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# Taking Alabama: Andrew Jackson, National Security, and Alabama, 1812-1836

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**Abstract** - This paper seeks to examine Andrew Jackson's actions during his time as a general in the Tennessee state militia and his tenure as president of the United States, focusing heavily on events that impacted Alabama and the national security of the United States. Because Alabama was once the frontier of the United States, securing it and ousting threats was a crucial factor in the development of the US as a nation, and the steps Jackson took to secure this southern frontier as general and statesman were integral in shaping the physical and demographic structure of the United States.

To effectively investigate and explain Jackson's efforts, this essay looks at two events: Jackson's participation in the Creek War and his involvement in the creation and execution of the Indian Removal Act. To study these events, this essay analyzes certain primary documents. The main source of information derives from treaties between the US government and Native American tribes, but personal correspondences and speeches also provide specific source material to support this paper's claim that Jackson worked to ensure the national security of the United States by solidifying America's claim to Alabama and ousting its many threats.

## I. Introduction

Discussions about the American frontier often elicit ideas of one of the most romanticized and fantasized parts of American history, the Wild West. The West, however, had not been the frontier forever. In fact, while Americans still thought of the West as a vast and relatively unexplored region, they considered another part of the country to be the American frontier. The Mississippi Territory was once the furthest west and south that American rule of law and influence extended. It was a place of new beginnings and a place where extreme wealth and fortune could be had for very little. Within the Mississippi Territory, there were regions that were heavily populated by Native Americans, while there was even more land totally devoid of human habitation. Threats from foreign powers, namely, the British and Spanish, as well as constant harassment and

assault from the Indians occupying the western portion of the Mississippi Territory, that is modern-day Alabama, eventually led one man, Andrew Jackson, to take Alabama from the hands of the enemies and firmly secure the United States' southern borders. This paper seeks to examine Alabama's importance in Andrew Jackson's campaigns through the South as general of the Tennessee state militia and president of the United States as he secured America's southern frontier.

This paper utilizes a number of primary and secondary sources to support this argument. Some of the main sources used are government treaties between the US and Indian tribes. These treaties serve to show official American policy towards native people groups across the South, specifically those in Alabama. Analysis of these documents allows for a better understanding of broad national sentiment. Personal correspondence and speeches also provide important aspects to this research. They allow for a more informal and non-typical view of events at the time. They can allow for more insight into national attitudes towards the Southern frontier before and during Andrew Jackson's involvement in the War of 1812, the Creek War, and the Indian Removal Act. A number of secondary sources are used as well to provide additional information and arguments that support this paper. These secondary sources also contain primary source information which would be difficult to obtain otherwise. It is also important to note the usage of different terms. The Mississippi Territory refers the modern-day states of Mississippi and Alabama prior to their acceptance into the Union in 1817 and 1819 respectively. Because this paper looks specifically at Alabama, there are times when it will reference Alabama specifically, either during the Mississippi Territory period or before statehood. It is also possible that when referring to the Mississippi Territory, Alabama is the intended area of focus rather than Mississippi or the territory as a whole. I use these terms somewhat interchangeably, understanding that there is a definite difference, but lacking the knowledge of how to properly refer to the different Alabamas of each time period.

## II. Threats to Peace

It is important to understand the history of the southern and western parts of the United States in order to comprehend how important Alabama's position was along the southern border of the nation. At the outbreak of the War of 1812, Louisiana and the newly christened Missouri Territory bordered the Mississippi Territory, or the present-day states of Mississippi and Alabama. Louisiana also contained the incredibly important port city of New Orleans. Situated at the mouth of the mighty Mississippi River, New Orleans controlled the only major access to the river. The British, French, Spanish, and Americans all wanted access to the river, not just to transport goods but also to use the river as a sort of security measure; the river allowed access to the heart of North America, giving whoever controlled it the ability to ferry troops deep into the continent. Spanish Florida bordered the Mississippi Territory to the south, and it would soon bring into fruition the fears many Americans had about a foreign neighbor to the south.

The United States had hesitated from becoming too heavily involved in the Mississippi Territory, in part, because of the numerous claims to the land. Abundant resources and lucrative trade available in the South meant that the Europeans, Americans, and Indians all had a strong determination to secure this territory for themselves. With the Spanish to the south in Florida, the British occupying the Old Northwest, and the French situated along the entire western border, the US had to contend with the threat of the three most powerful European countries of the previous century.<sup>1</sup> Because of the variety of claims and the constant awareness that war over the territory might become a reality, American settlers in the South venturing into the frontier faced potential death, either at the hands of an enraged Indian or as a volunteer in an international war. Land rights disagreements between Europeans, Americans, and Indians meant conflict was almost inevitable, putting the security of the United States' southern border at risk. The Alabama region of the Mississippi Territory was significantly less populated than Mississippi or Georgia, and it was the perfect region for conflict between the various factions.

Some of the most blatant threats to the US were Indian uprisings, especially those incited by the British along the populated American frontier. The English Crown had a long history of allying with native populations, often for trade rights or military assistance. During the French and Indian

War, both the British and the French allied themselves with Indian tribes, hoping to supplement their own forces and provide European troops with New World trackers. In the nineteenth century, the most tangible threats to US sovereignty were Anglo-Indian alliances, including the Anglo-Tecumseh alliance. Tecumseh, a leader of the Shawnee tribe, was located around present-day Ohio. After a series of visions prophesying Indian self-determination, he became known as the Great Shawnee Prophet, and with the assistance of his brother Tenskwatawa, Tecumseh began to rally their tribe and others together against the ever-encroaching American frontier.<sup>2</sup> British officials in Canada had long sought an alliance with Tecumseh, hoping to exploit his ideals to incite the tribes to war against the US.<sup>3</sup> By the outbreak of the War of 1812, Tecumseh's tribal confederacy had allied with the British, and Tecumseh's Rebellion would become the physical embodiment of America's fear.

Like Tecumseh to the north, the British had a long history with the Creek Indians in Alabama. The Creeks, like their cousins following the Prophet, would soon be at war with the United States, due in part to British urgings. With Tecumseh rallying his followers in the Northwest and Indian tribes across the South making trade agreements and protective alliances with both Great Britain and Spain, many in the United States began to feel threatened. As tensions between the United States and Great Britain continued to rise over matters still unsettled since the American Revolution, war began to be seen as a definite possibility. It would be within this context of national fear and an increased desire for a more secure nation that Andrew Jackson would secure Alabama, and thus the nation's southern border, from potential threats.

Before Jackson began campaigning across Alabama and the South in the name of national security, though, a certain amount of treaty-making had already taken place in an attempt to establish a peaceful relationship with America's Indian neighbors. Official treaties between the US government and Indian tribes, signed in the late 1780s and 1790s, established boundaries between sovereign Indian territory and that land claimed by the US or white settlers. Some of the tribes involved in this series of treaties included the Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw tribes, all located inside of or along the borders of present-day Alabama. These treaties established a policy of punishment, including an article in which the United States gave full authority to the tribes to punish trespassing American citizens as they saw fit.<sup>4</sup> In addition to treaties

that granted greater authority to Indian tribes, certain members of the political elite also sought to treat with the native population. Thomas Jefferson, in a letter of good faith to the Creek nation, explicitly promised the Creek people that the United States would protect Indian land claims “not only against others but against our own people.”<sup>5</sup>

While these policies of delegating punishment to Indian authorities or becoming directly involved in maintaining Indian sovereignty might be hard to understand today, they demonstrated the end goal of the US government, that is, national security. By establishing legal territorial boundaries and methods of punishment with the native Indians in populated regions of the South, namely the future states of Mississippi and Alabama, as well as the western portion of Georgia, the United States was attempting to not only secure more land, but to also ensure that there would be as little settler-Indian conflict as possible. This situation of appeasement would remain until the beginning of what would become known as the Creek War.

The Creek Indians were one of what Americans considered at the time to be the Five Civilized Tribes. Besides the Creeks, the Five Civilized Tribes included the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations. Of the five, only the Seminole tribe lacked a presence in Alabama. Civilizing the native peoples, as men like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson called it, involved a number of things, including teaching them sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry, educating them according to American values, and enlightening them on the basic principles of Christianity. According to the historian Robert Remini, Americans presumed that by adopting these practices, these accoutrements of white American culture, “Native Americans would win acceptance from white Americans.”<sup>6</sup> And for a while, this worked. White settlers lived and worked alongside native tribes in the Mississippi Territory, intermarrying and socializing with each other. This situation of relative peace and security along the American frontier that came with increased Indian assimilation would soon change, though, as both the British and Indians in Alabama entered into war with the US.

In 1813, a year into the War of 1812, Americans became aware of a truly horrific event that had occurred in Alabama. The Fort Mims Massacre, as it would come to be called, shook the nation already at war. The battle took place at Fort Mims, located near Alabama’s southern port of Mobile. A force of Red Stick Creek Indians attacked

the American outpost, and after several hours of fighting the the Creeks eventually took the fort. Of the 400 or so occupants within the fort, only around thirty were able to escape.<sup>7</sup> The Red Stick Creeks had attacked the fort using arms supplied by the British. The British felt that if they could arm the Red Sticks and encourage attacks against more northern targets in the South, they could distract American forces long enough to take strategic points across the South with the intent of invading into Alabama.<sup>8</sup> This became a clear threat to the security of the US. Karl Davis, in an article analyzing the massacre, argues that the attack on the fort was not necessarily a threat against the United States. Instead, he writes that a close examination of events makes it clear that the attack “was primarily a punitive expedition” against assimilated Tensaw Creeks.<sup>9</sup> The Fort Mims Massacre was not directly related to the War of 1812, according to Davis, but rather that it was serendipity, with the Red Sticks gaining access to better weapons because of the British presence in the South, but not necessarily executing the attack against the US itself. While this is not necessarily wrong, the Fort Mims Massacre was the sort of distraction for which the British hoped, and as Jackson and his militia battled the Creeks across the Mississippi Territory in response to the massacre, the threat of foreign invasion into Alabama or Mississippi became increasingly real.

### III. Jackson the General

Andrew Jackson, as major-general of the Tennessee militia, conducted a fairly short but brutal campaign against the renegade Creeks across Alabama in retaliation. The Creek War ended on March 27, 1814, at the decisive Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Four months later, the Treaty of Fort Jackson was signed to officially end the conflict, bringing the rebellious natives to heel and allocating reparations as Jackson saw fit.

As befit the current state of the country in 1814, and as it was one of the main justifications for the Creek War, the establishment of a policy of national security is evident in the treaty between Jackson and the Creek Indians. The first article of the treaty established the new territorial boundaries of the United States, removing around 22 million acres of land from Creek possession.<sup>10</sup> Conveniently, much of the land removed from the Creeks was either inside the state of Georgia or along the river lands of the eastern Mississippi Territory, some of the most fertile land in the South.

Taking this land from the Creeks accomplished two things that helped establish security along the southern frontier of the United States. First, removing Creek autonomy from Georgia and the eastern portion of the Mississippi Territory would allow the the state of Georgia and the territorial government of Mississippi, as well as the federal government, to gain a tighter control on the Indians living in the region. With the implementation of this treaty, the Creeks would become “protected by and subject to” the laws of the United States.<sup>11</sup> Second, taking away Indian land and autonomy meant they would have less interaction with Spain and Great Britain, the two most relevant threats to the United States, both of which had strong presences in south Alabama, especially along the border with Spanish Florida.

The treaty also gave the US government the right to construct military forts, trading posts, and public roads within the Creek nation’s remaining territories.<sup>12</sup> It is ironic that in the history of Indian-settler violence over the course of American expansion much, if not all, of the violence began, at least in part, because of the encroachment or establishment of white settlers inside indigenous lands. But here, however, the American consensus was that an increased presence inside Indian territory would increase security for both white settlers and native Indians living in the western Mississippi Territory.

General Jackson, having successfully treated with the Creeks, much to the benefit of the United States, moved south towards Spanish Florida. The British had established themselves in the Spanish town of Pensacola, no doubt intending to use the town as a staging area for an attack on the nearby city of Mobile or to execute incursions the southernmost portions of the Mississippi Territory. Perceiving the threat that lay just south of the American-Spanish border, Jackson marched on the British-held Spanish city despite receiving no direct orders to do so. Taking the fort and the city proved to be relatively easy, and the British were ousted.

Jackson’s invasion of Spanish Florida was relatively easy to justify; the United States was at war with the British, the British were colluding with the Spanish in Pensacola, and the United States southern frontier in Alabama was directly threatened.<sup>13</sup> The general’s fairly brief occupation of Pensacola, while clearly done in the name of national security, foreshadowed Jackson’s later invasion of Spanish Florida in 1818 during the Seminole Wars for a similar reason, which ended when Spain eventually sold Florida to the United States. Jackson’s

first invasion of Florida can be seen as an almost preparatory action, as if the American general was testing Spain’s response to a direct military incursion into their territory. Whether or not Jackson had underlying motives, he had certainly thwarted what could have been a direct threat to American settlers and citizens living in Alabama with his victory in Pensacola, and although he would become a contentious figure in the eyes of the government because of his actions in Florida, he had ensured the security of Alabama, and thus the nation, from both European and Indian threats.

#### IV. Jackson the President

Jackson’s reputation as a controversial public figure continued to grow during his political tenure through his specific actions involving Alabama. In one most controversial actions ever undertaken by the US government, Jackson, as president, signed the Indian Removal Act into law on May 28, 1830. Jackson played an important role in the creation and execution of this Act, both before and during his presidency. His time as the leader of the Tennessee militia during the Creek War, as well as his experience leading American forces through the South during the early years of the Seminole Wars, gave him a significant amount of credibility with the American public. They could trust Old Hickory, the man that had fought and defeated supposedly savage tribes across Alabama and Florida and protected Americans from European invasion. The Indian Removal Act was a sort of culmination of Jackson’s efforts to essentially wholly take Alabama for the United States.

In Jackson’s State of the Union address in 1829, he called specifically for the removal of Indians from the American southeast to the west, across the Mississippi River, to specifically designated land. This included hundreds of thousands of Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek Indians that lived within Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Jackson used two main methods to convince the American public that Indian removal was necessary. One point Jackson made was that of the current condition of the Indian tribes across the South. The ever-increasing presence of white settlers in what was once Indian territory had led to a degradation in the quality of Indian life. In one of the most ironic and moving parts of the speech, while discussing the extinction of tribes across the US, Jackson argued that “Humanity and national honor demand that every effort should be made to avert so great a calamity.”<sup>14</sup> Not able to hunt or forage like they had a

hundred years prior, combined with the continual loss of land to the US government or white settlers, tribes like the Cherokee and Creek were threatened with extinction, their whole way of life fading away. Just as Americans wanted to preserve the American way of life, Jackson used this to appeal to that sentiment, subtly relating it to an improbable but still possible chance that the native Indian could supplant or disrupt Americans' lives and their sense of security.

Of course, in southern states like Alabama, where there were still huge portions of the state designated as Indian territory, Jackson's policies appealed to the average citizen possibly more than other Americans. The Alabama elites and yeomen pushed for Indian removal for the same selfish reason. The land occupied by many of the Indian tribes in lower Alabama was located in the Black Belt, which cut a swath across lower middle Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia and contained some of the most fertile soil in the region. Plantation owners and poor farmers alike sought to establish themselves on previously unused cropland in the Black Belt in an attempt to exploit the rich soil and warm climate for their own gain. So, Jackson's plans for Indian removal were well-received in Alabama, if a little condemned for their lengthiness. Alabamians wanted the Indian way of life removed so they could establish and continue their own lifestyle.

A more direct relation to the sovereignty and security of the American nation can be seen in Jackson's other argument. The first half of the speech is spent discussing the thing most important to almost every Southern state, especially those in the Deep South. That issue was the sovereignty of American states and the political control they maintained within their borders. This had become somewhat of a political conflict since Jackson took office. Jackson made the argument that under no other circumstances would a sovereign state of the United States allow an independent government be set up in the same manner as the Indian tribal governments tried to do (the Southern states even objected to outside involvement from other whites and so balked at the idea of Indians having legal authority within their state). As a result, Jackson "advised them [the Indians] to emigrate beyond the Mississippi or submit to the laws of those States."<sup>15</sup> This idea of moving beyond the Mississippi River to maintain their sovereignty and culture would become the basis for the Indian Removal Act.

The historian Michael Morris argues that in Georgia, as well as the rest of the country, politicians used this idea of state sovereignty and the threat of usurpation of authority to their own ends, that is, the expulsion of Indian tribes from the South. Morris writes that this idea of securing state sovereignty became a part of the "national agenda and a nationalist rhetoric" used by Jackson and others to remove native tribes from their land.<sup>16</sup> The usurpation of state sovereignty would certainly have led to conflict across the nation, especially in the South, where the idea of state sovereignty was already beginning to reign supreme. It is likely that Jackson truly believed, in keeping with national opinion, that removal was the only way to prevent American-Indian conflict, thus giving credence to his removal policy. On a subtler level, Jackson probably understood that those same Southerners who had violently expressed their displeasure at the disregard for states' rights during the nullification crisis would potentially pose a threat to American nationhood and safety if Jackson ignored Indian removal.

Despite the official voluntary policy of emigrating west of the Mississippi, Indian removal across the South would become a brutal and deadly affair. There is a great debate on the number of Indians who perished during Indian removal. A commonly accepted number, though, according to Francis Prucha, is around four thousand dead. This would place the total dead at around one-fourth of the total Indians emigrating from the American southeast to the arid plains of the Missouri Territory.<sup>17</sup>

It would be impossible to total the human cost of Andrew Jackson's campaigns to take and protect the South. Thousands upon thousands of Native Americans died in petty skirmishes over land ownership with white settlers, in full-scale retributive warfare against the United States, and during what were supposed to be peaceful and voluntary emigration periods. The American South today is almost totally devoid of any native peoples. As of 2014, only fourteen of the fifty American states had more than 100,000 Native Americans, with only Florida and North Carolina falling into the category of the American South. In Alabama, Native Americans represented 1.2 percent of the total population according to the 2010 census.<sup>18</sup>

During the first half of the nineteenth century, American security was arguably one of the most important influences on national and state policy. It was a driving factor in the War of 1812, and

it led to Jackson's direct and harsh response to the Fort Mims Massacre. The Alabama portion of the Mississippi Territory, and then later the state of Alabama, posed a serious threat to American security along its frontier. Initially, the lack of population meant European advancements into the region would remain uncontested, threatening the United States. By the 1830s, though, American Indians still threatened white settlers in the region by preventing

settlers to purchase and utilize some of the most fertile soil in the region. Andrew Jackson took direct action to prevent Alabama from becoming compromised, through both direct military action in the Creek War as well as political action by speaking on state sovereignty, and was able to, at least in part, ensure the security of the United States' and its position on the world stage.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Karl Davis, ““Remember Fort Mims:” Reinterpreting the Origins of the Creek War,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 22 no. 4 (2002): 613, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3124760>.
- <sup>2</sup> Rachel Buff, “Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa: Myth, Historiography and Popular Memory,” *Historical Reflections* 21 no. 2 (1995): 277-278, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41299028>.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert M. Owens, *Mr. Jefferson's Hammer: William Henry Harrison and the Origins of American Indian Policy*, (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2007), 207-208.
- <sup>4</sup> United States, “Treaty With the Creeks: 1790,” 1790, *The Avalon Project*, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/cre1790.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/cre1790.asp).
- <sup>5</sup> “From Thomas Jefferson to Creek Nation, 2 November 1805,” *Founders Online, National Archives*, <http://founders.archives.gov/?q=From%20Thomas%20Jefferson%20to%20Creek%20Nation%2C%202%20November%201805&s=1111311111&sa=&r=3&sr=>.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 258.
- <sup>7</sup> Mike Bunn and Clay Williams, *Battle for the Southern Frontier: The Creek War and the War of 1812* (Charleston: The History Press, 2008), 38.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Kanon, ““A Slow, Laborious Slaughter”: The Battle at Horseshoe Bend,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 58 no. 1 (1999): 12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42627446>.
- <sup>9</sup> Karl Davis, ““Remember Fort Mims:” Reinterpreting the Origins of the Creek War,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 22 no. 4 (2002): 611, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3124760>.
- <sup>10</sup> Kathryn Braund, “Summer 1814: The Treaty of Ft. Jackson ends the Creek War,” *National Park Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/articles/treaty-of-fort-jackson.htm>.
- <sup>11</sup> United States, “Treaty With the Creeks: 1814,” February 1815, *Oklahoma State University Library*, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/cre0107.htm>.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Matthew Warshauer, “Andrew Jackson as a “Military Chieftain” in the 1824 and 1828 Presidential Elections: The Ramifications of Martial Law on American Republicanism,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 57 no. 1 (1998): 6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42627394>.
- <sup>14</sup> Andrew Jackson, “State of the Union, 1829,” Speech, State of the Union, Washington, D.C., <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newnation/4350>.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Morris, “Georgia and the Conversation over Indian Removal,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 91 no. 4 (2007): 404, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40585021>.
- <sup>17</sup> Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 241.
- <sup>18</sup> “Facts for Features: American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2014,” *US Census Bureau*, last modified Nov. 12, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2014/cb14-ff26.html>.

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