34. INDIAN TERRITORY, 1855–1866

Essay by *Michael D. Green*

Neither the Chickasaws nor the Seminoles were satisfied with their postremoval situations in Indian Territory. Stuck in the Choctaw and Creek nations, they deeply resented being denationalized. Therefore, they directed much attention toward reestablishing the independence of their nations. Both succeeded: the Chickasaws in 1855 and the Seminoles in 1856.

The United States quickly put the Leased District, acquired from the Choctaws and Chickasaws in 1855, to use. The army erected two forts, Camp Radziminski and Fort Cobb. In 1859, the government opened the Wichita Agency adjacent to Fort Cobb.

Very soon, however, Indian Territory became overwhelmed by the eastern sectional conflict, secession, and the Civil War. News from the states traveled fast, and residents of Indian Territory watched with interest Abraham Lincoln's victorious presidential campaign, the secession of South Carolina, and the subsequent withdrawal of other states from the union. In February 1861, commissioners from Texas toured Indian Territory, consulting with national leaders about secession; later that spring, the Confederate government sent Albert Pike from Arkansas to conclude treaties of alliance. By fall all five tribes had given the Confederacy their allegiance.

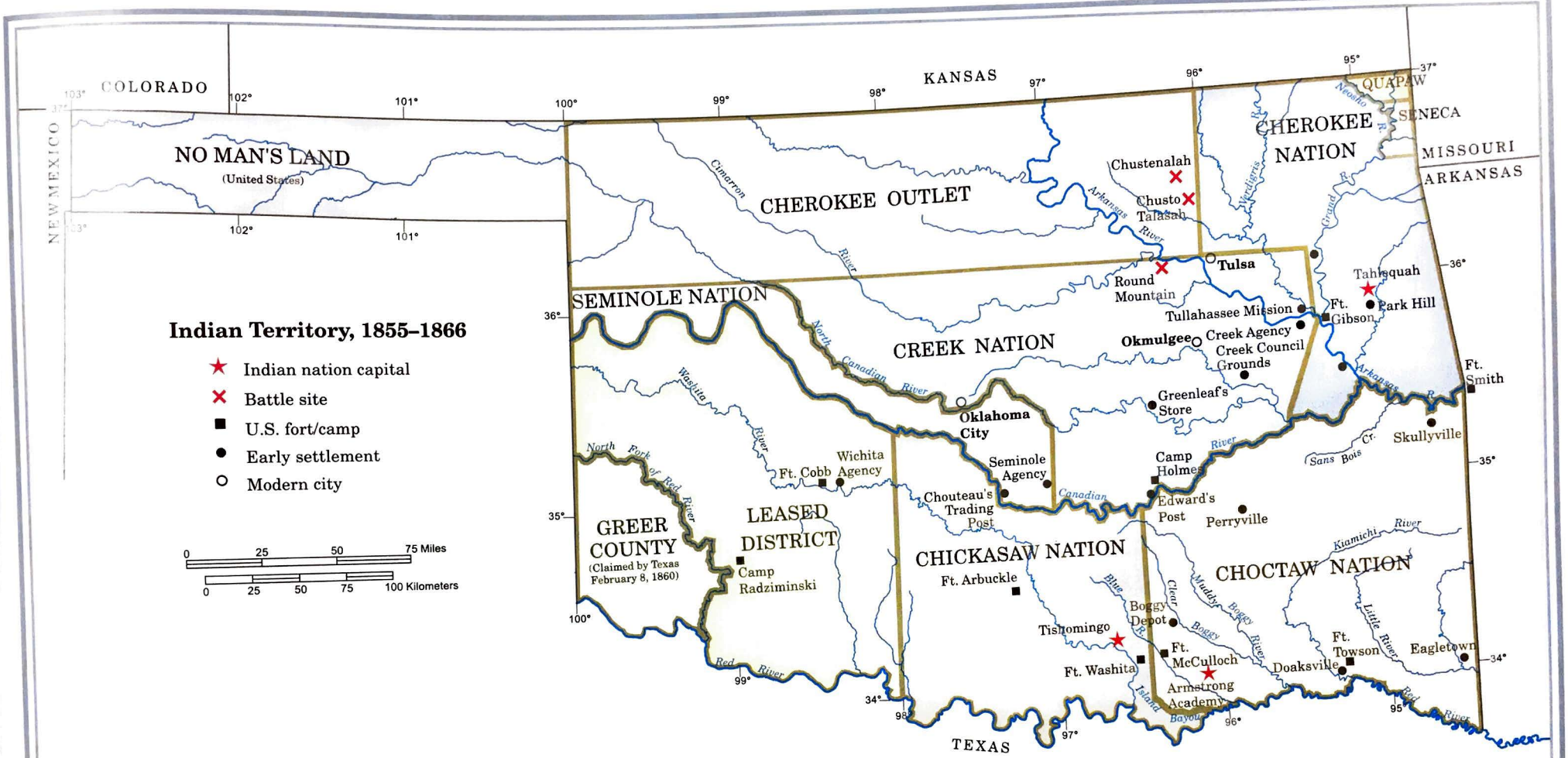
Several factors combine to explain the decisions of the tribal governments. None had a history of good relations with the United States. Federal policy had forced the Five Tribes from their homelands in the Southeast, and the dishonesty and ineptitude of government officials had caused both massive and needless suffering during removal and the period of postremoval rebuilding. Added to this history was the threat of further trouble. The victorious Republican Party had recommended during the 1860 campaign that the lands of the nations of Indian Territory be appropriated and made available to white settlers. Then, in the spring of 1861, the U.S. Army withdrew its forces from Indian Territory. In abandoning the region, the government left the Five Tribes vulnerable to attack from Plains Indians as well as to occupation by Confederate troops from Arkansas and Texas.

In addition to these "pushes" away from the United States, there were many "pulls" toward the Confederacy. For over a century, the elites of the Five Tribes had found their Anglo-American role models (many of whom were kin through an even longer period of intermarriage) in the South. In adopting slavery, they had embraced much of the Southern plantation culture as well. The cotton they grew for export and most of their imports flowed to and from Indian Territory along a river system dominated by New Orleans. Tribal funds were heavily invested in Southern enterprises. And about 15 percent of the population of Indian Territory was black. Not all of the blacks were slaves, slavery in Indian Territory rarely duplicated the most horrible aspects of Southern slavery, and Indians often did not hold strong attitudes of racial prejudice, but nevertheless these were all slaveholding tribes, and the Confederacy meant to protect slavery.

Furthermore, as the United States abandoned Indian Territory, the Confederacy courted it. All the federal officials and many of the missionaries in Indian Territory were Southerners, and after secession, they became spokesmen for the Confederacy. They—along with neighboring Arkansas and Texas and the central military command in the East—understood the importance of Indian Territory as a source of grain, beef, horses, and lead; as a buffer in the way of Union ambitions in the Southwest; and as a staging ground for Confederate attacks on the western Union states. And finally, the treaties that Pike offered during the spring and summer of 1861 were exceedingly generous and attractive. The Confederacy guaranteed the independence and territorial integrity of the nations of Indian Territory, promised to assume all federal financial obligations, and invited Indian delegates to Congress. The nations agreed to accept fortifications and recruit troops (paid and supplied by the Confederacy), while retaining the power to decide where and for what purposes the troops would be used.

Despite this, Indian Territory was not unanimous in support of the Confederacy. A large minority of Cherokees, perhaps a majority of Creeks, and a large majority of Seminoles opposed alliance with the Confederacy. Some were loyal to the United States and the treaties, but all strongly believed that the wisest course for their nations was neutrality. Since the early eighteenth century, the preferred policy of the southern Indian nations had been to avoid entanglement in the wars of white people, and Opothleyahola of the Creeks, John Chupco of the Seminoles, and John Ross of the Cherokees continued to counsel such a course.

The Confederates and neutrals spent the summer of 1861 organizing. The Chickasaws and Choctaws assembled a regiment, the Creeks and Seminoles formed another, and the Cherokees recruited two. Stand Watie, who rose to the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate Army, commanded one of the Cherokee units. At the same time, Opothleyahola called the neutrals of Indian Territory to join him in a large camp on the Deep Fork of the Canadian. By November, some 7,000 Indians—mostly Creeks and Seminoles—and blacks had gathered. The Confederates, suspicious of Opothleyahola's intentions and fearful of such a large opposition gathering, marched with 1,400 men to disperse the group. Opothleyahola led them northward. With Confederate troops hot on their trail, the neutrals staged elaborate rearguard actions at Round Mountain and Chusto Talasah that enabled the women, children, and aged to escape with their large herds and supply trains intact. At Chustenalah, late in December, the Confederates smashed the neutrals' defenses, dispersed their herds, destroyed their supply trains, and sent the survivors on foot into a blizzard. Freezing, starving, and bleeding, the neutrals stumbled into Kansas and the hands of woefully unprepared federal



officials. A federal census counted 5,600 Creeks, 1,000 Seminoles, 140 Chickasaws, 315 Quapaws, 197 Delawares, and 300 members of other tribes in the refugee camps. The experience converted many neutrals to Unionists, and the camps in Kansas recruited two brigades of Indian troops committed to fight to retake their homes.

A Union army invaded Indian Territory in the spring of 1862 but quickly withdrew, only to return during the winter of 1862–63 to occupy the Cherokee Nation. This encouraged Unionist Cherokees to form a government that repudiated the Confederate treaty, declared Confederate Cherokees outlaws, and authorized the confiscation of their property. The Union army retook Fort Gibson and drove the Confederate troops south of the Canadian. From this point on, the Canadian River was the line of demarcation in Indian Territory.

When the war ended in mid-1865, the Cherokee Nation (scene of many battles) and the Creek Nation (overrun by guerrillas) were devastated. Along with the Cherokees and Creeks, Seminole men fought on both sides. And the Choctaws and Chickasaws, in addition to putting men in Confederate uniform, were burdened by the need to feed and house thousands of Creek refugees. The end of the war found no nation untouched.