

# Report of Tecumseh's Speech to the Creek Council

Samuel Dale

## *Commentary*

One of many topics mentioned in Washington's State of the Union address was the "depredations" of "certain hostile tribes of Indians." The post-Revolutionary era was marked by rapid westward expansion, especially into what are now Kentucky and Ohio. The long-suffering Shawnees, who had once had a flourishing culture along the Ohio River, now had their backs against the wall. Although Shawnee history cannot be reconstructed in detail, epidemics (caused by contacts with white traders?) impelled them to move south around 1650. After living peacefully with the Creeks, they moved to Pennsylvania, where pressure from the imperialistic Iroquois forced them back to their original home. Claiming them as vassals, the Iroquois sold Shawnee lands in Kentucky to Virginia in 1768. After a military defeat in 1774, the Shawnees acknowledged the sale but were promised that they could retain their lands north of the river. One casualty was Puckeshinwa, who died in the arms of his young son, Chiksika, after extracting a promise that he would never make peace with the Virginians.

Keeping his promise, Chiksika joined war parties which moved in and out of Kentucky and Tennessee during and after the Revolution. He was killed in battle in 1788 in the presence of a younger brother to whom he had been a substitute father, Tecumseh (1768-1813). Too young to have much voice in Shawnee politics, Tecumseh was bitter about what was happening to his nation as well as to his family. During the 1780s, the United States government purchased more Shawnee lands to give to Revolutionary veterans in lieu of cash and to sell to speculators and settlers to raise much-needed revenue. Purchases were sometimes made from Indian tribes who did not actually own the land and sometimes from chiefs who lacked the legal authority to sell it. Armed with "legal" titles, the government claimed all but the northwestern portion of Ohio, to which the Shawnees were forced to move.

Forced into a small area, the supply of game was too limited to provide meat or furs that were needed for trade. In a society where women cultivated crops while men hunted and trapped, males felt increasingly useless. Alcoholism and intratribal violence spread as the old communal way of life broke under the strain. Amidst the social deterioration, some Indian chiefs gladly sold lands to the whites. Sales typically involved an annual annuity, and greedy leaders liked the political power and wealth which came from controlling the annuity payments.

This difficult situation was further complicated when the Shawnees divided into two ideological camps. Years of trading furs for manufactured goods silently introduced white ideas such as private property. Some acculturated Indians converted to Christianity, settled down on privately owned farms and invited white missionaries and agricultural experts to teach them a more viable way of life. Others reveled in nostalgia for the good old days before the whites had come. Some of the latter coalesced into a religious movement led by Tecumseh's brother, Tenskwatawa, whose visions made him known as the Prophet. The Master of Life told the Prophet to reject the old shamans (religious leaders) and chiefs who cooperated with the whites. Indians were to give up alcohol, sexual promiscuity and intratribal fighting. They were to restore the old communal life and gradually abandon trading with whites.

The Prophet's teachings spread like wildfire not only among the Shawnees, but also among other tribes in Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana. Wishing to get farther from the whites and closer to his following, the Prophet accepted the invitation of a Potawatomi chief to build a city at the junction of the Wabash and Tippecanoe rivers in Indiana. While Prophetstown grew rapidly, leaders of several tribes signed the Treaty of Fort Wayne in 1809, selling additional land for additional annuities. The treaty illustrates an old Indian problem: lack of unity among the tribes.

Meanwhile, Tecumseh had become a chief and had an enviable reputation as an orator and warrior. More pragmatic than his visionary brother, he politicized the new religion as he built an Indian confederacy. Stunned by the Treaty of Fort Wayne, he held a tense meeting with the territorial governor, William Henry Harrison. In a short speech, he explicated the premise that undergirded his entire rhetorical campaign: Indian lands belong to Indians as a whole, not to a specific Indian nation. Because the treaty had not been approved by all Indian nations, it was therefore illegal.

By 1811, Tecumseh's rhetorical campaign had brought many northern tribes into his confederacy. With an Anglo-American war in the offing, it was time to persuade southern tribes to join. He went first to the Creeks, from whom his father had taken his wife when the Shawnees had been living with them. Thus he had a rhetorical asset in his kinship relation, but he also had a serious rhetorical problem. The Creeks were highly acculturated and did not want war.

When Tecumseh and his party of warriors arrived, a white Indian agent was present, and Tecumseh delayed meeting with the council of Creek (Muscogee) chiefs until the agent left. Tecumseh was apparently unconcerned

about the presence of Sam Dale, a well-known frontiersman, whose account of the meeting was printed in Dale's biography and reprinted in Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne, from the Earliest Known Accounts of this Point, to the Present Period* (Fort Wayne: D.W. Jones & Son, 1868); it is from Brice (pp. 192-94) that the following account is reproduced.

The accuracy of Dale's report is obviously open to question. We do not know when he wrote it, but some of his remarks suggest that it was after the fact. He was a translator as well as reporter, and we do not know how good he was. Yet he was familiar with Indians and had no reason to misrepresent what he saw and heard. In any case, his is the only available eyewitness account.

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Tecumseh led, the warriors followed, one in the footsteps of the other. The Creeks, in dense masses, stood on one side of the path, but the Shawanoes noticed no one; they marched into the center of the square, and then turned to the left. At each angle of the square, Tecumseh took from his pouch some tobacco and sumach, and dropped on the ground; his warriors performed the same ceremony. This they repeated three times as they marched around the square. Then they approached the flag-pole in the center, circled around it three times, and facing the north, threw tobacco and sumach on a small fire, burning, as usual, near the base of the pole. On this they emptied their pouches. They then marched in the same order to the council, or king's house, (as it was termed in ancient times,) and drew up before it. The Big Warrior and leading men were sitting there. The Shawnee chief sounded his war-whoop — a most diabolical yell — and each of his followers responded. Tecumseh then presented to the Big Warrior a wampum-belt of five different colored strands, which the Creek chief handed to his warriors, and it passed down the line. The Shawnee's pipe was then produced: it was large, long, and profusely decorated with shells, beads, and painted eagle and porcupine-quills. It was lighted from the fire in the center, and slowly passed from the Big Warrior along the line.

All this time not a word had been uttered, everything was as still as death; even the winds slept, and there was only the gentle-falling leaves. At length Tecumseh spoke, at first slowly and in sonorous tones, but he grew impassioned and the words fell in avalanches from his lips, his eye burned with supernatural luster, and his whole frame trembled with emotion; his voice resounded over the multitude — now sinking in low and musical whispers, now rising to its highest key, hurling out his words like a succession of thunderbolts. His countenance varied with his speech; its prevalent expression was a sneer of hatred and defiance; sometimes a murderous smile; for a brief interval sentiment of profound sorrow pervaded it, at the close of a look of concentrated vengeance, such, I suppose, as distinguishes the arch-enemy of mankind.

I have heard many great orators, but I never saw one with the vocal powers of Tecumseh, or the same command of the face. Had I been deaf, the play of his countenance would have told me what he said. Its effect on that wild, superstitious, untutored, and war-like assemblage, may be conceived; not a word was said, but stern warriors, 'the stoics of the woods,' shook with emotion, and a thousand tomahawks were brandished in the air. Even Big Warrior, who had been true to the whites, and remained faithful during the war, was, for the moment, visibly affected, and more than once I saw his huge hand clutch spasmodically the handle of his knife. And this was the effect of his delivery — for, though the mother of Tecumseh was a Creek, and he was familiar with the language, he spoke in the northern dialect, and it was afterward interpreted by an Indian linguist to the assembly. His speech has been reported; but no one has done, or can do it justice. I think I can repeat the substance of what he said, and, indeed, his very words:

"In defiance of the white men of Ohio and Kentucky, I have traveled through their settlements — once our favorite hunting-grounds. No war-whoop was sounded, but there is blood upon our knives. The pale-faces felt the blow, but knew not from whence it came. Accursed be the race that has seized on our country, and made women of our warriors. Our fathers, from their tombs, reproach us as slaves and cowards. I hear them now in the wailing winds. The Muscogee were once a mighty people. The Georgians trembled at our war-whoop; and the maidens of my tribe, in the distant lakes, sung the prowess of your warriors, and sighed for their embraces. Now, your very blood is white, your tomahawks have no edges, your bows and arrows were buried with your fathers. O Muscogeese, brethren of my mother! brush from your eyelids the sleep of slavery; once more strike for vengeance — once more for your country. The spirits of the mighty dead complain. The tears drop from the skies. Let the white race perish! They seize your land, they corrupt your women, they trample on your dead! Back! whence they came, upon a trail of blood, they must be driven! Back! back — ay, into the great water whose accursed waves brought them to our shores! Burn their dwellings! Destroy their stock! Slay their wives and children! The red-man owns the country, and the pale-face must never enjoy it! War now! War forever! War upon the living! War upon the dead! Dig their very corpses from the graves! Our country must give no rest to a white man's bones. All the tribes of the North are dancing the war-dance. Two mighty warriors across the seas will send us arms.

"Tecumseh will soon return to his country. My prophets shall tarry with you. They will stand between you and your enemies. When the white man approaches you the earth shall swallow him up. Soon shall you see my arm of fire stretched athwart the sky. I will stamp my foot at Tippecanoe, and the very earth shall shake."