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The Savagery of it All

by Antonio Mendez

(English 1102)

When we think of racial oppression we often think of Black segregation and Jewish persecution, but lost in the depths of history is the story of the Native American. In fact, so little exists of what was once a proud people that today, confined to reservations, their history remains reserved with them. Although labeled as savages, the life and obligations of a native in essence were the same as any individual, those being to protect and provide for family and fellow. It is that trust and nobility that distinguished them from early British settlers, and would sadly lead to their demise. Although at first they had welcomed their neighbors to a plentiful land, soon they would learn how treacherous their neighbors could be, which would eventually lead to uprisings like that of The Black Hawk War of 1832.

To understand what led to the Black Hawk War of 1832 it is necessary to observe the events of 1804, when anti-American sentiment and reprisals were evident in protestation to the United States' rapid expansion. It was not so much expansion that bothered the tribes of the Midwest region, but rather the way in which they obtained land, as it was often through, as Kerry Trask indicates, "armed aggression" (Trask 5) and one-sided deals that most land perished from the indigenous Americans. During October of 1804, chiefs of the Sauk and Fox nations visited St. Louis to negotiate pardons for the warriors who had murdered settlers in the Cuivre River incident. Territorial governor William Henry Harrison, seeing an opportunity, asked for land in return for the pardons, this land cession would spark many debates afterward, as it was understood that the envoy sent was not at liberty to make such a deal and may have been coerced (Jung 18-20). However, the majority of the Sauk and Fox nations ceded to the Treaty of St. Louis of 1804, because at the time they did not know the extent of the land cession, of over 50 million acres, and knew too well the futility in resisting American government.

As the extent of governmental abuses became more evident to the Native Americans, tribal rebellion ensued under the leadership of the Shawnee Prophet and his brother Tecumseh, and in 1812; the Natives joined the British in the war of the same year. As the battles continued, the natives proved to be a formidable force against the Americans, and as Patrick Jung points out they "consistently defeated the United States in every major military operation in the upper Great Lakes" (Jung 29) during the war of 1812. When the British and American forces held peace talks, the British betrayed the trust of the Natives yet again by not restoring their lands to them. The Treaty of Ghent between Britain and America only proved to boost American expansion and morale. Faced with no other option and hesitant, the Sauk and Fox signed a peace treaty in 1816, unbeknownst that the treaty reaffirmed the land cession of 1804 (Jung 32).

As the years passed, the constant clashes and conflicts of both sides only fueled the hatred toward each other. By the 1820's, widespread hate was irrepressible toward the so-called savage, with stories like that of "The Indian Hater" published in 1828. The story depicts a man living on the frontier, weathered with a deep-seated contempt for the natives and a vengeance that does not distinguish one Indian tribe or warrior from the next; he systematically hunts the natives down and kills them (Hall 138-151). The author of "The Indian Hater", Judge James Hall, tried to depict both sides of the quarrel and began a journey that explored the good and bad sides of both factions, highlighting the atrocities and savagery of both the Native and settler. Sadly, as Trask implies, settlers and westerners embraced the story as the fight between good and evil, the Native being the

“archenemy of everything good and decent” (Trask 166). These strong feelings and speculated assessments only served to feed the irrational fear of settlers and further build on the image of a savage beast who fed on the goodwill of the innocent.

As years passed, the U.S started to sell the land of modern day Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Missouri to settlers, which in 1831 forced the Sauk and Fox from their capital of Saukenuk in Illinois; faced with having to leave their homes and dead ancestors a small force remained, disregarding the American governments’ demands to leave. The leader of the band, Black Hawk, as Trask puts it was “an unyielding traditionalist”, who honored his people’s way of life and highest beliefs (Trask 2, 3). He was not born into leadership and was neither a chief or elder, yet he earned respect and influence through his courage (Jung 11, 12). In recognition to the threat they posed, the government amassed an army under the command of Major Gen. Edmund P. Gaines to remove Black Hawk from Saukenuk, at which Black Hawk perceiving that the force was mostly composed of unruly militia, retreated to the other side of the Mississippi. He would later state in his autobiography that he would have become a prisoner by the regulars but grew afraid “of pale faced militia” (Dyar 43) who were “under no restraint of their chiefs” (Jung 63). After his bitter defeat and humiliation, Black Hawk signed a treaty agreeing to leave the region.

However, due to support by his war council and affirmations that the British in case of armed conflict would support him, a year later he returned to the land of his people and set the stage for the conflict known as The Black Hawk War (Dyar 40). Subsequently, his resistance received the title of “The British Band” due to their constant efforts to establish British support in the reclamation of their lands. It was not until the spring of 1832 that a group of the Sauk and Fox, along with factions of Kickapoo, Winnebago, and Potawatomie, returned to the area under the invitation and council of the Winnebago prophet. Although their first priority was to harvest produce for consumption, Black Hawk at some point hoped, and rallied support from other tribes, to return to the home of his ancestors. Believed to be an act of war by Black Hawk, the U.S government amassed an army to quell the rebellion, even though Black Hawks supposed “war party” contained the elderly, women, and children. Black Hawk, looking for support and commodities from local tribes realized that, after finding none, his protest was a futile pursuit and had already decided to surrender to the government, when irrational men of both sides would send the British Band down a path to total annihilation.

Illinois Governor John Reynolds, at the behest of General Henry Atkinson, had already assembled an army to combat Black Hawk’s faction. Due to the panic of settlers on the frontier and Atkinson’s own words of urgency, Reynolds was quick to find any able-bodied man that was willing to serve (Jung 76). Not knowing then that this fast attempt at rallying an army would hamper any surrender or peace agreement sent forth by Black Hawk himself. Therefore, once deployed, the regiment mostly comprised of inexperienced volunteers, a unit under the command of Major Stillman with the orders “to coerce said Indians into submission” (Dyar 41), would subsequently draw first blood by mistaking a peace envoy as a ruse and act of war.

Black Hawk now faced with the death of his warriors and an oncoming invasion, as a great commander would, defended his people from possible slaughter. It was not until later that the true story emerged, that Stillman and his men had smuggled contraband into their camp. As Black Hawk would later recall after raiding the militia’s camp, they found “a small quantity of whisky and some barrels that had contained this bad medicine, but they were empty” (Black Hawk 100). Possibly inebriated by the time that Black Hawk had sent his men to surrender, and without a proper translator, it is most likely that with the haze of alcohol and anti-native sentiment the militia purposely pursued engagement. In the aftermath, even Gov. Reynolds himself recognized that “fire water” played a crucial part in the instigation of the debacle that became Stillman’s Run.

Nevertheless, Black Hawk and his warriors heavily outnumbered, because many of his men were away hunting, repelled the enemy with about thirty or forty braves. This is contrary to Stillman’s account that their “line extended a distance of nearly two miles” (Stillman 137) or that

“their flanks extending from one creek to the other” (Stillman 137). Panicked, the militia simply retreated and when they arrived at Dixon Ferry, they recalled an epic battle with swarms of natives in a hysterical fashion. However, when everything calmed down the government had lost face in the eyes of its populace, Stillman and his men in one action had made themselves a laughingstock. Even Gen. Atkinson himself recognized that due to Stillman’s ignorance he had inadvertently “closed the door against settling the difficulty with-out bloodshed” (Trask 190).

For the rest of the war Black Hawk relied on small skirmishes, utilizing guerilla warfare to advance his retreat across the Mississippi River. However, Gen. Atkinson did not intend to let him go, the U.S government had decided to make an example of the British Band and renewed their pursuit with utmost ferocity (Jung 118-119). By the summer of 1832, although many complications such as an outbreak of cholera, lack of resources, and misinformation had delayed the army’s tracking and capture of Black Hawk and his followers, it would all culminate in the battles of Wisconsin Heights and Bad Axe River. Tired and starving the Sauk and Fox rebels would try desperately to surrender on other occasions, but sadly, on August 2, 1832, United States army systematically wiped out the natives in an endless massacre (Dyar 77). Even after the battle of Bad Axe River, Sioux, Menominee, and Mississippi Winnebago continued to capture and hunt the remaining tribes’ people that had fled to the other side of the Mississippi River (Jung 175). Black Hawk entered his homeland with roughly 1,100 followers, of those 500 were killed in the violence, 300 had survived and the other 300 hundred were thought to have escaped and gradually reentered their tribes. In the end, days later Black Hawk, having been bitterly defeated, turned himself in under the persuasion of Chasjaka (the Wave) of a nearby Winnebago village where they camped (Trask 295).

The savagery of the Black Hawk war was spurred on by unbridled hate, and escalated by constant aggressions. Often times both felt that the opposing side was an embodiment of evil and that the conflict fought was a holy one, but had it not been for Black Hawks stubbornness to return to Saukenuk, he may have been able to save his people from certain death. By the time he had realized the gravity of the situation, Gov. Reynolds had already unleashed the Indian-hating volunteers against the British Band marking the point of no return. We see that both sides partook of depravity and hate crimes, but in the end, the innocent suffered, fore in the battle of Bad Axe with no merit or reason many women, children, and elderly were not only indiscriminately murdered, but their bodies desecrated. No horror came close to the actions of the U.S. militia and volunteers, who killed women, children, and babies, scalping their carcasses for trophies (Trask 285-286). Scalping was, in the custom of natives, an act of honor among warriors, but had now become a means to show vengeance and unreserved cruelty (Jung 149-151). Instead of limiting the word savage to one people or ethnicity, we see that during the conflict both sides changed by power and greed. The true savages were those men and of those men, General Zachary Taylor would write, “I am decidedly of opinion that that attack made on the Indians brought on the war”(Dyar 77). Perhaps this story is better left untold, as it is a source of shame when we think of the suffering our ancestors had to endure to build the nation that we see today, however, it should also stand as a reminder as to what we should avoid in the future. That in by killing for land, our nation invalidates the very reason for which land exists.

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