

A Native Nations Perspective on the War of 1812

By Donald Fixico

The War of 1812 was an important conflict with broad and lasting consequences, particularly for the native inhabitants of North America. During the pivotal years before the war, the United States wanted to expand its territories, a desire that fueled the invasion of native homelands throughout the interior of the continent. Tribal nations of the lower Great Lakes, including the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Ojibwa, and others saw their lands at risk. The same was true for the Muscogee Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, Cherokee and Chickasaw in the south.

The Native leaders who emerged in response to this expansion shared a single concern, that of protecting tribal lands. There were Indians who sided with the Americans -- Red Jacket and Farmer's Brother led a Seneca faction to help the Americans at the Battles of Fort George and Chippewa. But most Indian nations sided with the British against the U.S, believing that a British victory might mean an end to expansion. In all, more than two dozen native nations participated in the war. In addition to the Lower Great Lakes Indians, led by Tecumseh, and Southern Indians, the Mohawks fought under Chief John Norton to hold onto their lands in southern Quebec and eastern Ontario.

The Indian Confederation under Tecumseh

The Shawnee war chief, Tecumseh, and his brother the Prophet, also known as Tenskatawa, played crucial roles in leading the Indians in the war. By 1811, Tecumseh had built a confederation of more than two dozen Indian nations, all of whom hoped to stop the American settler encroachment on their lands. One might ask why would they be concerned? The answer is clear. Tecumseh and his followers had observed eastern coast and upper Great Lakes Indians being removed from their lands by settler expansion, and they had seen a domino effect as one removed nation encroached on another's land. The residential order of more than one hundred eastern Indian nations had been permanently disrupted. Furthermore, both the French and Indian War, called the Seven Year's War in Canada (1756 to 1763) and the American Revolution (1775 to 1783) cost many native nations lives and land. The Indians in Tecumseh's confederation had every reason to be concerned about the future.

It's important to ask not only about the native leaders methods for dealing with the situation, but also to ask about their decisions, their influences and their vision for future relations with the United States and Britain. Tecumseh is a good case in point, since it was his decision, as a leader, to try to build a strong system of many alliances with other native nations. At the time, each native nation consisted of a few to several communities, each speaking a different language. Tecumseh realized that he had to depend on interpreters to translate his conversations and speeches to each Indian nation that he came into contact with. He also knew that he would have to raise a massive but focused army, drawing from these diverse Indian nations, a daunting task. Imagine trying to get all of Europe, with its different cultures and languages, to fight as a single army. Finally, Tecumseh's decision to forge an alliance with the British shows him to be a leader wise in the ways of statecraft. The daily challenges of managing an