

49. Tecumseh on Indians and Land (1810)

Source: Samuel G. Drake, The Book of the Indians; or, Biography and History of the Indians of North America (8th ed.: Boston, 1841), Book 5, pp. 121–22.

By 1800, nearly 400,000 American settlers lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. They far outnumbered remaining Indians. Some Indians determined to root out European influences and resist further white encroachment on Indian lands. The most militant were two Shawnee brothers, Tecumseh, a chief who had refused to sign the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, and Tenskwatawa, a religious prophet who called for complete separation from whites, the revival of traditional Indian culture, and resistance to federal policies.

In 1810, Tecumseh met with William Henry Harrison, the territorial governor of Indiana. He predicted war if white incursions on Indian land continued and condemned chiefs who had sold land to the federal government. Indians, he proclaimed, should “unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first.” During the War of 1812, Tecumseh was commissioned an officer in the British army. He died at the Battle of the Thames, near Detroit.

...

IT IS TRUE I am a Shawanee. My forefathers were warriors. Their son is a warrior. From them I only take my existence; from my tribe

I take nothing. I am the maker of my own fortune; and oh! that I could make that of my red people, and of my country, as great as the conceptions of my mind, when I think of the Spirit that rules the universe. I would not then come to Governor *Harrison*, to ask him to tear the treaty, and to obliterate the landmark; but I would say to him, Sir, you have liberty to return to your own country. The being within, communing with past ages, tells me, that once, nor until lately, there was no white man on this continent. That it then all belonged to red men, children of the same parents, placed on it by the Great Spirit that made them, to keep it, to traverse it, to enjoy its productions, and to fill it with the same race. Once a happy race. Since made miserable by the white people, who are never contented, but always encroaching. The way, and the only way to check and to stop this evil, is, for all the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be yet; for it never was divided, but belongs to all, for the use of each. That no part has a right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers; those who want all, and will not do with less. The white people have no right to take the land from the Indians, because they had it first; it is theirs. They may sell, but all must join. Any sale not made by all is not valid. The late sale is bad. It was made by a part only. Part do not know how to sell. It requires all to make a bargain for all. All red men have equal rights to the unoccupied land. The right of occupancy is as good in one place as in another. There cannot be two occupations in the same place. The first excludes all others. It is not so in hunting or travelling; for there the same ground will serve many, as they may follow each other all day; but the camp is stationary, and that is occupancy. It belongs to the first who sits down on his blanket or skins, which he has thrown upon the ground, and till he leaves it no other has a right.

...

Questions

1. How does Tecumseh's speech illustrate differences between Indian and American views of land as private property?
2. What evidence does he offer that whites cannot be trusted by the Indians?