native peoples, Tecumseh also offered these communities a distinctly “Indian identity” that brought disparate Native peoples together under the banner of a common spirituality, together resisting an oppressive force. In short, spirituality tied together the resistance movement. Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa were not above using this pan-Indian rhetoric to legitimate their own authority within indigenous communities at the expense of other Native leaders. This manifested most visibly during Tenskwatawa’s witch hunts of the 1800s. Those who opposed Tenskwatawa or sought to accommodate Americans were labeled witches.

While Tecumseh attracted Native peoples from around the Northwest and some from the Southeast, the Red Stick Creeks brought these ideas to the Southeast. Led by the Creek prophet Hillis Hadjo, who accompanied Tecumseh when he toured throughout the Southeast in 1811, the Red Sticks integrated certain religious tenets from the north and invented new religious practices specific to the Creeks, all the while communicating and coordinating with Tecumseh after he left Creek Country. In doing so, the Red Sticks joined Tecumseh in his resistance movement while seeking to purge Creek society of its Euro-American dependencies. Creek leaders who maintained relationships with the United States, in contrast, believed that accommodation and diplomacy might stave off American encroachments better than violence.

Additionally, the Red Sticks discovered that most southeastern indigenous leaders cared little for Tecumseh’s confederacy. This lack of allies hindered the spread of a pan-Indian movement in the southeast, and the Red Sticks soon found themselves in a civil war against other Creeks. Tecumseh thus found little support in the Southeast beyond the Red Sticks, who by 1813 were cut off from the North by Andrew Jackson. Shortly thereafter, Jackson’s forces were joined by Lower Creek and Cherokee forces that helped defeat the Red Sticks, culminating in Jackson’s victory at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Following their defeat, the Red Sticks were forced to cede an unprecedented fourteen million acres of land in the Treaty of Fort Jackson. As historian Adam Rothman argues, the defeat of the Red Sticks allowed the United States to expand west of the Mississippi, guaranteeing the continued existence and profitability of slavery.

Many Native leaders refused to join Tecumseh and instead maintained their loyalties to the American republic. After the failures of pan-Indian unity and loss at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811, Tecumseh’s confederation floundered. The War
of 1812 between the United States and Britain offered new opportunities for Tecumseh and his followers.\textsuperscript{21} With the United States distracted, Tecumseh and his confederated army seized several American forts on their own initiative. Eventually Tecumseh solicited British aid after sustaining heavy losses from American fighters at Fort Wayne and Fort Harrison. Even then, the confederacy faced an uphill battle, particularly after American naval forces secured control of the Great Lakes in September 1813, forcing British ships and reinforcements to retreat. Yet Tecumseh and his Native allies fought on despite being surrounded by American forces. Tecumseh told the British commander Henry Proctor, “Our lives are in the hands of the Great Spirit. We are determined to defend our lands, and if it is his will, we wish to leave our bones upon them.”\textsuperscript{22} Not soon thereafter, Tecumseh fell on the battlefields of Moraviantown, Ontario, in October 1813. His death dealt a severe blow to pan-Indian resistance against the United States. Men like Tecumseh and Pontiac, however, left behind a legacy of pan-Indian unity that was not soon forgotten.