

Memorial Day Speech

Including the Tecumseh-Pushmataha Debate at the Joint Meeting of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Councils

Charles D. Carter

Commentary

Although some young warriors became followers of Tecumseh, the Creek council refused to join his confederacy. They were highly acculturated — as they emphasized a quarter-century later in an unsuccessful rhetorical campaign to prevent the government from seizing their lands. They eventually had to move on the infamous “Trail of Tears” to the “Indian Territory,” now Oklahoma.

Tecumseh moved on to persuade the Choctaws and Chickasaws, but he lost his rhetorical battle with Pushmataha (1765?-1824), an influential Choctaw chief who had long advocated acculturation. Shortly after their debate, the War of 1812 would erupt. Tecumseh would ally himself with the British and be killed in battle. Pushmataha would become a brigadier general in the American army, die peacefully years later and be buried in the Congressional Cemetery. These events would make both leaders legendary figures among whites as well as Indians. Texts of their famous — but unrecorded — debate appeared in various nineteenth-century books.

What is probably a better version of the debate survived in the oral traditions of their own peoples, all of whom later had to join the Creeks in Oklahoma. Charles D. Carter (1868-1929) used the oral tradition in his epideictic speech at Pushmataha’s gravesite on Memorial Day, May 29, 1921. The following is reproduced from the proceedings of the service that were printed in the *Congressional Record* (Appendix), vol. 61, part 9 (1921), pp. 8278-8281.

Carter’s speech reflects the opinions of a prominent acculturated Indian about a significant rhetorical event that had happened over a century earlier. Carter was born a Choctaw and reared among the Chickasaws — the two nations Tecumseh had tried to persuade. Rising from humble beginnings, he

joined the Chickasaw council and, in June, 1906, became secretary of the first Democratic executive committee for the proposed state of Oklahoma. Elected to Congress shortly thereafter, he served from 1907 to 1927. For our immediate purpose, Carter's speech provides the best available account of the debate.

Memorial Day Speech, Including an Account of the Tecumseh-Pushmataha Debate at the Joint Meeting of the Choctaw and Chicasaw Councils

When the busy closing hours of the Sixty-first Congress were dragging along toward midnight, a page came to me on the floor and told me that Mr. Adam Byrd, from Mississippi, who was retiring from Congress, was about to leave for home and desired to see me for a few moments before departing. Mr. Byrd led me to a secluded spot in the Democratic cloakroom and after a brief explanation enjoined on me two responsibilities, which he said he felt it my duty to undertake. The first has no connection with this meeting to-day, but after finishing that this fine old fellow said in a most serious way, "Charley, you are an Indian, and I want to talk to you about another Indian. Old Chief Pushmataha was by long odds the greatest Indian who ever lived. Our Southland had many brave, heroic pioneers — Dale, Claiborne, Andrew Jackson, and others — but this primitive, unlettered Indian did as much during the early part of the nineteenth century toward saving the white population and the things it stands for as any of these, not even excepting his bosom friend, Old Hickory himself. Our American people may not be ungrateful, but they are the most thoughtless, forgetful people in the world, for they have woefully neglected giving anything like adequate credit for the valuable services Pushmataha rendered the white people then living south of the Ohio River and their descendants. While he had much to do with making my own State possible, I doubt if there is one school-teacher out of fifty in Mississippi who knows anything about his history. I doubt if there are 10 men in Congress who even know that his body rests out here in Congressional Cemetery, and before I came here they did not even do his memory the honor to put flowers on his grave on Decoration Day. I visit his grave on every Sunday when the weather will permit, and I see that it is properly decorated at the proper time. Now, I know you are not going to visit his grave every Sunday as I have, but I do want you to promise me that you will go out there occasionally and that you will see that the old chief's grave is given proper attention on Decoration Day." I had barely time to agree when he took me by the hand, saying, "Good-bye, and God bless you," went out of the cloakroom, and I never saw him again, for he died shortly afterwards.

I have done my best to keep this pledge, and no Decoration Day has passed since that time without appropriate decorations being placed on Pushmataha's grave, but had Adam Byrd failed to make that farewell call on

me that night, we might not be here to-day doing just honor to the memory of this truly great man. Adam Byrd was right. Pushmataha was a great chief. He was one of the greatest Indians who ever lived. He was more than that. He was one of the greatest characters of his generation. The old chief was a skillful hunter, an intrepid warrior, a close student of nature, a powerful orator, and a persuasive debater in the councils of his tribe. He had an acute sense of justice, not only between man and man but between nations as well. By patient and sagacious statesmanship and wise, far-seeing counsel he successfully steered the Choctaw ship of state through the then turbulent complications without, to use his own proud boast, ever having found it necessary "to raise the tomahawk against the Great White Father at Washington or his children."

The absorbing ambition of Pushmataha was that his people might become the equal of the whites in education and civilization and take their place beside the white man in a business way, in a professional way, and in the councils of the Nation. He was always an advocate of education and industry among his people and contributed much not only of his time, but of his small income, to that end. He was dearly beloved by both the Choctaws and Chickasaws, and after his death one of the executive and judicial districts of his nation in Indian Territory was named in his honor. When the forty-sixth star was added to the constellation of Old Glory the Oklahoma people gave evidence of their appreciation of the memory of this grand old man by naming one of the largest and most beautiful counties of the State for him.

But I must not trespass too greatly upon your time. You are to have the privilege of hearing this great man's life and character discussed by those much better informed and equipped than myself. I will pause only long enough to tell you something of what I believe his own people, the Choctaws, consider one of Pushmataha's greatest achievements. This has to do with the part he took in saving the white man's civilization west of the Alleghenies and specifically his reply to the wonderful address delivered before the Choctaw Council by the great Shawnee orator, Tecumseh. The War of 1812 was impending and the British authorities were doing all in their power to stir up antagonism between the Indians and the Americans. The astute Shawnee chief, Tecumseh, was sent on a tour by British agents to organize all Indians west of the Alleghenies with the purpose to expel the white American beyond the mountains. One of the first tribes he visited was the Choctaw. After his mission had been explained to Pushmataha, the wise old chief advised Tecumseh that he was only one of the three chiefs of the Choctaw Nation; that the Choctaws could only take part in any war upon the decision of the general council of the tribe; and that before this was done they would probably desire to consult their kindred tribe and ally, the Chickasaws. Tecumseh then requested that both tribes be called together in order that he might lay his plan before the council. After a consultation with the other two Choctaw chiefs, Masholatubby and Apuckshinubby, and the principal chief of the Chickasaws, a general council of the two tribes was called.

Tecumseh was classed by many of his contemporaries as the most powerful

debater of his generation, and this was saying much, for it was during the day of Clay, Calhoun, and Webster. Realizing the full power of his oratory, Tecumseh surmised if he could get to speak to the Choctaw people in general council they would not be able to resist his magnetic logic and eloquence. The council was assembled, and Tecumseh, with his suite of 30 warriors bedecked in panoply of paint and feathers, filed in before the council fire to deliver his address. We must bear in mind that the Shawnees spoke an entirely different language from the Choctaws and Chickasaws, the Shawnees belonging to the Algonquin stock and speaking their dialect, while the Choctaws and Chickasaws are of the Appalachian stock and spoke the Muskogean dialect. Therefore it was necessary for each speech to be translated by an interpreter so all might understand.

The great Shawnee chief was thoroughly familiar with past relations between all Indian tribes and the whites, and he began by recounting all the wrongs perpetrated on the Indians by the palefaces since the landing of Columbus. He related how the white man had beguiled the Indians along the Atlantic coast to part with their lands for a few trifling beads and a little fire water, leaving them beggars, vagabonds, peons, and strangers in their own land, to be scorned and despised by their paleface neighbors. He told how the Shawnees and other northern tribes were being stripped of their patrimony. He laid down the principle that the Great Spirit had given the Western Hemisphere to all red people in common and that no particular tribe had anything more than the right of possession to any lands, and therefore asserted any relinquishment of title by one tribe to be null and void, because many of the owners had not joined in the transfer. These wrongs discussed he declared had been made possible by the ingenuity of the whites in attacking only one tribe at a time, but if all Indians would join and combine their forces in one attack at one time, the white man could be driven back over the mountains whence he came; that the golden opportunity was now at hand to join hands with the British and scourge from their revered hunting grounds eternally the hated paleface. He closed his eloquent address with a stirring appeal to the patriotism of the Choctaws and Chickasaws, asking if they would await complete submission or would they now join hands and fight beside the Shawnees and other tribes rather than submit?

Evidently Tecumseh's purpose had been fully accomplished. His magnetic words seemed to arouse every vindictive sentiment within the souls of the Choctaw and Chickasaw warriors; their savage enthusiasm had been stirred to white heat when Pushmataha calmly strode before the council fire and began his wonderful reply to Tecumseh's speech. What a pity that no accurate account of this wonderful debate between these two giant primitive orators was at that time preserved. Lincecum, Pickett, Randall, and other historians have left us brief excerpts, Cushman undertakes to give Pushmataha's speech in full, but his recital does not even do faint justice to the original and in no measure conforms to the Choctaws' account of it. For many years it was handed down from generation to generation by tradition to the Choctaws and Chickasaws, but it can be easily understood how that method might fail to

preserve all the virile force and eloquence of this wonderful address. I will undertake to give it to you in part as nearly as I remember hearing it told by some of the old Indians many years ago. Pushmataha began his address as follows:

PUSHMATAHA'S REPLY TO TECUMSEH.

"Omiske, tushkahoma ho chukma hashche yumma! Anumpa tilofasih ish huklo."

("Attention, my good red warriors! Hear ye my brief remarks.")

"The great Shawnee orator has portrayed in vivid picture the wrongs inflicted on his and other tribes by the ravages of the paleface. The candor and fervor of his eloquent appeal breathe the conviction of truth and sincerity, and, as kindred tribes, naturally we sympathize with the misfortunes of his people. I do not come before you in any disputation either for or against these charges. It is not my purpose to contradict any of these allegations against the white man, but neither am I here to indulge in any indiscreet denunciation of him which might bring down upon my people unnecessary difficulty and embarrassment.

"The distinguished Shawnee sums up his eloquent appeal to us with this direct question:

"Will you sit idly by, supinely awaiting complete and abject submission, or will you die fighting beside your brethren, the Shawnees, rather than submit to such ignominy?"

"These are plain words and it is well they have been spoken, for they bring the issue squarely before us. Mistake not, this language means war. And war with whom, pray? War with some band of marauders who have committed these depredations against the Shawnees? War with some alien host seeking the destruction of the Choctaws and Chickasaws? Nay, my fellow tribesmen. None of these are the enemy we will be called on to meet. If we take up arms against the Americans we must of necessity meet in deadly combat our daily neighbors and associates in this part of the country near our homes.

"If Tecumseh's words be true, and we doubt them not, then the Shawnees' experience with the whites has not been the same as that of the Choctaws. These white Americans buy our skins, our corn, our cotton, our surplus game, our baskets, and other wares, and they give us in fair exchange their cloth, their guns, their tools, implements, and other things which the Choctaws need but do not make. It is true we have befriended them, but who will deny that these acts of friendship have been abundantly reciprocated? They have given us cotton gins, which simplify the spinning and sale of our cotton; they have encouraged and helped us in the production of our crops; they have taken many of our wives into their homes to teach them useful things, and pay them for their work while learning; they are teaching our children to read and write from their books. You all remember well the dreadful epidemic visited upon us last winter. During its darkest hours these neighbors whom we are now urged to attack responded generously to our needs. They doctored our sick; they clothed our suffering; they fed our

hungry; and where is the Choctaw or Chickasaw delegation who has ever gone to St. Stephens with a worthy cause and been sent away empty handed? So in marked contrast with the experience of the Shawnees, it will be seen that the whites and Indians in this section are living on friendly and mutually beneficial terms.

"Forget not, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, that we are bound in peace to the Great White Father at Washington by a sacred treaty and the Great Spirit will punish those who break their word. The Great White Father has never violated that treaty, and the Choctaws have never yet been driven to the necessity of taking up the tomohawk against him or his children. Therefore the question before us to-night is not the avenging of any wrongs perpetrated against us by the whites, for the Choctaws and Chickasaws have no such cause, either real or imaginary, but rather it is a question of carrying on that record of fidelity and justice for which our forefathers ever proudly stood, and doing that which is best calculated to promote the welfare of our own people. Yea, my fellow tribesmen, we are a just people. We do not take up the warpath without a just cause and honest purpose. Have we that just cause against our white neighbors, who have taken nothing from us except by fair bargain and exchange? Is this a just recompense for their assistance to us in our agricultural and other pursuits? Is this to be their gracious reward for teaching our children from their books? Shall this be considered the Choctaws' compensation for feeding our hungry, clothing our needy, and administering to our sick? Have we, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, descended to the low estate of ruthlessly breaking the faith of a sacred treaty? Shall our forefathers look back from the happy hunting grounds only to see their unbroken record for justice, gratitude, and fidelity thus rudely repudiated and abruptly abandoned by an unworthy offspring?

"We Choctaws and Chickasaws are a peaceful people, making our subsistence by honest toil; but mistake not, my Shawnee brethren, we are not afraid of war. Neither are we strangers to war, as those who have undertaken to encroach upon our rights in the past may abundantly testify. We are thoroughly familiar with war in all its details and we know full well all its horrible consequences. It is unnecessary for me to remind you, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, veteran braves of many fierce conflicts in the past, that war is an awful thing. If we go into this war against the Americans, we must be prepared to accept its inevitable results. Not only will it foretoken deadly conflict with neighbors and death to warriors, but it will mean suffering for our women, hunger and starvation for our children, grief for our loved ones, and devastation for our beloved homes. Notwithstanding these difficulties, if the cause be just, we should not hesitate to defend our rights to the last man, but before that fatal step is irrevocably taken, it is well that we fully understand and seriously consider the full portent and consequences of the act.

"Hear me, O Choctaws and Chickasaws, for I speak truly for your welfare. It is not the province of your chiefs to settle these important questions. As a people, it is your prerogative to have either peace or war, and as one of your

chiefs, it is mine simply to counsel and advise. Therefore, let me admonish you that this critical period is no time to cast aside your wits and let blind impulse sway; be not driven like dumb brutes by the frenzied harangue of this wonderful Shawnee orator; let your good judgment rule and ponder seriously before breaking bonds that have served you well and ere you change conditions which have brought peace and happiness to your wives, your sisters, and your children. I would not undertake to dictate the course of one single Choctaw warrior. Permit me to speak for the moment, not as your chief but as a Choctaw warrior, weighing this question beside you. As such I shall exercise my calm, deliberate judgment in behalf of those most dear to me and dependent on me, and I shall not suffer my reason to be swept away by this eloquent recital of alleged wrongs which I know naught of. I deplore this war, I earnestly hope it may be averted, but if it be forced upon us I shall take my stand with those who have stood by my people in the past and will be found fighting beside our good friends of St. Stephens and surrounding country. I have finished. I call on all Choctaws and Chickasaws indorsing my sentiments to cast their tomahawks on this side of the council fire with me."

The air resounded with the clash of tomahawks cast on the side of the Choctaw chief and only a few warriors seemed still undecided. Tecumseh seeing the purpose of his mission thwarted and thinking Pushmataha could not understand the Shawnee language, spoke to his warriors in his native tongue, saying: "Pushmataha is a coward and the Choctaw and Chickasaw braves are squaws," but Pushmataha had traveled much and knew a smattering of many Indian dialects. He understood Tecumseh and turning upon the Shawnee with all the fire of his eloquence, he clinched the argument and settled the decision of the few wavering Choctaw braves by saying:

"Halt, Tecumseh! Listen to me. You have come here, as you have often gone elsewhere, with a purpose to involve peaceful people in unnecessary trouble with their neighbors. Our people have had no undue friction with the whites. Why? Because we have had no leaders stirring up strife to serve their selfish, personal ambitions. You heard me say that our people are a peaceful people. They make their way, not by ravages upon their neighbors but by honest toil. In that regard they have nothing in common with you. I know your history well. You are a disturber. You have even been a trouble maker. When you have found yourself unable to pick a quarrel with the white man, you have stirred up strife between different tribes of your own race. Not only that, you are a monarch and unyielding tyrant within your own domain; every Shawnee man, woman, and child must bow in humble submission to your imperious will. The Choctaws and Chickasaws have no monarchs. Their chieftains do not undertake the mastery of their people, but rather are they the people's servants, elected to serve the will of the majority. The majority has spoken on this question and it has spoken against your contention. Their decision has therefore become the law of the Choctaws and Chickasaws, and Pushmataha will see that the will of the majority so recently expressed is rigidly carried out to the letter. If, after this decision, any Choctaw should be so foolish as to follow your imprudent advice and enlist to fight against the

Americans, thereby abandoning his own people and turning against the decision of his own council, Pushmataha will see that proper punishment is meted out to him, which is death. You have made your choice; you have elected to fight with the British. The Americans have been our friends and we shall stand by them. We will furnish you safe conduct to the boundaries of this nation as properly befits the dignity of your office. Farewell, Tecumseh. You will see Pushmataha no more until we meet on the fateful warpath."

Obviously, those two noble sons of the forest and their tribes had reached "the point where the trail divides." The Choctaws and Chickasaws were persuaded to refuse participation in Tecumseh's conspiracy against the Americans and the action of these two powerful tribes prevented many other Indians from siding with the British. The Choctaws and Chickasaws finally joined hands with the Americans and fought from the early battles of the war to the Battle of New Orleans, and Pushmataha arose to the rank of brigadier general in the American Army. The Shawnees joined forces with the British and Tecumseh was slain while leading a forlorn charge under Proctor at the Battle of the Thames.