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# The Idea of the “Vanishing Indian” as an Ideology in the Jacksonian Era

Songho Ha

University of Alaska Anchorage, U.S.A

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Historians have attributed the Indian Removal of the 1830s to various factors such as Andrew Jackson’s hostility towards Native Americans, the greed of white settlers for gold found in Cherokee territory, and most importantly white farmers’ hunger for the fertile land owned by Southern Native tribes.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will discuss another factor that affected the Indian Removal: the ideology of the “Vanishing Indian.” This concept refers to a fatalistic narrative of Native Indians as doomed to vanish from the American continent.<sup>2</sup> This narrative was used to justify the United States government’s policy to relocate Native Indian tribes from the Old Southwest to west of the Mississippi River.

The concept of the “Vanishing Indian” was an ideology in the sense that it was used to hide a deeply rooted racism amongst whites towards Native Americans. I will use the case of the Creek Indian Removal of 1825 to 1827 to demonstrate the potency of the ideology of the “Vanishing Indian.” This case is important, not only because it was a precedent for a larger- scale Indian removal of 1830s, but also clearly testifies to the power of the idea of “ Vanishing Indians” in setting the stage for Indian-settler relations’<sup>3</sup>

In 1827, federal officials forced the Creek Indians of Georgia to move to Alabama. President John Quincy Adams enforced the Creek removal. The issue started with the Treaty of Indian Springs signed on February 12, 1825 by U.S. representatives James Meriwether and Duncan G. Campbell and Creek Chief William McIntosh plus several other Creek leaders.<sup>4</sup> The treaty required that the Creeks move to west of the Mississippi River by September 1, 1826. The United

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1. See Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Andrew Frank, “Native American Removal,” in *A Companion to the Era of Andre Jackson*, ed., Sean Patrick Adams (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 391-411.
  2. This paper is very much inspired by Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1982).
  3. 3 Previous studies on the Creek Indian removal from Georgia include Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln: NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Mary Hargreaves, *The Presidency of John Quincy Adams* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 200-207; Lynn Hudson Parson, *John Quincy Adams* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 181-83
  4. The treaty is in Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties: 1778-1883* (New York: Interland Publishing Inc., 1973), 214-217; Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 76.

States Senate overwhelmingly ratified the treaty by a vote of 38 to 4 on March 3, 1825, just one day before the inauguration of Adams, and he signed the treaty into a law on March 7 as one of his first official acts of President.<sup>5</sup> However, the validity of the treaty was very doubtful. McIntosh had no authority to sign such a treaty on behalf of the all Creeks.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Creek National Council, the governing body of the Creek Nation, had decreed before the Treaty of Indian Springs that they would not cede and more land to whites. Any Creek who violated this decree would be punished by death.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless, Georgia Governor George Troup started negotiation with McIntosh to survey all Creek Indian land before September 1, 1826. Infuriated by this bold move, Creek Indians killed McIntosh and two of his followers on April 29, 1825.<sup>8</sup> Two weeks later, after learning of McIntosh's death, Adams ordered Georgia officials to stop their survey to prevent a further escalation of tensions. He sent General Edmund Pendleton Gaines to Georgia. General Gaines stationed nine infantry companies between the Creek Indians and Georgia settlers and held a series of meetings with Creek Indians to assess their sentiment. After these meetings, Gaines reported to Adams that a vast majority of Creeks opposed the Treaty of Indian Springs and supported the killing of McIntosh.<sup>9</sup> Based on this report, President Adams' Secretary of War James Barbour sent a letter dated July 21, 1825 to Georgia Governor George Troup that the United States government would not permit Georgia's survey. Shortly afterwards, Adams administration also signed the Treaty of Washington with Creek Indians on January 24, 1826 that repealed and replaced the Treaty of Indian Springs. The preamble of the new treaty stated that "the stipulations in the said Treaty [of Indian Springs] are...wholly void."<sup>10</sup> The new treaty, however, demanded that the Creek nation forfeit to the federal government all of its land in Georgia east of the middle of the Chattahoochee River.<sup>11</sup> The remaining Creek lands in Georgia represented about 192,000 acres, or a mere 4.5% of the total Creek land held in early 1825. The Creeks agreed to leave the ceded territory by January 1, 1827.<sup>12</sup>

The Treaty of Washington represented a turning point in Adams's views towards Indian removal, a stance he had previously rejected. Behind his growing acceptance of Indian removal lay the ideology of the "Vanishing Indians." The idea of Vanishing Indians was most fully discussed during a four-hour discussion of the Adams cabinet on December 22, 1825 held to formulate a general policy to deal with Native Americans and their lands. During the debate, Secretary of War James

5. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 80.

6. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 56.

7. *Ibid.*, 74.

8. *Ibid.*, 96.

9. *Ibid.*, 111-116.

10. Herman V. Ames, ed., *State Documents on Federal Relations: The States and the United States* (Philadelphia: Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1911), 114; Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 125. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties: 1778-1883*, 264.

11. *Ibid.*, 265.

12. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 130.

Barbour initially proposed “incorporating Indians within the States of the Union....considering them as altogether subject to our [United States] laws.” Secretary of State Henry Clay refuted this idea of assimilation and argued that Barbour’s plan was “impracticable.” He said that “it was impossible to civilize Indians; that there never was a full- blooded Indian who took to civilization. It was not in their nature.” According to Adams’ diary that recorded this meeting, “He [Clay] believed they were destined to extinction, and,.... He did not think them, as a race, worth preserving. He considered them as essentially inferior to the Anglo-Saxon race. Which were now taking their place on this continent. ....their [Indians’] disappearance from the human family will be no great loss to the world. In point of fact they were rapidly disappearing, and he did not believe that in fifty years from this time there would be any of them left.”<sup>13</sup> What is important is that none in the meeting, including President Adams, refuted the idea. In fact, Adams wrote that “Governor Barbour was somewhat shocked at these opinions [of Clay], for which I fear there is too much foundation.”<sup>14</sup>

By accepting the concept of the “Vanishing Indian,” Adams and his cabinet felt justified in signing the Treaty of Washington in January 1826. Moreover, about a month afterwards Adams indicated his complete conversion to the idea of Indian removal. On February 21, 1826, Secretary of War Barbour submitted a letter to John Cocke, Chairman of the House Committee on Indian Affairs. In the letter, Barbour recommended removal as the ultimate solution to the question of Natives Americans’ land.<sup>15</sup> Barbour suggested removal of all Native Indians to west of the Mississippi River. The removal would be carried out by individuals instead of collectively by tribes.<sup>16</sup> Barbour’s plan was similar to the Indian Removal Act of 1830 later urged by President Andrew Jackson. Likewise, Barbour’s report resembled later Jacksonian views towards Native Americans, stating that “Before this resistless current [of the white population] the Indian must retire, till his name will be no more.”<sup>17</sup>

Once having adopted Indian removal as their official policy, the Adams administration became less and less sympathetic to the Creeks. Despite the signing of the Treaty of Washington, Georgia continued to pressure the United States government and the Creek Indians to cede all Creek territory in Georgia. Eventually, the Adams administration signed a new treaty with the Creek Indians on November 15, 1827 that stipulated cession of all Creek territory within Georgia. This was a return to the Treaty of Indian Springs that Adams and his cabinet had previously struck down. The text of the 1827 treaty made clear that the Creek Nation only agreed to sign this treaty under duress and against their wishes. In particular, the document stated that the “President of the United States having urged the Creek Nation further to extend the limits as defined in the Treaty [of Washington].”<sup>18</sup> By the treaty of 1827, Creek

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13. Charles Francis Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), v.7, 89-90.

14. *Ibid.*, 90.

15. *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* v. 2, 646-654.

16. *Ibid.*, 648.

17. *Ibid.*, 648.

18. Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883*, 285.

Indians were forced to move to Alabama the same year.<sup>19</sup>

The case of the Creek Indian Removal from their territory in Georgia in 1827 shows the power of the idea of the "Vanishing Indian." Once Adams and Barbour accepted the idea of "Vanishing Indian," they could not resist the political pressure from Georgia to remove the Creeks. As Clay argued, if all Native Indians were doomed to extinction, why bother to resist Indian removal? Although the Indian removal of all Indian tribes east of the Mississippi to the west would not occur until the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the path to the Jacksonian Indian Removal policy was well laid out by 1827, by none other than John Quincy Adams, who was presumed to be a political enemy of Andrew Jackson.

The ideology of the "Vanishing Indian" justified Indian removal, not only as an inevitable, but also supposedly "humane" policy. For example, Congressman Joseph M. White of Florida stated during a speech in the House on February 20, 1828 that "They [Indians] are rapidly melting away-no one can deny this-and the question is, how is this doom to be averted?"<sup>20</sup> William Lumpkin of Georgia answered his colleague's question by promoting a policy of Indian removal as "the best and most reasonable plans which can be devised for the salvation of the poor, perishing, and afflicted aborigines of this country."<sup>21</sup> The power of this ideology can be further illustrated by the fact that even those opposing Indian removal accepted the assumptions of the "Vanishing Indian." For example, Peleg Sprague of Maine, who opposed Indian removal stated in a Senate speech of April 17, 1830 that "It is said that their [Indians'] existence cannot be preserved; that it is the doom of Providence that they must perish. So, indeed, must we all; but let it be in the course of nature, not by the hand of violence. If, in truth, they are now in the decrepitude of age, let us permit them to live out all their days, and die in peace; not bring down their grey hairs in blood to a foreign grave."<sup>22</sup> President Adams, Secretary Barbour, and Senator Sprague all gave up their initial resistance to Indian removal, or mounted at best a very feeble resistance to it, once they accepted the assumptions of the "Vanishing Indian."

The idea of the "Vanishing Indian" was ultimately an ideology, because this idea ignored the fact that Native Indians had made a significant progress in their assimilation into American society. In fact, those who argued this ideology and advocated Indian removal themselves acknowledged the eventual assimilation of the Indian tribes into the American way of life. John C. Calhoun, in his capacity as Secretary of War under President James Monroe, commented in a January 27, 1825 report to the Senate entitled "Plan for Removing the Several Tribes West of the Mississippi River," that "Almost all of the tribes proposed to be affected by the arrangement are more or less advanced in the arts of civilized life, and there is scarcely one of them which has not the establishment of schools in the nation, affording, at once, the means of moral, religious, and intellectual

19. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 141-186.

20. Joseph M. White, February 20, 1828, in *Register of Debates*, 20<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1589.

21. William Lumpkin, February 20, 1828, in *Register of Debates*, 20<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1587.

22. Peleg Sprague, April 17, 1830, in *Register of Debates*, 21<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 357.

improvement.”<sup>23</sup> Also, Secretary Barbour stated in his 1826 report that “Schools have been established,..., for the instruction of their youths. They have been persuaded to abandon the chase, to locate themselves, and become cultivators of the soil; implements of husbandry and domestic animals have been presented them; and all these things have been done,...”<sup>24</sup>

A century later, historian Grant Foreman also commented that “At least four of the tribes of southern Indians had so far advanced in learning and culture as to establish themselves permanently on the soil, build homes and farms, cultivate the land, raise herds and varied crops, including cotton which they carded, spun, and wove into cloth with which they clothed themselves. They laid out roads, built mills, engaged in commerce, and sent their children to schools conducted by the missionaries. And finally they established representative governments modeled on those of the states.”<sup>25</sup>

Recent scholarship agrees with Foreman’s conclusion. Summarizing current studies on Indian Removal, historian Andrew Frank concluded, “prominent members of Native communities embraced literacy, private property, Christianity, centralized politics, coercive power, cotton growing, cattle herding, and ranch building.”<sup>26</sup> Despite these facts, Calhoun, Barbour, Clay, and Adams argued that the Native Indians were inferior and it was inevitable that they should ‘vanish’ in time. The racism against the Native Indians in American society was thus so powerful and pervasive that even these politicians, who were also first-rate intellectuals of their time, could not recognize the contradictions in their own messages and attitudes.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the idea of the “Vanishing Indian” was an ideology that distorted the perception of the reality in the minds of those who harbored the ideology.

Creek Indians tried to counter this ideology but to no avail. In May 1824, a Creek council drafted a policy statement. In it, Council leaders stated that “We are happy to say we are making advances towards civilization....”<sup>28</sup> In another policy document, issued on October 29, 1824, many important leaders of the Creek Indians, including Big Warrior, Little Prince, and Hopoie Hadjo, argued that they are “progressing in the arts of civilization” and they demanded that whites “treat us with tenderness and justice.”<sup>29</sup> But their resistance was futile. The ideology of the “Vanishing Indian” swept the Creek Indians away from their land starting in 1827.

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23. *American State Papers: Indians Affairs* v. 2, 544.

24. *Ibid.*, 647.

25. Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 13-14.

26. Andrew Frank, “Native American Removal,” 396.

27. See Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, revised edition), 92-107.

28. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 77.

29. *Niles Weekly Register* 27 (December 4, 1824), 222-223, cited in Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 78.