

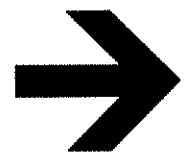
Thomas Jefferson

Founding Father of Indian Removal

LEFT: President Thomas Jefferson pointing to the Declaration of Independence. Engraving after painting by Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), ca. 1801.

THOMAS JEFFERSON (1743–1826) WAS A SCHOLAR, SCIENTIST, PLANTER, PRESIDENT, architect and philosopher – a true Renaissance man in the age of revolution. He was also an enigma. Jefferson admired Native “character” and often expressed concern for Native people. Yet, as president from 1801 to 1809, he pursued policies that eroded tribal homelands and cultures, and laid the foundation for the devastating Indian removals of the 1830s.

Indians fascinated Jefferson. A voracious reader and book collector, he studied Indian customs and recorded Native languages. He prepared a display at Monticello, his home in Virginia, of tribal objects collected during the Lewis and Clark expedition (1803–1806). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jefferson considered the Indian to be by nature equal to the white man. In his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (printed in London in 1787), Jefferson upbraided the French naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon for asserting that Indians were small, weak, lethargic, mentally inferior, undersexed and equipped with “small organs of generation.” The American Indian “is neither more defective in ardor, nor more impotent with his female, than the white . . .,” Jefferson replied. They were brave, strong, intelligent and articulate – the latter was proven by the Mingo headman James Logan (ca. 1725–1780), whom Jefferson compared to Demosthenes and Cicero, the greatest orators of ancient Greece and Rome.



The problem was that America's "vacant lands" were populated by thousands of American Indians, whose notions of freedom rested on maintaining their tribal traditions and ancestral territories. Acquiring Indian lands became a crusade for Jefferson, one that led the United States toward the slippery slope of removal.



Headman James (or John) Logan,

(Soyechtowa?) (circa 1725–1780), a village leader of Iroquois groups which migrated to Ohio Country and became known as the Mingos, is one of the most famous of Indian orators, even though confusion still surrounds his actual name, in both its English and Native form. After Logan's family was horribly massacred by frontiersmen in 1774, he led a small band in a personal war of revenge. His speech in a parley with British officers, known as Logan's Lament, was widely published in the mid-18th century and memorized in colonial schools. Jefferson collected pages of affidavits about the case and printed them in an appendix to a revised edition of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* when his, and Logan's, identification of the perpetrator was challenged in the press.

The only thing Indians needed, Jefferson insisted, was the civilizing influence of agriculture. (Like English theorists since John Locke, Jefferson willfully ignored extensive and highly productive Native farming which did not use European implements.) By abandoning hunting and adopting farming, he counseled, Indians would rise from "savagery" to "civilization" and eventually be absorbed into American society. As president, he extolled the virtues of agriculture in meetings with Native leaders, in correspondence and in speeches. "In leading [Indians] to agriculture," he told Congress in 1803, "I trust and believe that we are acting for their greatest good."

Perhaps so. But Jefferson's actions – rather than his words – suggest that his benevolent impulses were trumped by a darker motive.

For Jefferson, democracy rested on the virtues of the yeoman farmer and on an unlimited supply of land. The man who cultivated his own land was sturdy and self-reliant, he believed, uniquely able to resist the blandishments of political demagogues and opportunists.

"Our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries as long as they are chiefly agricultural," Jefferson proclaimed, "and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America."

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When the American Revolution ended in 1783, Jefferson was already dreaming of expeditions to the West. He looked forward to the day when the United States would overstretch the entire continent and emerge as an "Empire of Liberty." The West of Jefferson's imagination moved a giant step closer to reality in 1803, when the United States acquired the vast Louisiana Territory, which stretched from the Mississippi to the Rockies. When Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their



epic expedition up the Missouri River to the Pacific, he instructed them to gather all the information they could about the new territories and the Native peoples who inhabited them.

As Lewis and Clark explored the West, Jefferson began hammering out a policy for acquiring lands from tribes living east of the Mississippi. The plan rested on alternately encouraging, cajoling, bribing, tricking and pressuring Indians into signing treaties that ceded tribal lands to the United States.

Jefferson first instructed his agents to persuade Indians to adopt agriculture. That new way of life, the agents explained, would require less land than hunting. With no need for their vast forests, the Indians were encouraged to sell their uncultivated territories for 25 cents per acre, the profits of which Indian farmers could use to purchase agricultural tools and manufactured goods.

To stimulate Indian consumerism, Jefferson increased the number of government trading houses located near Native villages,

arguing publicly that the establishments enabled Indians to share in the fruits of white "civilization." But it was a ploy. His real motive, he confided in 1803, was to lure Indians into spending themselves into debt, obligations that would be paid off through the sale of tribal lands.

The weapons in Jefferson's arsenal of dispossession were many and varied, and they worked to perfection. As the historian Colin Calloway has observed, Jefferson's strategy yielded some 30 treaties with approximately a dozen tribes, who ceded some 200,000 square miles of land in nine states.

Some Indian peoples, including many Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Creeks, chose to heed Jefferson's call to adopt the ways of white society, adopting governments modeled on the United States, churches and schools producing high literacy. But other Natives rejected the white road. For them, Jefferson had little patience. Given his principles, Indians had two choices: full assimilation or removal.

Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (mural study, U.S. Capitol), by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze (1816–1868). Smithsonian American Art Museum. Bequest of Sara Carr Upton. 1931.6.1.

Completed in 1861, Emanuel Leutze's mural study is a quintessential expression of America's "Manifest Destiny" – the idea, popular in the 1840s and 50s, that the United States was destined, by God and history, to expand its boundaries throughout North America.





Family Removal, by Jerome Tiger (Creek-Seminole, 1941–1967). Tempera on paperboard, 1965.

Ironically, the notorious Indian removals of the 1830s targeted the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Creeks – tribes that had heeded Jefferson’s call to assimilate into American life.

Jefferson began raising the specter of Indian removal in private letters written in 1803. Native resistance to European-style farming and to land sales, as well as white settlers’ disrespect for Indian property rights, appears to have disposed Jefferson to doubt the feasibility of assimilating Native people into American life. Would it not be better to move Indians out of harm’s way, he wondered, to exchange tribal lands in the east for lands west of the Mississippi? He reasoned that Native people, safely ensconced in the west, could live peacefully, moving from “savagery” to “civilization” at their own pace, while at the same time enabling frontier whites to take over the Indians’ old homelands back east. The “best use we can make of” the Louisiana Territory, he declared, “will be to give establishments in it to the Indians on the East side of the Mississippi, in exchange for their present country.”

The idea of emigrating to the West was suggested to the Cherokees during the twilight of Jefferson’s presidency, in 1808–1809, but treaty provisions for removal did not emerge until the War of 1812, after Jefferson returned to Monticello. Yet the Pandora’s Box of removal was now open, and it would not be easily closed. Clamor for removing Indians from the east grew quickly in the years that followed, particularly among white settlers in Georgia and the newly created states of Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. Ultimately, no fewer than 76 Indian treaties prescribed emigration, and more than 100,000 Native people from 28 tribes would be removed west of the Mississippi between 1816 and 1850. Ironically, the notorious Indian removals of the 1830s targeted the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Creeks – tribes that had heeded Jefferson’s call to assimilate into American life.

Jefferson was not responsible for the Trail of Tears. But by raising the specter of Indian removal, America’s greatest champion of liberty made it possible for President Andrew Jackson to turn an odious idea into a formal national policy. *

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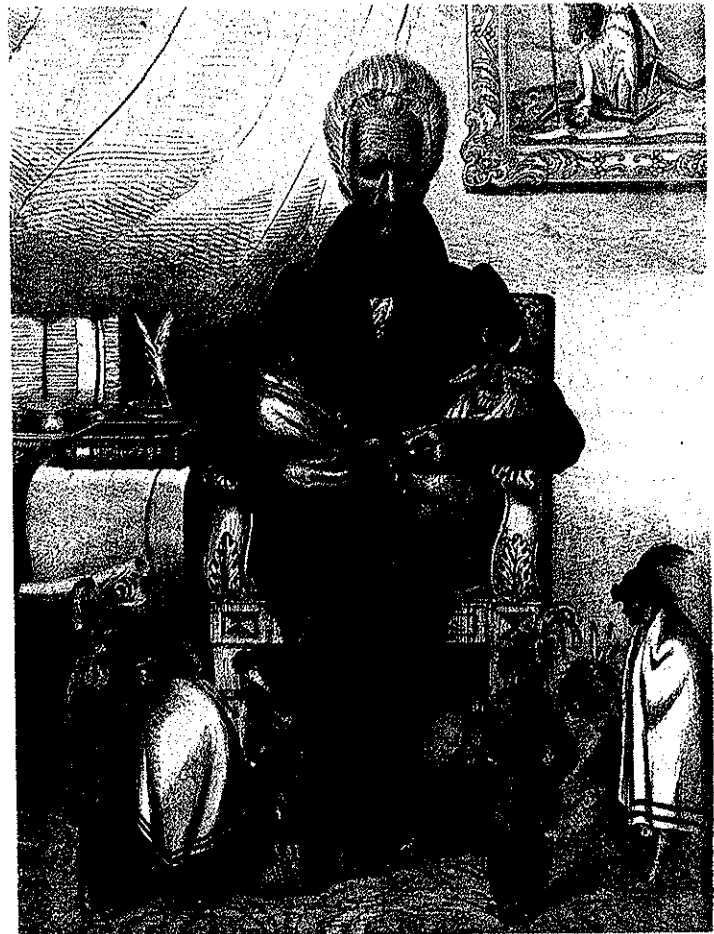


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Andrew Jackson as *The Great Father*, ca. 1830. As president, Jackson advocated moving Indians to the west, where they could live free of white interference. Removal opponents mocked “Old Hickory’s” professed compassion for the tribes in cartoons that depicted Jackson as a paternal figure comforting Indian children.