

A QUESTION ABOUT SOVEREIGNTY

“And now I saw a pale horse and the rider’s name was Death. And there followed him another horse whose rider’s name was Hell. They were given control of one-fourth of the earth, to kill with war and famine and disease and wild animals.

Revelation 6:8

The chaos, loss of life and human suffering in Indian Territory resulting from the Civil War, had a long standing impact and foresight might have dictated a different path for the leadership to follow. Neither the issue that initiated the war, secession from the Union, then later slavery, dominated political discussion in Indian Territory nations. Recognized as separate territories in the Treaty of 1830 they were not states, they had not seceded from the Union, nor did the magnitude of slave ownership in Indian Territory compare to the Confederacy. Whereas agriculture, principally the labor intensive cultivation of cotton and tobacco, were the “backbone” of economics in the South, most in Indian Territory were involved in small agricultural endeavors. And, in Cherokee territory, although bitterness between traditionalists and treaty signers still simmered, that issue had somewhat subsided. During the two decades that followed the Trail of Tears, the Nation had establishing a government, a judicial process and a school system said to be second to none. Some historians refer to that era as the “golden years” of Cherokee sovereignty. Why then their decision to take sides?

Apparently there was a combination of factors that eventually swayed the leadership to support the Confederacy. In Cherokee country it undoubtedly involved the continual power struggle between Chief John Ross and Stand Watie. All tribes may have been uneasy over the attitude of federal officials, underscored, for example, by statements such as the one by William Seward during the 1860 elections that “Indian Territory south of Kansas must be vacated by the Indian.” Certainly, the government in Washington had a history of violating or ignoring past treaties or agreements, On the other hand, promises may have been made by Confederate officials regarding full recognition as a nation. Or perhaps familiarity with some of the new southern power structure may have had an influence. After all, not only had President Jefferson Davis served earlier at Fort Gibson, but others in the Confederate military hierarchy as well. Robert E. Lee, Joseph E. Johnston, J.E.B. Stuart, John Bell Hood and Albert Sidney Johnston had all been assigned to Indian Territory at one time or another.

Soon after the decision, it became obvious that Confederate promises of assistance could not be fulfilled. Following the defeat at Pea Ridge, Arkansas in March of 1862, it was evident that the South lacked sufficient basic materials to wage war. Even prior to that battle, adequate numbers of firearms were unavailable and Indian soldiers were ordered to pick up weapons from fallen Yankee soldiers. Ammunition was also in short supply in the south from the onset of the war. One high ranking Confederate officer noting that “in every battle we fight we must capture as much ammunition as we use.” And, from the onset, appeals were made for families to save the urine in their chamber pots, an ingredient necessary for the artificial production of niter, used in the manufacture of gunpowder.

It soon became clear that the priority of the Confederate high command was the war on the eastern front. After the defeat at Pea Ridge, the commanding officer General Earl Van Doren, withdrew to Fort Smith and resupplied his troops with equipment earmarked for Indians. Under orders, he left with a significant number of Arkansas troops to fight in Mississippi. Those regiments remained in the east and some were still present when Lee surrendered at Appomattox. Thus, ill equipped, undermanned, unable to match Union forces in open battle, Indian troops frequently resorted to guerrilla warfare.

At the conclusion of the war, it has been estimated that thirty three percent of the women were widows, sixteen percent were fatherless children and fourteen percent were orphans. Because governments were virtually obliterated, the war's end became a prelude to the misery to come. Indian Territory became a safe haven for criminals of all descriptions and citizens were in jeopardy until the territory was somewhat tamed following the two decade era of "Hangin" Judge Parker. To further compound the misery, international law dictated that a state of war abrogated all previous treaties between warring nations, enabling the United States Congress to take full advantage of that situation. Railroads were built through the territory, followed by inroads into the legal system, then support for what became known as "land rushes," and finally, formation of The Dawes Commission dividing the land.

Hindsight, as the saying goes, is 20/20 vision. The skill and thoughtfulness of the same leadership that created those "golden years," then conversely their rush to participate in another nation's war is puzzling. Was sovereign neutrality ever considered as a viable option? Certainly the decision that unleashed those apocalyptic horsemen, Death and Hell, proved to be devastating, ultimately leaving the respective nations without a country.

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