



Account of Choctaw removal

Alexis de Tocqueville (1831)

Alexis de Tocqueville was a white French politician who spent several months in 1831-32 touring the United States; he later published his observations of US society in a classic work, Democracy in America. In December 1831, while trying to secure passage by steamboat down the Mississippi River from Memphis to New Orleans, Tocqueville encountered a band of Choctaws who were being relocated from their home in Mississippi to a new reservation in present-day Oklahoma under the US government's Indian Removal policy. Tocqueville recounts what he saw in this selection from a letter to his mother.

Commenting caustically on Indian Removal, Tocqueville (who was Catholic) compares 19th-century Americans to the Spanish conquistadors: both, he says, imagined themselves authorized by God to occupy America and to subjugate its indigenous inhabitants. However, while Spanish colonial society assimilated indigenous people, Tocqueville predicts that US policy will exterminate them.

As we debated thus on the riverbank, we heard an infernal music ringing out from the forest; it was the noise of a drum, the neighing of horses, the barking of dogs. At last there came into view a great troop of Indians—the elderly, women, children, luggage—all led by a European [...] These Indians were the Chactas (or Tchactaws, according to the Indian pronunciation). [...] You wish, no doubt, to know why these Indians had come [...] Know, then, that the Americans of the United States, who are reasonable and unprejudiced people and, moreover, great philanthropists, have come to imagine, like the Spanish, that God has granted them full ownership of the new world and its inhabitants.

They have discovered, furthermore, that, as it has been proven (listen carefully to this) that one square mile can support ten times more civilized men than savages, reason dictates that in every place where civilized men have settled, the savages must withdraw. See the lovely thing that is logic. Consequently, whenever the Indians begin to find themselves a little too close to their brothers the whites, the president of the United States sends them a messenger who explains to them that, for their own benefit, of course, it would be good that they retreat just a little farther toward the West. The lands they have inhabited for centuries belong to them, without question; no one denies them that incontestable right. But these lands, after all, they are an uncultivated wilderness of woods and swamps—poor property, to be sure. Beyond the Mississippi, by contrast, lie magnificent lands, in which the game have never been troubled by the sound of the pioneer's axe; which the Europeans will *never* reach, for they are more than a hundred leagues away. Add to that presents of inestimable value to repay their cooperation—barrels of spirits, strings of glass beads, earrings and looking-glasses—and, behind it all, the insinuation that if they refuse, it might prove necessary to compel them. What to do? The poor Indians lift their aged parents into their arms; the women load their children onto their shoulders; the nation marches away, carrying their most valued treasures with them. They abandon forever the soil on which their fathers have lived perhaps a thousand years, to go settle in a wasteland where the whites will not leave them ten years in peace.

You see what comes of a high civilization? The Spanish, true brutes, set their dogs on the Indians

as if on wild animals; they kill, burn, massacre, pillage the new world like a town taken by marauders, without mercy or thought. But they cannot destroy everything; at some point their fury expires. The surviving remnants of the Indian populations mingle, in the end, with their conquerors, acquiring their ways, their religion; today, in several provinces, they govern those who formerly conquered them. The Americans of the United States, more humane, more moderate, more respectful of right and legality, never bloodthirsty, are more profoundly destructive; and there can be no doubt that in less than a hundred years, there will remain in North America not only not one single nation, but not one single man of the most remarkable of the Indian races.

But I have entirely forgotten where I was in my story. It had to do, I believe, with the Chactas. The Chactas were a powerful nation living on the border between the states of Alabama and Georgia.^a After lengthy negotiations, they were finally persuaded, this year, to quit their country and emigrate to the other side of the Mississippi. Six or seven thousand Indians have already crossed the great river; those we saw arrive at Memphis came with the intent of following their countrymen. The agent of the American government who accompanied them and was responsible for paying their passage, upon learning that a steamboat had just docked, hurried to the riverbank. [...]

Here began a scene that had something truly lamentable about it. The Indians advanced toward the riverbank with a mournful air. First to be taken aboard were the horses, many of which, unaccustomed to the ways of civilized life, took fright and threw themselves into the Mississippi, from whence they could be pulled only with difficulty. Next came the men, who, in accordance with their custom, carried nothing but their weapons; then the women, carrying their children strapped onto their backs or wrapped up in the blankets with which they covered themselves; they were, in addition, loaded down with bundles containing the entirety of their worldly goods. Finally the elderly were led aboard. One woman was a hundred and ten years of age. Never have I seen a more frightful figure. She was naked except for a blanket that left exposed to view, in a thousand places, the most emaciated body imaginable. She was accompanied by two or three generations of grandchildren. At that age, to have to leave her country to go seek her fortune in a strange land—what a miserable fate! Among the elderly was a young girl who had broken her arm one week earlier; for want of care, the arm had become paralyzed below the fracture. Nevertheless, she had to march on with the rest. When all else was aboard, the dogs approached the riverbank; but they refused to come onto the boat and set to howling dreadfully. Their masters had to bring them on board by force.

In the whole of the scene, there was an air of ruin and destruction, something that felt like a final farewell with no hope of return; it would have wrung the heart of any who witnessed it. The Indians were calm, but somber and taciturn. There was one who knew English, of whom I asked why the Chactas were leaving their country. “To be free,” he answered. I could draw nothing else from him. Tomorrow we will deposit them in the solitudes of Arkansas. It is, I must confess, a peculiar stroke of luck that we should have arrived in Memphis to witness the expulsion, one could say the dissolution, of one of the most ancient and celebrated American nations.

^a Tocqueville is mistaken: the Choctaw lands were located within the state of Mississippi. The Cherokee and Muscogee (a.k.a. Creek) nations had lands in Alabama and Georgia.

Source: Alexis de Tocqueville, letter to Madame La Comtesse de Tocqueville, December 25, 1831; in *Oeuvres complètes d'Alexis de Tocqueville*, edited by Madame de Tocqueville, vol. 7 (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1866), 99-106, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044050518588>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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