

The Source: Newspaper Editorials about Indian Removal

ELIAS BOUDINOT, EDITORIALS FROM THE
CHEROKEE PHOENIX (1828–1831)

1 February 21, 1828

Boudinot wrote this editorial for the first issue of the *Cherokee Phoenix*.

In regard to the controversy with Georgia, and the present policy of the General Government, in removing, and concentrating the Indians, out of the limits of any state, which, by the way, appears to be gaining strength, we will invariably and faithfully state the feelings of the majority of the people. Our views, as a people, on this subject, have been sadly misrepresented. These views we do not wish to conceal, but are willing that the public should know what we think of this policy, which, in our opinion, if carried into effect, will prove pernicious to us. . . .

How far we shall be successful in advancing the improvement of our people, is not now for us to decide. We hope, however, our efforts will not be altogether in vain. Now is the moment when mere speculation on the practicability of civilizing us is out of the question. Sufficient and repeated evidence has been given, that Indians can be reclaimed from a savage state, and that with proper advantages, they are as capable of improvement in mind as any other people; and let it be remembered, notwithstanding the assertions of those who talk to the contrary, that this improvement can be made, not only by the Cherokees, but by all the Indians, in their present location. We are rendered bold in making this assertion, by considering the history of our people within the last fifteen years. There was a time within our remembrance, when darkness was sadly prevalent, and ignorance abounded amongst us—when strong and deep rooted prejudices were directed against many things relating to civilized life—and when it was thought a disgrace, for a Cherokee to appear in the costume of a white man. We mention these things not by way of boasting, but to shew our readers that it is not a visionary thing to attempt to civilize and christianize all the Indians, but highly practicable. . . .

We would now commit our feeble efforts to the good will and indulgence of the public, praying that God will attend them with his blessings, and hoping for that happy period, when all the Indian tribes of America shall arise, Phoenix like, from their ashes, and when the terms, "Indian depredation,"

Source: All editorials presented in this section are excerpted from Elias Boudinot, *Cherokee Editor: The Writings of Elias Boudinot*, ed. Theda Perdue (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 93–143.

"war-whoop," "scalping knife" and the like, shall become obsolete, and for ever be "buried deep under ground."

2 January 21, 1829

"Vigil" might reasonably entertain one cheering consideration, and that is, the gradual diminution of such practices as described by him in his communication.¹ If he had visited this Nation *thirty years* ago, and witnessed the practices of the inhabitants in their full extent, his tears would have flowed more freely, and the consideration of their wretchedness would have been without a redeeming thought. At that period the Cherokees resided in villages, in each of which was a "Townhouse," the head quarter of frivolity. Here were assembled almost every night (we are told, we speak from hearsay for we were born under an era of reformation,) men and women, old and young, to dance their *bear dance*, *buffalo dance*, *eagle dance*, *green-corn dance* &c. &c. &c. and when the day appeared, instead of going to their farms, and laboring for the support of their families, the young and middle aged of the males were seen to leave their houses, their faces fantastically painted, and their heads decorated with feathers, and step off with a merry whoop, which indicated that they were *real men*, to a ball play,² or a meeting of a similar nature. Such in a word was the life of a Cherokee in those days during spring & summer seasons. In the fall and winter seasons they were gone to follow the chase,³ which occupation enabled them to purchase of the traders a few items of clothing, sufficient to last perhaps until the next hunting time. From the soil they derived a scanty supply of corn, barely enough to furnish them with *gah-no-ha-nah*⁴ and this was obtained by the labor of women and grey headed men, for custom would have it that it was disgraceful for a young man to be seen with a hoe in his hand, except on particular occasions.

In those days of ignorance and heathenism, prejudices against the customs of whites were inveterate, so much so that white men, who came along the Cherokees, had to throw away their costume and adopt the *leggings*.⁵ In a moral and intellectual point of view the scenery was dark & gloomy, nevertheless it has not been impenetrable. The introduction of light and intelligence has struck a mortal blow to the superstitious practices of the Cherokees, and by the aid of that light, a new order of things is introduced, and it is to be hoped will now eradicate the vestiges of older days.

¹ Boudinot is replying to an item in an earlier edition of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, from a correspondent describing a Native American dance.

² A Native American athletic game, criticized by missionaries and other whites for encouraging gambling and excessive leisure among the Cherokees.

³ To hunt deer.

⁴ Hominy, a corn-based staple of the Cherokee diet.

⁵ Colonial traders had to dress in Cherokee buckskin to be accepted among them.

The causes which have operated to exterminate the Indian tribes that are produced as instances of the certain doom of the whole Aboriginal family appear plain to us. These causes did not exist in the Indians themselves, nor in the will of heaven, nor simply in the intercourse of Indians with civilized man, but they were precisely such causes as are now attempted by the state of Georgia—by infringing upon their rights, by disorganizing them, and circumscribing their limits. While he possesses a national character, there is hope for the Indian. But take his rights away, divest him of the last spark of national pride, and introduce him to a new order of things, invest him with oppressive laws, grievous to be borne, he droops like the fading flower before the noon day sun. Most of the Northern tribes have fallen prey to such causes, & the Catawbas¹ of South Carolina, are a striking instance of the truth of what we say. There is hope for the Cherokees as long as they continue in their present situation, but disorganize them, either by removing them beyond the Mississippi, or by imposing on them “heavy burdens,” you cut a vital string in their national existence.

Things will no doubt come to a final issue before long in regard to the Indians, and for our part, we care not how soon. The State of Georgia has taken a strong stand against us, and the United States must either defend us in our rights, or leave us to our foe. In the former case the General Government² will redeem her pledge solemnly given in treaties.—In the latter, she will violate her promise of protection, and we cannot, in future, depend consistently, upon any guarantee made by her to us, either here or beyond the Mississippi.

¹ A once powerful southern Indian nation reduced to a small, impoverished population by the 1820s.

² The federal government of the United States.

Most of our readers probably know what is meant by Indian clans. It is no more than a division of an Indian tribe into large families. We believe this custom is universal with the North American Indians. Among the Cherokees are seven clans such as Wolf, Deer, Paint, &c. This simple division of the Cherokees formed the grand work by which marriages were regulated, and murder punished. A Cherokee could marry into any of the clans except two, that to which his father belongs, for all of that clan are his fathers and aunts and that to which his mother belongs, for all of that clan are his brothers and sisters, a child invariably inheriting the clan of his mother. . . .

But it was the mutual law of clans as connected with murder, which rendered this custom savage and barbarous. We speak of what it was once, not as it is now, for the Cherokees, after experiencing sad effects from it, determined to, and did about twenty years ago in a solemn council, abolish it. From that

time, murder has been considered a governmental crime.—Previous to that, the following were too palpably true, viz:

The Cherokees as a nation, had nothing to do with murder.

Murder was punished upon the principle of retaliation.

It belonged to the clan of the murdered to revenge his death.

If the murderer fled, his brother or nearest relative was liable to suffer in his stead.

If a man killed his brother, he was answerable to no law or clan.

If the murderer (this however is known only by tradition) was not as respectable as the murdered, his relative, or a man of his clan of a more respectable standing was liable to suffer.

To kill, under any circumstance whatever, was considered murder, and punished accordingly.

Our readers will say, “those were savage laws indeed.” They were, and the Cherokees were then pitied, for the above were not mere inoperative laws, but were rigorously executed. But we can now say with pleasure, that they are all repealed, and are remembered only as vestiges of ignorance and barbarism.

In this editorial, Boudinot responded to a congressional committee that recommended removal west of the Mississippi as the best option for preserving eastern Indian nations from extinction.

The Committee of Indian Affairs in the House of Representatives, in page 21 of their report say:

That the greatest portion, even of the poorest class of the Southern Indian, may, for some years yet, find the means of sustaining life, is probable; but, when the game is all going, as it soon must be, and their physical as well as moral energies shall have undergone the farther decline, which the entire failure of the resources of the chase has never failed to mark in their downward career, the hideous features in their prospects will become more manifest.

Whoever really believes that the Cherokees subsist on game, is most wretchedly deceived, and is grossly ignorant of existing facts. *The Cherokees do not live upon the chase*, but upon the fruits of the earth produced by their labour. We should like to see any person point to a single family in this nation who obtain their clothing and provisions by hunting. We know of no one. We do not wish to be understood as saying that they do not hunt—they do hunt some, probably, about as much as white people do in new counties, but they no more depend upon this occupation for living than new settlers do. Game has been nearly extinct for the last thirty years, and even previous to that, when the

Cherokees depended upon the chase for subsistence, they were obliged to obtain their full supply of meat and skins out of what is now the limits of this nation. Cut off the last vestige of game in these woods, and you cannot starve the Cherokees—they have plenty of corn and domestic animals, and they raise their own cotton, and manufacture their own clothing. . . .

The maxim of our enemies, “that an Indian cannot work,” the committee suppose “well established,” and it would most certainly be well established if they could but prove their naked assertions. We know of many Indians who not only *work*, but work *hard*. Who labors for the Cherokee and builds his house, clears his farm, makes his fences, attends to his hogs, cattle and horses; who raises his corn, his cotton and manufactures his clothing? Can the committee tell? Yes, they have an answer at hand. He has no house, no farm, no hogs, cattle, no corn to save him from starvation, and clothing to cover him from nakedness. We know not what to say to such assertions. The above maxim has been received by many as truth, but not by the intelligent observers of their character, but by their enemies and such as have not had the means of knowing facts. But suppose it was once well founded and correctly applied, it has long since lost its universality. We invite any person who may be hesitating on this point to come and see and judge for himself—we are not afraid that the truth, the whole truth, should be known—we desire it—we invite “the most rigid scrutiny.”

“That an Indian has an inherent thirst for spirituous liquor,” is another maxim which the committee think is well applied to the Cherokees. On the charge of intemperance, we are very far from this crying sin. But if the charge is, that the Cherokees have greater thirst for spirits than whitemen, we unhesitatingly deny it. It is not so—we speak from personal observation. Facts form the only proper criterion in this case, and what is the actual state of things? We know, most certainly know, that among the whites of the surrounding counties intemperance and brutal intoxication (at which humanity may well shudder,) may be witnessed in every neighborhood. Go to their elections and courts and number those who are under the indulgence of inebriating drink and then come into the nation, and visit the Indian elections, courts and the General Council and make a disinterested comparison, and we pledge ourselves that there is less intemperance here on these occasions than among the whites. It is an incontrovertible fact, for the truth of which we appeal to all honest eyewitnesses, that on those public occasions, particularly at the General Council, which continues four weeks, a drunken Indian is seldom to be seen. We are sorry that intemperance does exist, but is it not universal? There has been of late considerable reformation among the Cherokees in common with other parts of the country.

We have on more than one occasion remarked upon the difficulties which lie in the way of civilizing the Indians. Those difficulties have been fully developed in the history of the Cherokees within the last two years. They are such as no one can now mistake—their nature is fully revealed, and the source from whence they rise can no longer be a matter of doubt. They are not to be found in the “nature” of the Indians, which a man in high authority once said was as difficult to change as the Leopard his spots. It is not because they are, of all others, the most degraded and ignorant that they have not been brought to enjoy the blessings of a civilized life. But it is because they have to contend with obstacles as numerous as they are peculiar.

With accommendable zeal the first Chief magistrate of the United States¹ undertook to bring the Cherokees into the pale of civilization, by establishing friendly relations with them by treaties, and introducing the mechanic arts² among them. He was indeed a “father” to them—They regarded him as such—They placed confidence in what he said, and well they might, for he was true to his promises. Of course the foundation for the improvement which the Cherokees have since made was laid under the patronage of that illustrious man. His successors followed his example and treated their “red children” as human beings, capable of improvement, and possessing rights derived from the source of all good, and guarantied by compacts as solemn as a great Republic could make. The attempts of those good men were attended with success, because they believed those attempts were feasible and acted accordingly. . . .

But alas! no sooner was it made manifest that the Cherokees were becoming strongly attached to the ways and usages of civilized life, than was aroused the opposition of those from whom better things ought to have been expected. No sooner was it known that they had learned the proper use of the earth, and that they were now less likely to dispose of their lands for a mess of pottage,³ that they came in conflict with the cupidity and self-interest of those who ought to have been their benefactors. Then commenced a series of obstacles hard to overcome, and difficulties intended as a stumbling block, and unthought of before. The “Great Father” of the “red man” has lent his influence to encourage those difficulties.⁴ The *guardian* has deprived his *wards* of their rights—The sacred obligations of treaties and laws have been disregarded—The promises of Washington and Jefferson have not been fulfilled. The policy of the United States on Indian affairs has taken a different direction, for no other reason than that the Cherokees have so far become civilized as to appreciate a regular form of Government. They are now deprived of rights they once enjoyed—A

¹ President George Washington.

² Farming, animal breeding, and weaving, for example.

³ A trifling compensation.

⁴ Boudinot is now referring to President Andrew Jackson.

neighboring power⁵ is now permitted to extend its withering hand over them—Their own laws, intended to regulate their society, to encourage virtue and to suppress vice, must now be abolished, and civilized acts, passed for the purpose of expelling them, must be substituted.—Their intelligent citizens who have been instructed through means employed by former administrations, and through the efforts of benevolent societies, must be abused and insulted, represented as avaricious, feeding upon the poverty of the common Indians—the hostility of all those who want the Indian lands must be directed against them. . . .

Is not here an array of *difficulties*?—The truth is, while a portion of the community have been, in the most laudable manner, engaged in using efforts to civilize and Christianize the Indian, another portion of the same community have been busy in counteracting those efforts. Cupidity and self-interest are at the bottom of all these difficulties—A desire to possess the Indian land is paramount to a desire to see him *established* on the soil as a *civilized* man.

⁵ Georgia.

JEREMIAH EVARTS, "WILLIAM PENN LETTERS" (1829)

7 From Letter I

It may be truly said, that the character which a nation sustains, in its intercourse with the great community of nations, is of more value than any other of its public possessions. Our diplomatic agents have uniformly declared, during the whole period of our national history, in their discussions with the agents of foreign powers, that we offer to others the same justice which we ask from them. And though, in times of national animosity, or when the interests of different communities clash with each other, there will be mutual reproaches and recriminations, and every nation will, in its turn, be charged with unfairness or injustice, still, among nations, as among individuals, there is a difference between *the precious and the vile*; and that nation will undoubtedly, in the long course of years, be most prosperous and most respected, which most sedulously cherishes a character for fair dealing, and even generosity, in all its transactions.

There is a higher consideration still. The Great Arbiter of Nations¹ never fails to take cognizance of national delinquencies. No sophistry can elude his scrutiny; no array of plausible arguments, or of smooth but hollow professions, can bias his judgment; and he has at his disposal most abundant means of

¹ God.

All editorials presented in this section are excerpted from Jeremiah Evarts, *Cherokee Removal: The "William Penn" Essays and Other Writings by Jeremiah Evarts*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 50–195.

executing his decisions. In many forms, and with awful solemnity, he has declared his abhorrence of oppression in every shape; and especially of injustice perpetrated against the weak by the strong, *when strength is in fact made the only rule of action*. The people of the United States are not altogether guiltless, in regard to their treatment of the aborigines of this continent; but they cannot as yet be charged with any *systematic legislation* on this subject, inconsistent with the plainest principles of moral honesty. At least, I am not aware of any proof, by which such a charge could be sustained.

Nor do I, in these preliminary remarks, attempt to characterize measures now in contemplation. But it is very clear, that our government and our people should be extremely cautious, lest in judging between ourselves and the Indians, and carrying our own judgment into execution with a strong hand, we incur the displeasure of the Most High.

8 From Letter II

In my first number I prepared the way to inquire, *What right have the Cherokees to the lands which they occupy?* This is a plain question, and easily answered.

The Cherokees are human beings, endowed by their Creator with the same natural rights as other men. They are in peaceable possession of a territory which they have always regarded as their own. This territory was in possession of their ancestors, through an unknown series of generations, and has come down to them with a title *absolutely unencumbered in every respect*. It is not pretended, that the Cherokees have ever alienated¹ their country, or that the whites have ever been in possession of it.

If the Cherokees are interrogated as to their title, they can truly say, "God gave this country to our ancestors. We have never been in bondage to any man. Though we have sold much land to our white neighbors, we have never bought any from them. We own the land which we now occupy, by the right of the original possessors; a right which is allowed in all countries to be of incontestable validity. We assert, therefore, that no human power can lawfully compel us to leave our lands."

If the Cherokees are correct in their statement of facts, who can resist their conclusion? We might as well ask the Chinese, what right *they* have to the territory which they occupy. To such a question they would answer, "God gave this land to our ancestors. Our nation has *always* been in possession of it, so far as history and tradition go back. The nations of Europe are comparatively of recent origin; the commencement of ours is lost in remote antiquity."

What can be said to such a statement as this: Who can argue so plain a case?

It has been alleged, that the savage of the wilderness can acquire no title to the forests, through which he pursues his game. Without admitting this doctrine, it is sufficient to reply here, that it has no application to the case of the

¹ Sold.

Cherokees. They are at present neither savages nor hunters. It does not appear that they ever were mere wanderers, without a stationary residence. At the earliest period of our becoming acquainted with their condition, they had fixed habitations, and were in undisputed possession of a widely extended country. They were then in the habit of cultivating some land near their houses, where they planted Indian corn, and other vegetables. From about the commencement of the present century, they have addicted themselves more and more to agriculture, till they now derive their support from the soil, as truly and entirely as do the inhabitants of Pennsylvania or Virginia. For many years they have had their herds, and their large cultivated fields. They now have, in addition, their schools, a regular civil government, and places of regular Christian worship. They earn their bread by the labor of their own hands, applied to the tillage of their own farms; and they clothe themselves with fabrics made at their own looms, from cotton grown in their own fields.

9

From Letter V

The Cherokees then are a *nation*; and the best definition of a nation is, that it is a *community living under its own laws*.

A nation may be a power of the first, second, third, or tenth rate. It may be very feeble, and totally incompetent to defend its own rights. But so long as it has distinct rights and interests, and manages its own concerns, it is a substantive power; and should be respected as such. Any other rule of interpretation would make force the only arbiter. St. Marino, in Italy, is described in our best gazetteers as "a small but independent republic;" and yet it has not half so many people, nor the three hundredth part so much land, as the Cherokee nation now has.

It has been said, indeed, that the Indians, being an uncivilized people, are not to be ranked among nations. But this is said gratuitously, and without the least shadow of proof. How many treaties did Julius Caesar make with savage tribes, who were greatly inferior, in every intellectual and moral respect, to the Cherokees of the present day? There is as little reason as truth in the objection. Has not God endowed every community with some rights? and are not these rights to be regarded by every honest man and by every fair-minded and honorable ruler?

10

From Letter XV

The Georgians say to the Cherokees: "We are a civilized people; you are a vagrant, hunting and savage people. By virtue of this distinction, the lands which you occupy, and which your fathers called their hunting grounds, belong in reality to us; and we must take possession. The writers on the law of nations bear us out in the demand."

To such a statement the Cherokees might justly reply: "We are not about to dispute as to your being a civilized people, though the manner of urging this demand of the houses and lands of your poor neighbors, argues neither great modesty nor benevolence. We do not profess to be learned in the law of nations; but we read the Bible, and have learned there some plain principles of right and wrong. The Governor of the world gave us this country. We are in peaceable possession. We have never acknowledged any earthly lord, or sovereign. If our Creator has taken away our land and given it to you, we should like to see some proof of it, beside your own assertion. We have read in the book, which we understand you to acknowledge as the word of God, that '*to oppress a stranger wrongfully*' is a mark of a great national wickedness.

"But we are not the sort of people that you take us to be. We are not vagrants, like some tribes of which we have heard; nor were our fathers. They always had a fixed place of residence. And as to *our* wandering about, we have not the time. We are busy with our crops and many of us do not go so far as our nearest county court once a year, unless called out as jurymen. We do not hunt. Not a family within our bounds derives its subsistence from the chase. As to our being savages, we appeal to the white men, who travel on our turnpike roads, whether they receive any ill treatment. We have a legislature and a judiciary, and the judges of our supreme court are very rigid in punishing immorality. We have herds of cattle, farms and houses, mills and looms, clothing and furniture. We are not rich; but we contrive, by our industry, to provide against hunger and nakedness; and to lay up something comfortable for winter. Besides these things, we have schools and places of public worship. Judge ye, whether we are such a sort of people, as the writers on the laws of nations and in their minds, when they talked of vagrants, hunters, and savages."

To this the Georgians rejoin: "But you had no business to betake yourselves to an agricultural life. It is a downright imposition upon us. This is the very thing that we complain of. The more you work on land, the more unwilling you are to leave it. Just so it is with your schools; they only serve to attach you the more strongly to your country. It is all designed to keep us, the people of a sovereign and independent State, from the enjoyment of our just rights. We must refer you to the law of nations again, which declares that populous countries, whose inhabitants live by agriculture, have a right to take the lands of hunters and apply them to a better use."

11

From Letter XXIV

It is now proposed to *remove the landmarks*, in every sense;—to disregard territorial boundaries, definitely fixed, and for many years respected;—to disregard a most obvious principle of natural justice, in accordance with which the possessor of property is to hold it, till some one claims it, who has a better right;—to forget the doctrine of the law of nations, that engagements with dependent

allies are as rigidly to be observed, as stipulations between communities of equal power and sovereignty;—to shut our ears to the voice of our own sages of the law, who say, that Indians have a right *to retain possession of their land and to use it according to their discretion*, antecedently to any positive compacts; and, finally, to dishonor Washington, the Father of his country,—to stultify the Senate of the United States during a period of thirty-seven years,—to burn 150 documents, as yet preserved in the archives of State, under the denomination of treaties with Indians, and to tear out sheets from every volume of our national statute-book and scatter them to the winds.¹

Nothing of this kind has ever yet been done, certainly not on a large scale, by Anglo-Americans. To us, as a nation, it will be a new thing under the sun. We have never yet acted upon the principle of seizing the lands of peaceable Indians, and compelling them to remove. We have never yet declared treaties with them to be mere waste paper.

¹ To overturn the treaties with Indian nations that the Senate has ratified since the creation of the federal government.

Excerpted from:

Brown, V., & Shannon, T. J. (2004). *Going to the source: The Bedford reader in American history*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.