

## Washington's Native American Policy

Near the beginning of his first term as President, George Washington declared that a just Indian policy was one of his highest priorities, explaining that "The Government of the United States are determined that their Administration of Indian Affairs shall be directed entirely by the great principles of Justice and humanity." The Washington administration's initial policy toward Native Americans was enunciated in June of 1789. Secretary of War Henry Knox explained that the Continental Congress had needlessly provoked Native Americans following the Revolution by insisting on American possession of all territory east of the Mississippi River. Congress had previously argued that by supporting the British during the war Native Americans had forfeited any claim to territory on the western frontier of American settlement. However, this perspective ignored the fact that only a portion of tribes had actually supported the British...

...In referring to the constitutional grant of treaty-making powers to the chief executive—with the "advice and consent" of the Senate—Washington declared that a similar practice should also apply to agreements with Native Americans. The Senate acceded to the President's wishes and accepted treaties as the basis for conducting Indian relations...

...as momentous events in the north unfolded, Washington also faced challenges from the four southern tribes. For the Cherokees and the more distant Choctaws and Chickasaws, Washington sought messages of assurance, friendship, and plans for trade. The formidable Creeks were the fourth southern tribe. Washington regarded the Creek with considerable apprehension because of their disagreement with the state of Georgia's interpretation of three treaties that had been negotiated by that state during the 1780s. These treaties included significant cessions of land from the Creeks to Georgia that the tribe did not recognize.

The Creeks' leader was Alexander McGillivray, a mixed-race chief who spoke fluent English and was a shrewd negotiator. Twenty-eight Creek chiefs led by McGillivray accepted Washington's invitation to travel to New York in the summer of 1790 to negotiate a new treaty. The result was the Treaty of New York which restored to the Creeks some of the lands ceded in the treaties with Georgia, and provided generous annuities for the rest of the land. It also established a policy and process of assimilation called "civilization," aiming to attach tribes to permanent land settlements. Under the policy tribal members would be given "useful domestic animals and implements of husbandry" to encourage them to become "herdsman and cultivators" instead of "remaining in a state as hunters."

In August 1790 the Creek chiefs formally approved the Treaty of New York. The Creek chiefs agreed to place themselves under the protection of the United States. In return the United States confirmed the sanctity of the Creek land lying within the boundaries defined by the treaty. However, the Treaty of New York failed to achieve its goals, as the federal government could not stem the relentless incursion of American settlers onto "protected" Indian lands. In a letter to Washington, Knox agonized over the possibility of Indian extermination. He observed that in the most populous areas of the United States, some tribes had already become extinct. "If the same causes continue," he explained, "the same effects will happen and in a short period the idea of an Indian on this side of the Mississippi will only be found in the page of the historian."

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