Winter 2003

At the Head of the Aboriginal Remnant: Cherokee Construction of a "Civilized" Indian Identity During the Lakota Crisis of 1876

Paul Kelton
University of Kansas, pkelton@ku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly

Part of the American Studies Commons, Other International and Area Studies Commons, and the United States History Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2431

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
"AT THE HEAD OF THE ABORIGINAL REMNANT"
CHEROKEE CONSTRUCTION OF A "CIVILIZED" INDIAN
IDENTITY DURING THE LAKOTA CRISIS OF 1876

PAUL KELTON

In 1876 the bilingual Cherokee diplomat and lawyer William Penn Adair expressed great pride in the level of "civilization" that his nation had achieved. Defining civilization as commercial agriculture, literacy, Christianity, and republican government, Adair believed that his society had reached a sophistication that equaled and in certain areas surpassed that of the United States. Speaking before the US House of Representatives Committee on Territories, the diplomat claimed that his people produced surpluses of "every agricultural product that is raised in the neighboring States of Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, and Texas." Schools in the Indian Territory, he added, produced a vast number of students who were literate either in their own language or English, or both. "About four-fifths at least of the population of the Indian Territory can read and write, which cannot be said of the people of the United States," the lawyer bragged. He also claimed, with an unfortunate degree of intolerance, that Christianity was stronger in the Indian Territory than in the surrounding states. "All of our nations and tribes have more or less embraced the CHRISTIAN RELIGION, and have generally repudiated their ancient traditional religious beliefs and superstitions," he stated. "And, I must say that our religion is pure and free from the contaminations of . . . Mormonism, Mahometanism, Spiritualism, and that other class of religionists that murdered our SAVIOUR." Adair was particularly proud of his nation's political and judicial system. Since the early nineteenth century, the Cherokee had had a national legislature, a principal

KEY WORDS: William Penn Adair, Cherokee, Indian identity, Lakota, Sioux Removal, Indian Territory

Paul Kelton completed his Ph.D. in history in 1998 at the University of Oklahoma and is currently Assistant Professor of History at the University of Kansas. His research focuses on indigenous peoples and their responses to colonialism. He is currently completing a book manuscript on the Southeastern Indians.

[GPQ 23 (Winter 2003): 3-17]
chief, and a supreme court. Such institutions produced a degree of law and order that white communities could not match. “I need only to call your attention to the fact,” Adair stated, “that there is more crime and of a more heinous character among whites of the United States than there is among the Indians.”

Adair certainly overstated the degree to which his people adopted Euro-American civilization, but he did describe several characteristics of his nation that made it different from other Native societies, especially the Lakota, who were receiving the bulk of America’s attention in 1876. The Lakota were among the last Native American nations to confront Euro-American domination and to begin the process of adopting what whites and many Cherokee considered “civilization.” The Lakota had contact with Euro-Americans since the 1700s, but very few spoke English, even fewer practiced Christianity, and constitutional government was a foreign concept to the loosely allied tribal bands. Moreover, as late as 1876, many Lakota lacked experience as settled farmers. The majority of the Northern Plains tribe, including bands headed by Spotted Tail and Red Cloud, had only recently abandoned buffalo hunting and become confined to reservations in the Dakota Territory, where they remained dependent on the federal government. Other bands led by such individuals as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse remained off the reservation, hunting in Montana and Wyoming and subsisting on what few buffalo remained.

Despite the seemingly deep cultural and historical gulf that separated the two nations, the “civilized” Cherokee found their own fate intersecting with that of the “uncivilized” Lakota in 1876. By 1 February 1876 all Lakota Indians, according to the order of the Secretary of the Interior, were to gather at their agencies, where US agents hoped to pressure them into ceding the Black Hills and removing to Indian Territory, thus becoming the neighbors of the Cherokee. Two years earlier the US Army had invaded the Black Hills and announced the presence of gold; prospectors flooded into the sacred homeland of the Lakota, and western politicians called for the immediate acquisition of the valuable real estate. The Lakota, however, resisted the loss of the Black Hills. When 1 February 1876 passed, several bands remained off the reservation, forcing the US military to track them down. The military campaign reached its most significant point on 25 June when Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse’s warriors and their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies destroyed George Armstrong Custer and his entire detachment of men. Unfortunately, Custer’s defeat only increased the federal government’s efforts to punish Native Americans. For those Indians on the reservation, US agents stepped up their demands that the Lakota give up their sacred land and move to a distant home in Indian Territory.

While hundreds of miles away from the Lakota, the Cherokee understandably became concerned about the tumultuous events on the Northern Plains. A significant number of the 14,000 Cherokee, but certainly not the majority, read about the Lakota and expressed their views in English. While the recorded discourse of this English-speaking minority cannot reveal how everyone in their nation thought, it does give us a rare view of how at least one group of Indians conceived of their relationship with a radically different Native group with whom they had little if any firsthand experience. Such discourse indeed reveals how and why English-speaking Cherokee, those whose language skills could have prepared them to assimilate into Euro-American society, nonetheless chose to identify as Indians and continued to call for a separate existence of Native peoples. At the same time, Cherokee discourse also reveals the limits of Indian identity. English-speaking individuals, especially those whose leadership positions forced them to interact with antagonistic whites, chose to adopt the “civilized” label in order to distinguish themselves from “wild” Indians such as the Lakota.
SCENE I: THE CHEROKEE INVADE
WASHINGTON

In 1876 the Cherokee, like the Lakota, were engaged in battle with the forces of white expansion. Instead of donning war paint and confronting the bluecoats on the high plains, though, Cherokee diplomats took the train to Washington, D.C., where they lobbied Congress to defeat various bills that were detrimental to Indian sovereignty. Since 1866 nearly every session of Congress had entertained at least one of these so-called Oklahoma bills, each aimed to dissolve the Cherokee as well as Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole Nations, to open their land for white settlement and to force Indians to become US citizens. Cherokee diplomats had become quite skilled in mobilizing the support of sympathetic whites, but they faced the daunting task of countering the efforts of railroad lobbyists and western politicians who wanted to end the autonomy of Indian nations. Such enemies of Indian sovereignty personally attacked English-speaking diplomats as a corrupt group of “mixed-bloods” who lived off tribal annuities and were concerned only with their own power. Their “full-blood” constituents, meanwhile, supposedly remained impoverished and ignorant of the advantages that assimilation into the United States would bring them.

Criticism certainly stung the diplomats, but the enemies of Indian sovereignty oversimplified their nation’s politics. A large number of Cherokee possessed both Indian and European ancestry, but such individuals did not constitute a monolithic group who remained apart from those of only Cherokee descent. “Blood” did not serve as a political dividing line of the roughly 14,000 members of the Cherokee Nation. In 1876 the Downing Party, which was named after the late principal chief Lewis Downing, had majority power in the National Council. The core of this party revolved around a group known as the Keetoowah Society, whose cultural conservatism often led outsiders and later historians to label it a “full-blood” organization. Indeed, the Keetoowahs elected one of their own, Oochalata, to the position of principal chief and took the leading role in appointing diplomats to serve Cherokee interests in Washington. The Downings, while seeming to be a “full-blood” party, nonetheless had a number of members of mixed Cherokee and European descent, including William Penn Adair, whom the Keetoowahs continually supported as a diplomat. The Downings’ rival, the National Party, also had members of both mixed and pure descent. Its head was William Potter Ross, a former principal chief and current diplomat from a prestigious family whose ancestry included both Cherokee and Europeans. Ross counted on longstanding support that his family had built among the so-called full-bloods. Rather than blood, political divisions fell along a complicated matrix of family loyalties, clan membership, popular appeal of particular leaders, and variety of other factors. At times, divisions between the National and Downing Parties could become heated, but they both united on the issue of Cherokee nationalism. Both parties strove to protect Indian sovereignty and joined forces in lobbying the federal government to defeat the Oklahoma bills.

While blood did not translate into political divisions, neither did the cultural differences that appeared to distinguish diplomats from the rank and file. On the surface, diplomats such as Adair and Ross epitomized what US officials wanted Indians to become. They were highly educated, devoted Christians whose fluency in English allowed them to engage in the larger Euro-American world of politics and commerce. Most Cherokee, though, did not adopt non-Native customs to the extent that Adair and Ross did. Aspects of Euro-American civilization pervaded most sectors of Cherokee society: many Cherokee families participated in electoral politics, maintained farms, kept livestock, sent their children to school, and even participated in Christian
church services. Nevertheless, such accommodation to "civilization" did not completely erase tribal folklore, medical rituals, kinship relations, gender roles, and other customs that predated European contact. Language was especially a symbol of cultural conservatism among the many individuals who chose to speak only their native tongue as a marker of their separate identity from the outside world. It was precisely the persistence of the Cherokee language that brought cultural conservatives and English speakers together. Native speakers depended on those fluent in English to defend Cherokee interests from the enemies of Indian sovereignty. Nationalist leaders such as William Penn Adair and William Potter Ross fit that role well.

Still, cultural conservatives did not extend trust to all English speakers in their nation. A small minority, often referred to as "progressives," went beyond merely speaking the language of their white neighbors; they also longed for the eventual dissolution of Indian nations and assimilation of individual Cherokee as US citizens. Leading the progressive faction was the articulate entrepreneur Elias Cornelius Boudinot, a self-proclaimed expert on Indian affairs who frequently traveled to Washington, D.C., on his own behalf and publicly shared his views with receptive railroad executives, western politicians, and other opponents of Indian autonomy. For his radical position, Boudinot made himself a bane to nationalist Cherokee, both English speakers and cultural conservatives, who excluded him and his progressive faction from political power.8 Progressives may not have had much political power within their nation, but they cast a long shadow on the internal dynamics of Cherokee society. English-speaking diplomats certainly became even more sensitive to the need to maintain the trust of their native-speaking supporters.

When nationalist diplomats arrived in Washington, they carried the political baggage of the Cherokee Nation with them. They had to defend the interests of their people while distinguishing themselves from the progressives. Moreover, they faced attacks from proponents of the Oklahoma bills who challenged their legitimacy as leaders of Native peoples. To make matters worse, the mood of Congress was shifting against Indians. As the Lakota defied orders to return to their reservation, many congressmen called for the transfer of Indian affairs from the Interior to the War Department. While fulfilling their national duties to defend Native sovereignty and responding to their critics, Cherokee diplomats were pulled into the larger debate on Indian affairs, forcing them to comment on geographically distant Native peoples. But such a debate played into hands of English-speaking diplomats, who were attempting to assert their legitimacy as leaders both within and outside the Cherokee Nation. Events on the Northern Plains gave nationalists an opportunity to construct an Indian identity that silenced their detractors, set themselves apart from progressives, and satisfied their constituents.

One day before the Secretary of the Interior declared that all Lakota not on their reservations would be considered hostile, William Penn Adair, a member of the Downing Party, gave the House Committee on Territories a warning about employing the army to conduct US Indian policy. "They [the Plains Indians] are at peace with the Government and your people," Adair claimed, "yet they are in constant dread lest they may at any time be invaded by the army." Such dread was understandable, given the history of US Indian affairs. The Cherokee lawyer had grown disturbed at the number of recent massacres of Native Americans in which white offenders went unpunished, and he warned that western Indians had not forgotten the atrocities. "The destruction of their people by the army at . . . 'Sand Creek,' 'Black Kettle,' and 'Camp Grant' . . . in which old and harmless men and sick women and children were murdered and butchered is still fresh in the memories of the . . . Indians," Adair exclaimed. "And when they consider the wrong-doers have never been punished, it is but human for them,
in their ignorance, to think that the soldiers have authority to kill Indians when they please."

Adair’s criticism of US Indian policy went beyond mere sympathy for geographically distant Indians. The bilingual diplomat made it clear that he identified with all western Indians as people of his own race. “So far as I am concerned,” Adair exclaimed, “I hope I shall never be unmindful of the fact that my ancestors, in the Indian line, were full-blooded Indians, and which the Anglo-Saxon race have been pleased to term ‘wild Indians,’ and, gentlemen, my sympathies lean towards all classes of my unfortunate race.” Adair went on to establish a hereditary link with peoples living far away. “The wild Indians of the western plains and mountains I look upon as my brothers of pure blood.” Such comments certainly resonated in the ears of paternalistic whites who shared the diplomat’s repugnance for “extermination,” but they were also aimed at the progressive faction of the Cherokee Nation, particularly Elias Cornelius Boudinot. Boudinot attended the committee meeting without any authorization from the Cherokee Nation and spoke in support of not only the Oklahoma bill but also the transfer of the Indian Bureau from the Interior to the War Department. Adair thought that such a transfer would lead to extermination, and that in favoring it Boudinot had betrayed not only Indians such as the Lakota but also the entire Native race. Adair, a nationalist, was proclaiming a pan-Indian identity that progressives such as Boudinot loathed to adopt.

By employing the idea of a common race, expressed with the folk metaphor of “blood,” and by highlighting the atrocities that Native peoples faced, William Penn Adair characterized himself as an Indian with concerns for all Native peoples. This identity served him well politically. Adair delivered his words not only to members of Congress but also to his constituents. The Cherokee national newspaper, the Advocate, printed in both Cherokee and English, frequently published news received from national delegates to Washington and even encouraged Cherokee to form reading clubs to become aware of the difficulties their nation faced. By reading Adair’s views in the pages of the Advocate, Cherokee were warned about the dangers that threatened all Indian people and learned that the English-speaking delegation served as dedicated advocates. By reflecting on the full scope of Indian affairs, Adair affirmed his links to his culturally conservative constituents and his distinction from progressives. It apparently worked. The Cherokee continually elected Adair to represent them in Washington and rewarded the lawyer with the position of assistant principal chief in 1879.

As did Adair, William Potter Ross, visiting Washington at the same time as his political rival, referred to events on the Northern Plains while defending Cherokee sovereignty. Testifying before the House Committee on Indian Affairs on 8 March, Ross compared the incessant Oklahoma bills with the army’s invasion of the Black Hills. Each Oklahoma bill threatened the Indians with the potential influx of speculators, settlers, and others who would quickly take over Indian lands. For Ross, the Cherokee only had to look at events on the Northern Plains to confirm their suspicions of the Oklahoma bill. With greedy prospectors rushing into the Black Hills after the announcement of gold, the Lakota were faced with the threat of losing their sacred land. “The expedition to the Black Hills is producing effects which always follow, with greater or lesser intensity, the slightest opening into an Indian country,” Ross exclaimed, “and the same results would succeed any action . . . unsettling the lawful condition of the Indian Territory.” Ross went on to ask rhetorically, “Is not the seizure of that country [the Black Hills] the end to be obtained by the adoption of any one of the numerous schemes hatched annually for the organization of the Territory of Oklahoma?”

Later in March, English-speaking nationalists again spoke about events on the Northern Plains. In a letter to Congress, William Penn Adair, his cousin John Adair, and their
political rivals Daniel and Rufus Ross joined with delegates of the Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole Nations to condemn the proposed transfer of Indian affairs from the Interior to the War Department. English speakers, of course, did not want to be under the control of the military, but they claimed they were protecting more than their own interest. "With authority of and for our people, whom we especially represent at Washington, and in common sympathy with and desire for justice to our race, we ask you in their behalf to not pass any bill making such a transfer," the diplomats stated. 14

In making their case, Indian delegates placed both the Trail of Tears and events in the Black Hills within the same context of the US military aiding rapacious whites in expropriating Indian land: "We can only discharge our duty to our peoples and race in this emergency by plainly assuring you that our conviction is that this movement to put our people and their property under military control is for the purpose of doing by force what has not been done by civil power; to overthrow and destroy us, as was done by the military when we resided east of the Mississippi."15 Similarly, it appeared to the diplomats that the military was combining with corrupt whites to destroy the Lakota. "It is a fact that is even now being verified at the Black Hills, that the presence of troops begets trouble with Indians," they stated. "Traders, contractors, liquor dealers, supply men, and that other class of hangers-on, middle-men, and loafers, who follow an army and are found at posts, and all of whom do their parts in producing conflict between Indians and citizens, or with the army."16

The diplomats concluded that past atrocities invalidated the army as a proper agent in dealing with Indians. The military could only reap what it had already sown. "The many bloody massacres of Indians, including women and children," the diplomats exclaimed, would lead to distrust and further conflict.17

By criticizing the conduct of US Indian affairs, Cherokee delegates attempted to show their own constituents and outside critics that they were concerned with more than their own privileged position. They took it upon themselves to give a voice to the Lakota and other geographically distant Native peoples who shared a similar struggle against white expansion. While providing a Native voice, however, English-speaking Cherokee carefully maintained their self-perceived sense of superiority over "uncivilized" Indians. "The rapidity with which we have advanced in civilization, both east and west of the Mississippi, is unparalleled in the history of nations," diplomats bragged in one typical example.18

The Cherokee unabashedly lauded their cultural achievements, but they maintained that they would not leave behind those they considered less advanced. Diplomats promoted themselves as a model for Native peoples to emulate, thus translating their "civilized" identity into paternal regard for the well-being of the Lakota and other so-called wild Indians. Such paternalism was certainly an effort to silence critics who believed English-speaking diplomats cared for nothing but their own power.

Guided by their sense of paternalism, Cherokee diplomats welcomed the resettlement of their "uncivilized" brethren in the Indian Territory. What better way of redeeming "wild" Indians than placing them next to their "civilized" betters in a homeland reserved for Native Americans? William Penn Adair, for example, who believed that western Indians were "poor," "weak," and "ignorant," proclaimed that the western Indians' "ultimate hope for salvation, I think, is inside of the Indian country, on lands set apart for them by our treaties of 1866." He added, "There, if they have time, they can be protected and learn lessons of civilization, and will, if left alone, become civilized as the civilized Indians are now."19

William Potter Ross also argued that the preservation of the Indian Territory would allow all Indians to become "civilized." There, other Native Americans would imitate the practices of the Cherokee. These included speaking English as well as "the accumulation
of wealth, the spread of [Christian] religion, and the intermarriage with whites." Another Cherokee nationalist echoed Adair and Ross. Joel M. Bryan, an official diplomat also sent to Washington to lobby against the Oklahoma bill, said it best. "Let the Indian question of the Territory rest, and let the Indians rest," Bryan urged Congress. "The Indians of the Territory are generally advancing in civilization, religion, and morality; and if let alone and encouraged their present organization will be the easiest and cheapest plan that can be adopted to reclaim and civilize the wild Indians of the Plains." By welcoming "wild" Indians into Indian Territory, Cherokee diplomats shrewdly tied the goal of white reformers to "civilize" the Indians with their own goal of retaining their sovereignty. If the Indian Territory remained a separate homeland for Native peoples, they would be protected from military conquest and the corrupting influence of frontier whites. But if the Oklahoma bill passed and the last homeland of the Indians became inundated with whites, the promise of a "civilized" future for American Indians would collapse. Native peoples would surely be destroyed amid a hostile population who believed extinction was the Indian's only fate. "The Indians believe," William Penn Adair exclaimed, "that the Indian country is the LAST HOPE of the Indians in North America, and they are therefore tenacious for its preservation." The nationalists' concern for and identification with Native peoples outside of their bounds corresponded well with their efforts to retain Cherokee autonomy.

SCENE II: THE BOUDINOT EXCEPTION TO THE NATIONALIST RULE

As did nationalist diplomats, Elias Cornelius Boudinot and progressives claimed superiority over the so-called wild Indians but did not translate such pretensions into paternalistic concern. Boudinot in fact showed contempt for many in his own nation, whom he believed were beholden to the Ross family. Boudinot blamed the Ross family for the murder of his father, Elias Sr., and his uncle and cousin, Major Ridge and John Ridge, in 1839. The elder Boudinot and the Ridges led the faction that signed the infamous Treaty of New Echota in 1835, which ceded all of the Cherokee's eastern lands for lands in the West and which ultimately resulted in the Trail of Tears. The majority of Cherokee, who followed the leadership of the Ross family, did not agree to this treaty, and once removal was complete, unknown assailants took revenge on its most prominent signers. For Boudinot, old wounds had not yet healed; he claimed that the same parties responsible for his father's death still held a reign of terror. "Red-handed murder stalks with defiant and insolent steps through the length and breadth of this fair territory," the estranged man charged. The Cherokee who favored incorporation into the United States, according to Boudinot, refused to speak "because they stand in dread of a gang of desperadoes and murderers, who live by theft and thrive by assassination." The best hope for Indians, then, was not a separate existence but passage of the Oklahoma bill and complete assimilation into American society. "The Indians will bless you," Boudinot informed members of the US House of Representatives, "if he but understands that he is elevated from the degrading rank of a ward and subject to the proud position of American citizen." Elias Cornelius Boudinot's political positions cannot be traced to his family's troubled history alone. He also looked favorably upon US citizenship because he embraced an individualistic entrepreneurial ethic and looked forward to the expanded economic opportunities that the creation of Oklahoma would bring for him. As a Cherokee citizen, Boudinot had purchased land from his nation in Vinita, a town that lay at the intersection of the two railroads that received rights-of-way in accordance with the Treaty of 1866. The entrepreneur had dreams that Indian Territory would someday become a state, thus
flooding the land with white settlers, bringing a precipitous rise in property values, and increasing the clientele of a hotel he planned to build in Vinita. He boasted to a railroad lobbyist that property value in the Cherokee Nation would increase ten times over the existing value.27 He also had bragged that "when the territorial bill passes my road to wealth is open [and] I'll order some marble work at great cost to decorate my villas."28

With Boudinot and other progressives resting their economic future on the breakup of Indian nations, they embraced a laissez-faire attitude toward other Native Americans. One of Boudinot's allies, for example, privately lambasted Cherokee nationalists as "the Hog and Hominy class" that cared nothing for enterprise.29 Another lamented that if the anti-territorial majority "will not come over and stand on the bright side of civilization and success let them go to their wallow, but don't let them drag us in with them."30 Not surprisingly, progressives failed to embrace the cause of non-Cherokee Indians and condemned nationalists for associating too closely with other Indians. "The only objection we have heard to this policy of dividing the lands," progressives wrote, "is that of one of the Delegates [probably William Penn Adair], who says it would prove disastrous to the blanket Indians. . . . We did not know before that our delegation were representing any blanket Indians, or that there were any such in our Nation."31 Placement of the Lakota or other "blanket" Indians near the Cherokee Nation was an unacceptable proposition to progressives. Having them as neighbors would decrease property values and destroy potential commerce with whites. Speaking to members of Congress, Boudinot claimed that placement of so-called wild tribes next to the Cherokee would "greatly retard our progress and result in a great loss to us pecuniarily."32 While nationalists adopted a pan-Indian yet paternalistic identity to defend Cherokee sovereignty, progressives distanced themselves from other Native Americans to promote their economic interests.

Scene III: Custer's Last Stand in Tahlequah

With their disdainful approach to other Indians, progressives remained a minority voice within the Cherokee Nation. English-speaking nationalists such as William Penn Adair and William Potter Ross continued to enjoy more support. Indeed, other English speakers echoed the views of their nationalist diplomats when they received news of Custer's defeat and heard the heightened cries for extermination that emanated from western white communities. Events on the Northern Plains in the summer of 1876 led many Cherokee to support the Lakota in their common struggle against white hostility.

The year 1876 was not the first time the Cherokee addressed the Lakota and their problems. In August of 1874, the Cherokee Advocate heaped scorn on General George Custer for invading the Black Hills, announcing the presence of gold, and initiating a rush of Euro-Americans into land guaranteed to Indians by the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie.33 John L. Adair, the editor, reprinted sympathetic articles extracted from eastern presses that claimed that the Lakota would fight and would have, according to one account, "a strong color of right on their side." The editor himself claimed that antagonistic whites fabricated the reports of gold and that Custer had no right to intrude upon Indian land. Adair was most disgusted with gold-hungry westerners and their attempts to force the Lakota to cede land. "They expect to compel Congress," the editor declared, "by circumstances to commit a crime against a weak and defenseless people that a horde of gold hunters may be protected." Of course, the Cherokee also worried about how events in the Dakotas would affect Indian sovereignty. The invasion of the Black Hills and threatening the Lakota with an ultimatum to cede their land, according to Adair, "shadow the regard in which some people hold Indian Treaties."34

In the summer of 1876, articles, editorials, and letters concerning the Battle of Little Big-
The calls for “extermination” indeed traumatized many English-speaking Cherokee but made them no less willing to identify with the Lakota. After hearing of the Plains Wars, Ezekiel Buffington expressed his outrage with US Indian affairs. “I cannot longer remain a silent spectator and turn a deaf ear to the promptings of my duty,” he wrote to the Advocate, “while wrongs and injustices daily threaten [the Indian’s] annihilation.” The outraged Cherokee lambasted the policy of extermination and expressed a feeling of kinship with the Native warriors who resisted what he regarded as injustice. “I am happy,” he declared, “that the blood of this unfortunate and despised race courses through my veins, and for [the Plains Indians] I cannot but help to feel the tenderest regard and sympathy.”

As did Buffington, Ann Bell Shelton expressed in her private correspondence feelings of kinship with the Lakota and disgust with US Indian affairs. Living in Texas at the time, Shelton wrote, “I admire Sitting Bull[all] amazingly and I don’t want blood shed on either side, but I don’t want him to come to any harm.” The Cherokee woman, however, expressed concern about white hostility that the Plains Wars exacerbated. Referring to the “Indian question,” she complained, “my soul sickens at the very mention of it. The talk of extermination, just the same as if it were rats they were talking of.” Indeed, the calls for extermination did scar the young woman. “I wish sometimes,” she exclaimed fatalistically, “the whole of us, from the pure Indian to the last one with the millionth part of a drop of blood could be cut off in a moment and the vexed question stopped forever.”

Scene IV: A Visit from Spotted Tail

Reading about the invasion of the Black Hills and Custer’s Last Stand inspired many English-speaking Cherokee to express their outrage with Euro-American attitudes and US Indian policy. Nationalist sentiments even led some to view the Lakota as kinsmen locked in a common cause of resisting white expansion. In late October 1876, Cherokee would have another unique opportunity to discuss their relationship with the Lakota. US agents escorted Chief Spotted Tail and ninety other Lakota to visit Indian Territory. Just weeks prior to his visit, US agents withheld rations from Spotted Tail and several other chiefs and their people, forcing them to sign a treaty ceding the Black Hills. White officials hoped that they could also pressure them into agreeing to relocate to a reservation in Indian Territory. The Cherokee thus were faced with
the possibility of having to fulfill their previous promises that they would welcome the Lakota.

As one might expect, Elias Cornelius Boudinot and progressives expressed a strong aversion to living next to a group that they considered “wild” and, given recent events, possibly dangerous. Boudinot condemned Cherokee diplomats for their earlier promises in Washington to welcome “uncivilized” Natives to Indian Territory. For Boudinot, whites would make better neighbors. “No doubt [Cherokee nationalists] would rather see a band of Sitting Bull’s fellows located among [their] people than the same number of good, honest white men,” the entrepreneur charged. Some English speakers who had expressed sympathy for the Lakota also found themselves exhibiting the same contemptuous attitude as that of Boudinot. Ann Bell Shelton, for example, who earlier claimed that she admired Sitting Bull, wrote, “[It was a great source of satisfaction to me to see that Col. [Elias Cornelius] Boudinot protested against all that wild savage element coming into the territory.”

Cherokee diplomats such as William Potter Ross and William Penn Adair could not afford to be so contemptuous. If they were, they might seem as traitors to their race, thus alienating their culturally conservative constituents and disaffected sympathetic whites who looked upon the “civilized” Indians as leaders of Native peoples. Consequently, a group of Cherokee including Ross and probably Adair traveled to Muskogee in the nearby Creek Nation to greet Spotted Tail. According to US agents who accompanied the Lakota, Ross “expressed to the chiefs a deep interest in the welfare of their people, and hoped they would decide to make the country they had visited their home to commence the work of civilization.” Unfortunately, the exact content of the dialogue between the Cherokee and the Lakota went unrecorded or has not survived in the written records.

While Adair’s and Ross’s voices remain silent due to the inadequacies of the historical record, William P. Boudinot spoke loudly through the pages of the Advocate. Interestingly, the editor proclaimed that the Cherokee should not welcome the Lakota. “So far as the Sioux are concerned we wish them well,” proclaimed the editor, “and so wishing them well we do not now welcome them to this territory.” Boudinot, however, derived his position from reasons different than those of his brother. The editor clearly saw that the Lakota were being coerced to move and that such conduct of Indian policy by federal officials threatened all Indians. “If the Sioux, do not wish to move . . . we but lessen our own right [to our land],” he claimed, “which may hereafter be jeopardized . . . by simply saying ‘welcome’ when the government by force or fraud propose to move them against their will.” Boudinot went on to add that if the Lakota could speak to the Cherokee they would say, “[If you are friends to us and have my voice to express in the matter join with us in resisting the tyranny of the [US] government.”

On the surface, the editor’s reaction to Lakota removal may appear to be mere rationalization for an unspoken fear of living next to Indians they considered “wild.” In addition, the silence of Adair and Ross makes their earlier rhetorical support of the Lakota appear insincere. Such an interpretation, though, ignores the possibility that Cherokee nationalists, especially William P. Boudinot, may have realized that circumstances surrounding Spotted Tail’s visit bore a striking resemblance to events that ended in the Cherokee’s Trail of Tears. In the early 1830s, William Boudinot’s father, Elias Boudinot Sr., found himself in a position similar to Spotted Tail’s. Georgians had confiscated the property of many Cherokee and prevented them from defending themselves in court; the federal government refused to curtail Georgia’s unconstitutional and illegal actions and instead asked the Indians to give up their land and remove west. The majority of Cherokee stubbornly refused to give in and clung to their Native homeland, but Elias Boudinot Sr. thought such resistance was futile. He joined others in signing the Treaty of New Echota, without the approval of the
national council, an act that ultimately cost him his life. With Spotted Tail’s visit, it must have occurred to William Boudinot that history was repeating itself. Like the Cherokee, the Lakota were being forced to leave their beloved homelands against their will. The editor probably did not wish to put into print what obviously must have occurred to him. He certainly did not want to appear apologetic for his father and dredge up old wounds among the Cherokee, who in 1876 were still trying to overcome years of internal strife and to build a unified resistance against the Oklahoma bills.

While the editor did not publish his understanding of the parallels in history, other Cherokee did. One English speaker, writing under the Native name Tooquastee, reminded his fellow Cherokee that gold drew illegal squatters into the Cherokee Nation in 1828 just as it had in the Black Hills in 1874. And in both cases, the federal government did not protect Native peoples from oppression but only asked them to leave. “Shut out of the courts of justice, we were jeered, insulted, and slain by white men with impunity,” he reminded his people. “The present scene in the Black Hills,” the perceptive Tooquastee concluded, “is but the repetition of this piece of Cherokee history, only more flagrant and therefore more bloody.” The infuriated writer went on to condemn the “friends of extermination” for causing the Plains Indians to rebel. The recent hostilities, he concluded, were “only additional admonitions proclaiming to the ear of the civilized world . . . that Indians are human beings and that it is wrong to oppress them.”

Because some Cherokee could see the repetition of their own history in the Dakotas, they rejected the removal of the Lakota while maintaining a common identity as Indians who shared a heritage of victimization. Yet throughout the military conflict and debate on Lakota removal, English-speaking Cherokee continued to affirm their self-perceived cultural superiority over the Plains Indians. Just weeks prior to the visit of Spotted Tail, William P. Boudinot wrote, “Let it not once be supposed that we are not an Indian to the back bone with all the dislike, prejudice, and contempt for the white color that the red ought to have.” The Cherokee, however, were not the same as the warlike Indians of the Plains. “We profess to be an Indian in having less aversion to other races than they have,” the editor exclaimed. Boudinot boasted about his people’s level of “civilization” and said that their imitation of “enlightened” and “Christian” white men was responsible for “the position this Tribe now holds at the head of the Aboriginal Remnant.”

**CONCLUSION**

As 1876 came to an end, the curious intersection of Lakota and Cherokee history came to an anticlimatic finish. Spotted Tail of course did not like the Indian Territory, returned home, and spurned federal efforts to get him to move. The issue of Lakota removal subsequently subsided, and the two great Indian nations would forever remain geographically distant. The issues of 1876, however, would continue to face the Cherokee in subsequent years. Throughout the remainder of the decade, the Cherokee would be asked to accept the settlement of relocated western tribes on their lands. Indeed, the Cherokee agreed to sell territory to the federal government for use by western tribes. Meanwhile, the Cherokee remained focused on the injustices that all Indians faced and linked this pan-Indian struggle with their own efforts to defend themselves against schemes to destroy their sovereignty. Ultimately, the Cherokee’s dream of a separate homeland in which Indians could remain autonomous became lost. Beginning in the 1890s Congress approved a series of measures that destroyed the sovereignty of nations in the Indian Territory and ultimately created the state of Oklahoma in 1907.

While no tangible results came from the intersection of Lakota and Cherokee history in 1876, the episode does have important significance. Cherokee discourse concerning the
Lakota, events on the Northern Plains, and their possible relocation to Indian Territory should not be dismissed as insincere rhetoric or as a convenient tactic to defend their own self-interest. Instead, such discourse demonstrates the internal struggles of a number of English-speaking American Indians to define who they were. Such individuals, whose abilities put them in the middle of Euro-American and Native worlds, aspired to leadership both within and outside their own nation, but in doing so, they had to articulate their way between contradictory political spheres. Rank-and-file Cherokee desired that their nation remain autonomous, while at the same time outside whites accorded Indians no future as separate peoples, or worse, as animals who should be exterminated. Nationalists such as William Penn Adair, William Potter Ross, and William P. Boudinot attempted to transcend this contradiction by creating an identity as both Indian and “civilized.” On the one hand, English speakers revealed in their discussions of the Lakota that they were indeed Indians, and as such they shared in the struggles of all Native peoples in their effort to retain their sovereignty. On the other hand, the Indians’ separate existence was a hard sell to white policymakers. “Civilization” for English-speaking Cherokee was the key to making this sell. By being “civilized,” they claimed they should take a leading role in saving other Indians from both their “uncivilized” customs and hostile whites. The Cherokee thus volunteered their “civilized” identity as an aid to the United States in accomplishing its policy goals. But such assistance was only going to come if whites allowed Indians to live within their own sovereign nations.

The construction of a “civilized” Indian identity served English-speaking Cherokee well in their effort to build legitimacy both at home and abroad. Such a construction also demonstrated a central irony of federal policy. English fluency was supposed to be a tool to prepare Native peoples to surrender their Indianness and assimilate into Euro-American society. Instead, it became a way of the Cherokee to understand how they shared a common identity not with whites whose culture they emulated but with the Lakota. In 1876 Cherokee read about the struggle of the Lakota to retain the Black Hills and came to the painful acknowledgment that the whole affair on the Northern Plains bore a close resemblance to events in Georgia over forty years earlier. Also, in 1876 they concluded that the same historical processes were bearing down on “civilized” as well as “wild” Indians. The Oklahoma bills and the invasion of the Black Hills were yet more examples of the rapaciousness of whites, which all Indians have had to confront. English literacy, while not always necessary for the construction of Indian identity, nonetheless expanded the Cherokee’s geographic vision of being Indian. The narrative of events being created by Euro-American avarice and being recorded in the dominant language reminded English-speaking Cherokee nationalists what they had in common with peoples living far away. English literacy encouraged nationalists Cherokee to choose to defend the interests of Indians rather than forget the Native identity that Euro-Americans wanted to erase.

Consciousness of Indianness, however, had its limits. Progressives such as Elias Cornelius Boudinot embraced neither the cause of Cherokee sovereignty nor a common identity with the Lakota. Instead, he was willing to plunge himself into a new status of a US citizen, leaving behind the so-called blanket Indians from whom he chose to distance himself. The time had arrived for progressive Indians to escape the fate of so many members of their race and become completely assimilated into Euro-American society. For the Lakota and other “wild” Indians, it was perhaps too late. History was overwhelming them, and the Cherokee should beware of associating with them too closely lest they be exterminated as well.

Nationalists of course did not go so far. They also pointed out their differences with the Lakota but translated those differences into the very reason that they should be concerned
about other Indians. They viewed themselves as the “civilized” representatives of their race who had a special duty to lead the Lakota and other “wild” Indians to a level of equality with Euro-Americans. Or at the very least, the Cherokee could stay the destruction of Indians by setting an example that Native peoples could be “civilized.” William Penn Adair, for example, stated it quite well when he remarked at an agricultural fair in 1878:

From this Christian theory I have advanced and reviewing the past as among the dead and the future pregnant with hope for all races of men it occurs to me that the most vital question that should concern us at this time as Indians, especially on this great occasion is: What duty do we, the present generation of Indians, owe to ourselves and our posterity? The answer to this question, it seems to me, covers no debatable ground, and is, that it should be our duty to push our people forward in civilization. 48

Just two years earlier it must have appeared to Adair and other English speakers that history seemed to be overwhelming all Indians. Cherokee nationalists were not certain that any Indians, whether “civilized” or not, would have a future in what was becoming an increasingly hostile world for peoples of Native American descent. English-speaking nationalists thus continued to defend the Indian’s separate existence and their own role “at the head of the Aboriginal Remnant,” leading the way for Indians to best adapt to the history that had threatened to destroy them all.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Sarah Erwin and her staff at the Thomas Gilcrease Museum and John Lovett and his staff at the Western History Collections, Oklahoma University for their gracious assistance. He also thanks the many friends, colleagues, and anonymous readers who commented on earlier drafts. Donald Fixico, David La Vere, Rita Napier, Theda Perdue, Brad Raley, and William Savage deserve special appreciation for their help and encouragement.

1. William Penn Adair, “Remarks of W. P. Adair, Cherokee Delegate in Relation to the Expedition and Legality of Organizing the Indian Country into a Territory of ‘Ok-la-ho-ma,’ made before the Committee on Territories, of the House of Representatives of the United States,” 31 January 1876, quotes on pp. 27, 31 (Adair’s emphases). Unless otherwise cited, all publications of Cherokee speeches and protests made before or submitted to members of Congress can be found in the Grant Foreman Collection, Archives Department, Thomas Gilcrease Museum of American Art and History, Tulsa, Okla.

2. Although the United States in the 1870s was moving away from its agrarian past and becoming an industrial civilization, Cherokee as well as white policymakers held to older Jeffersonian ideals. On the origins and persistence of an agrarian definition of civilization in Indian policy, see Bernard Sheehan, Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and American Indians (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), and Francis Paul Prucha, The Great Father: the United States Government and the American Indians, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).


4. Since this paper is based on English-language sources, its claims do not extend to the entire Cherokee Nation. It does not assume that the opinions of the English-speaking minority, especially on what constituted “civilization,” reflected the views of Cherokee who spoke only their native tongue. Nevertheless, English speakers are worthy subjects of study given the important role they played in shaping the destiny of their nation. How they constructed their identity also offers evidence of how individuals from other tribes who traveled in both Euro-American and Native worlds may have viewed themselves. The issue of American Indian identity has received a growing amount of scholarly attention that ranges from the colonial period to contemporary times and embraces a number of different tribal peoples. See Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer Brown, eds., The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); James A. Clifton, ed., Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies of North American Frontiers (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989); Gregory Evans Dowd, A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins


7. The social makeup and political world of the Cherokee Nation in the 1870s were certainly complex. The best scholarly account of the Cherokee during this time is William McLoughlin, After the Trail of Tears: The Cherokees' Struggle for Sovereignty, 1820-1880 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). See also an earlier study, Morris Wardell, A Political History of the Cherokee Nation, 1838-1907 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938). Unfortunately, both studies perpetuate the “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” dichotomy emphasized by the enemies of Indian sovereignty. These were constructs that Cherokee rarely used themselves but that appeared frequently in US government records. For example, federal agents broke down Cherokee population statistics by blood, recording that in 1879 there were 6,000 “mixed-bloods” and 8,000 “full-bloods” (“Affairs in the Indian Territory,” US Senate, Reports, 45th Cong., 3d sess., Washington, D.C.: General Printing Office, 1879, serial 1839, vol. 3, p. iii). Since government officials had no definite way of telling who had European ancestry and who did not, they often used cultural characteristics as a means to categorize people. Cherokee who adopted Euro-American customs, especially language, were assumed to have European ancestors. Of course, such assumptions are based on the false idea that race determines culture, and for that reason I will not employ the terms “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” to put Cherokee into two different cultural groups. On the connections between “blood” categories and fluency in English, see Daniel H. Ross, et. al., Remonstrance of the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole Delegations Against the Organization of the Indian Territory into a Territory of the United States,” 28 February 1876 (Washington, D.C.: John L. Ginck, 1876), p. 21.


10. Ibid. (Adair’s emphases).
11. News concerning the activities of national delegates can be found in most of the spring issues of the Cherokee Advocate, especially the following: 11 March 1876, 25 March 1876, 29 April 1876, 20 May 1876, 27 May 1876, and 24 June 1876. The surviving copies of nineteenth-century editions of the Advocate can be found on microfilm in the Oklahoma Historical Society, Department of Archives, Oklahoma City, Okla.

14. “Protest by the Lawful Delegates of the Civlized Nations of Indians of the Indian Territory, (Herein Named), On their Behalf and on Behalf of the Indian Race, Against the Passage of a Law by Congress Transferring Them and Their Property to Military Control,” 27 March 1876 (Washington, D.C.: Gibson Brothers, 1876), p. 1. In addition to the Adairs and Rosses, Joel M. Bryan and John L. McCoy also signed the document as representatives of the “Old Settler Cherokee,” who were descendants of individuals who had migrated to Indian Territory before the forced removals of the 1830s. The Old Settlers did not form a political party of their own but did have some special interest due to treaties they alone had signed earlier in the nineteenth century. It is clear here that the Old Settlers agreed with the nationalist sentiments of the Downing and National parties.
15. Ibid., p. 2.
16. Ibid., p. 4.
17 Ibid., p. 9.
18. "Remonstrance of the Cherokee ... Delegations" (note 7 above), p. 11.
19. Adair, "Remarks" (note 1 above), p. 34.
22. Adair, "Remarks" (note 1 above), p. 35 (Adair's emphasis).
24. Since the Cherokee government effectively forbade any pro-territorial organizations and prevented the publication of pro-territorial views in the pages of the Advocate, the size of this minority is hard to determine. Boudinot's supporters, perhaps exaggerating, claimed that "hundreds of men" supported territorialization. See: Unsigned to James M. Bell, n.d., OU-WHC-CNP, Box 169, Folder 59. Although the minority was most likely composed of only English speakers and bilinguals, not everyone fluent in English supported Elias C. Boudinot.
26. In 1869 federal officials had seized a tobacco company that Boudinot operated within the Cherokee Nation and arrested the enterprising man for failure to pay federal excise taxes. Boudinot appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, but in 1871 the justices severely disappointed him when they upheld his conviction. Psychologically crushed and financially bankrupted, Boudinot determined that Indian enterprise would only flourish when they received the same rights as United States citizens (E. C. Boudinot to Stand Watie, 10 May 1871, OU-WHC-CNP, Box 149, Folder 35).
29. William N. West to James M. Bell, n.d., OU-WHC-CNP, Box 169, Folder 59.
33. Much has been written on the Black Hills gold rush, but an adequate overview of this event is Donald Jackson, Custer's Gold (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), see especially pp. 81, 88, 107, 109.
34. Adair's commentary can be found in Cherokee Advocate, 19 September 1874.
35. Cherokee Advocate, 22 July 1876.
36. Ibid.
37. Cherokee Advocate, 5 August 1876.
38. Ann Bell Shelton to Mrs. Sarah C. Watie, 27 August 1876, OU-WHC-CNP, Box 158, Folder 4. When Ann referred to "cut off" she probably means extermination. In an undated letter, she wrote, "I often wish we had been exterminated and done with some years ago for that will be the end — and I have a horror of a long lingering death" (emphasis Shelton's). See: Ann to Uncle Jim [James M. Bell], n.d., OU-WHC-CNP, Box 169, Folder 74.
40. Oklahoma Star, 3 August 1876.
41. Ann B. Shelton to Mrs. Sarah C. Watie, 19 February 1877, OU-WHC-CNP, Box 210, Folder 127.
42. US agents only identified William Potter Ross by name, leaving it unknown who the "other Cherokee" actually were. One can assume that Adair did not want to see his rival and the National Party gain more prestige than the Downing Party and made the short trip to Muskogee. Moreover, the only surviving official record of this meeting does not record what the Cherokee or Lakota actually said. See “Certain Concessions from the Sioux Indians,” US Senate, Executive Documents, 44th Cong., 2d sess., vol. 1, no. 9, pp. 19-20.
43. Cherokee Advocate, 21 October 1876.
44. Ibid.
45. Interestingly, Spotted Tail was indeed assassinated years after his return from Indian Territory. The motives of his assailant remain uncertain, but they do not appear to be directly related to thecession of the Black Hills. For an overview of this notable chief's life, see George Hyde, Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brulé Sioux (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).
46. Cherokee Advocate, 21 October 1876.
47. Cherokee Advocate, 9 September 1876.