

## 14.7 Jackson's Indian Policy

As a frontier settler and famous Indian fighter—Native Americans called him “Sharp Knife”—Jackson had little sympathy for Indians. During his presidency, it became national policy to remove Native Americans from the East by force.

White settlers had come into conflict with Native Americans ever since colonial days. After independence, the new national government tried to settle these conflicts through treaties. Typically, the treaties drew boundaries between areas claimed for settlers and areas that the government promised to let the Indians have forever. In exchange for giving up their old lands, Indians were promised food, supplies, and money.

Despite the treaties, Native Americans continued to be pushed off their land. By the time Jackson became president, only 125,000 Indians still lived east of the Mississippi River. Warfare and disease had greatly reduced the number of Indians in the East. Others had sold their lands for pennies an acre and moved across the Mississippi. Jackson was determined to remove the remaining Indians to a new Indian Territory in the West.

Most of the eastern Indians lived in the South. They belonged to five groups, called tribes by whites: the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole. Hoping to remain in their homelands, these Indians had adopted many white ways. Most had given up hunting to become farmers. Many had learned to read and write. The Cherokee even had their own written language, a newspaper, and a constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Whites called these Indians the “Five Civilized Tribes.”

While the Five Civilized Tribes may have hoped to live in peace with their neighbors, whites did not share this goal. As the cotton kingdom spread westward, wealthy planters and poor settlers alike looked greedily at Indian homelands. The Indians, they decided, had to go.

### The Indian Removal Act

In 1830, urged on by President Jackson, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. This law allowed the president to make treaties in which Native Americans in the East traded their lands for new territory on the Great Plains. The law did not say that the Indians should be removed by force, and in 1831 the Supreme Court ruled that Indians had a right to their lands. An angry Jackson disagreed. Groups that refused to move west voluntarily were met with military force, usually with tragic results.

This was true of the Sac and Fox of Illinois. Led by a chief named Black Hawk, the Sac and Fox fought removal for two years. Black Hawk's War ended in 1832 with the slaughter of most of his warriors. As he was taken off in chains, the chief told his captors:

*Black Hawk is an Indian. He has done nothing for which an Indian ought to be ashamed. He has*



*fought for his countrymen, the squaws [women] and papooses [young children], against white men who came, year after year, to cheat them of and take away their land. You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. They ought to be ashamed of it.*

### **The Trail of Tears**

Many whites were ashamed. Washington was flooded with protests over the treatment of Indians. Still the work of removal continued. In 1836 thousands of Creeks who refused to leave Alabama were rounded up and marched west in handcuffs. Two years later, under President Martin Van Buren, more than 17,000 Cherokee were dragged from their homes in Georgia and herded west by federal troops. Four thousand died during their long walk to Indian Territory. Those who survived remembered that terrible journey as their “Trail of Tears.” A soldier who took part in the Cherokee removal called it “the cruelest work I ever knew.”

Led by a young chief named Osceola, the Seminoles of Florida resisted removal for ten years. Their long struggle was the most costly Indian war ever fought in the United States. A number of Seminoles were finally sent to Indian Territory. But others found refuge (safety) in the Florida swamps. Their descendants still live in the state today.

When Jackson left office, he was proud of having “solved” the Indian problem for good. But as you will learn in the next two chapters, Jackson had simply moved the conflict between Indians and whites across the mighty Mississippi.

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*Sequoyah was a Cherokee Indian who developed an 86-letter alphabet for the Cherokee language. The alphabet contained both Roman letters and symbols that Sequoyah created. Even though these Native Americans developed what many whites considered an advanced civilization, wealthy planters and poor settlers were determined to force them out and seize their lands.*



*This artist painted an unrealistic picture of the Trail of Tears. Most of the Cherokees had no horses or warm blankets. They were dragged from their homes and allowed to take only the clothes they had on. Many died as they walked barefoot for hundreds of miles.*