

Background: The time is 1835, and the Cherokee Nation is in crisis. The people are torn in the question of removal. Should the Cherokee people decide to move West now and side with the Ridge faction, or should they fight to stay on their own lands with the Ross faction? In this piece, Elijah Hicks calls the Cherokee people to action. This is his position on removal as seen in an edition of the Cherokee newspaper, *The Phoenix*.

A LETTER TO THE PEOPLE

by: Elijah Hicks

My friends—brethren in humanity—we stand strong. I beseech you to continue in our fight for justice. Although this tumult continues to burden our hearts, we must labor on until we can keep our lands and see that our future generations flourish on its fruits. However, before us is a great divide among our people. The question of ceding and fleeing from what is rightfully ours remains. Our people, who were once united under one goal, are now fighting against each other like the savages the whites call us. What would our great ancestors, who see our plight, have to say? We cannot win this fight divided. We are as strong as ever before, and we should fight to stay in the lands that are ours.

Our weak brothers, who believe we should flee without a fight, have forgotten who they are. They have forgotten that we were born to live as warriors not as cowards. The strength that our ancestors have passed onto us is woven into our rooted courage. So, let us remain strong against this unjust removal. We already have become so incredibly united. Courageously, we have turned over the United States' Supreme Court and have shown our irrepressible voice as an independent nation. Already our children and people are literate and educated, as we have developed a unified Cherokee writing system and have erected schools for our children to attend. We have cultivated our lands by large-scale farming systems and have become economically successful and independent. We boldly fought the odds and proved every skeptic wrong in their preconceived judgments of our kind. We are innately strong; removal is unnecessary.

The Ridge's, who represent a small minority of the Cherokee, underestimate our strength. They make their point of removal clear, but are we meant to follow in their cowardly footsteps? We are a great nation. We are not a nation of cowards, like this small minority who decide to flee when an obstacle draws near. We are a nation with traditions that move us forward. Are we willing to submit to the whites who have made us their enemies? When will our submission stop? When will their greed cease? We have succumbed to the white's demands long enough. This unjust submission started long ago with our peaceful ancestors—when “our fathers laid aside their arms and ceded the best portions of their country” even though their act meant nothing.¹ From 1721 until now, more than 120,000 acres of Cherokee land have been ceded, and from more than 22 different treaties our rich soils have been taken from us in attempts to find peace. Our fathers relinquished our rightful lands to avoid aggression. For many years, our people endured manipulation and extortion. When will it end? Georgia has already pushed us beyond its own country's constitutional limits. As witnessed with our fellow Creeks, Georgia has taken its native peoples' rights without their consent. Governor Lumpkin of Georgia so kindly remarks that “the inhumanity of Georgia, so much complained of, is nothing more nor less than the extension of her laws and jurisdiction over this mingled and misguided population who are found within her acknowledged limits.”² Are our mingled and misguided people wrong not to want to endure the cruelty Georgia has unjustifiably extended over us, after Georgia has flagrantly dehumanized our very identity and has ignored the laws of our Council? Are we too ignorant to know what is best for us? Georgia has already taken away our human liberties. The state claims that it is justified in its actions—even when Georgia made it unlawful “for any person or persons, under colour or pretense of authority from said Cherokee tribe. . . to cause or procure by any means the assembling of any council or other

1 "Memorial of the Cherokee Nation." *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 92.

2 Lumpkin, Wilson. "Speech before Congress." *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver 2010. Print. 84.

pretended legislative body.”³ If our council is made illegal, how are we to make decisions for the good of our people? Furthermore, Georgia has made it impossible for us to defend ourselves: “no Indian or descendant of any Indian, residing within the Creek or Cherokee Nations of Indians, shall be deemed a competent witness in any court of this State.”⁴ How are we to defend ourselves in their court system in peaceful and diplomatic ways if they will not allow us? We cannot endure this injustice any longer. If we passively allow this to continue, our Nation will cease to exist. By fleeing from the problem, we are not ending it. Who is to say that the whites will not further take away our lands after removal? Passivity is no longer an option.

We refuse to go down the dangerous and futile path of removal—not because we are cowards but because it would be suicidal. As we have witnessed our brothers whom have fled earlier, the path was full of disease and death. If we mistakenly listen to those like the Ridge family, we will suffer: even Non-Cherokee people who see these dangerous consequences, like Jeremiah Everts, predict that there will be “much suffering, in the removal of 60.000 souls . . . much exposure, sickness, hunger, [and] nakedness.”⁵ This is our family. This is our land. This is our life. Let us take care of our people. The demand for removal is unreasonable. We should not be forced down a path that we do not want to follow. As they push us west of the Mississippi, there is “no guarantee of a new country that could be given to [us].”⁶ The land is foreign, and if we are compelled to leave our country, we see nothing but ruin before us, as “the [dark] country west of the Arkansas territory is unknown to us.”⁷ Most likely, we will hardly get settled in the new location before “[we] will be urged to remove again.”⁸ How will

3 “Georgia General Assembly.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 61.

4 *Ibid.* 61

5 Everts, Jeremiah. “William Penn’ Essay.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 55.

6 *Ibid.* 56

7 “Memorial of the Cherokee Nation.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 94.

8 Everts, Jeremiah. “William Penn’ Essay.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace

we survive? When will their greed end? Why must we continue to allow our fate rest in their hands? In a petition sent out by George Lowrey, 13,000 out of 16,000 Cherokee do not want to remove: let us continue to fight for the majority of the Cherokee.

We are strong, and we plan to stay. We will let justice lead us to victory. Our genuine case is simple: “who is the injured, and who is the aggressor? Let conscience answer. . . Do the obligations of justice change with the color of one's skin?”⁹ Many of our brothers who have succumbed to the manipulation of justice have lost their way. Our brother Elias Budinot, whose opinion most once trusted when he wrote for *The Phoenix*, once believed in justice. In his own words, he believed that justice would be served—that conscience and truth would be deserved to the Cherokee people. In An Address to the Whites, Budinot simply states in response to the injustice done to us, “Let humanity answer.”¹⁰ Can he not remember his original compassion for his people? Have you forgotten yours? We have tried to change ourselves and our traditions for many moons. John Ross reminds us, in his letter to John C. Calhoun, that “[t]he happiness which [he] once enjoyed, by a quiet & undisturbed ease, in [his] primitive situation before the . . . Civilized Tree . . . [is stained now— planted around] the elysian vallies drenched with blood.”¹¹ Our happiness has ceased. The whites and their policies have changed us. We have tried assimilation. We have allowed them to “civilize” us. We have a proper order of conduct in Council. We are united by blood and are bound by our civilized laws. We have yielded. In our own home, roles are shifting as we assimilate. By changing, we have made excuses for the natural traditions of our culture. In trying to convince the whites of our degree of “civility,” those who have abandoned their faith in us, like John Ridge, have begun to degrade us—excusing that “the hardest

Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 56.

9 Frelinghuysen, Theodore. “Speech before the Senate.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 72.

10 *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 46.

11 Ross, John. “Letter to John C. Calhoun.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 48.

portion of manual labor is performed by the men, & the women occasionally lend a hand to the field, more by choice and necessity than anything else.”¹² Our woman used to work in the fields by choice. But now, under new white societal laws, it is not proper for them to continue in that conduct. Now, we force them to stay in the home and take to a woman's sphere of the white culture. Additionally, a woman's esteem and advice is no longer respected as it once was, as we move from our traditional matriarchy to the white's differing patriarchy. We have become more savage in our ways of assimilation. We have belittled our women and have watched our culture fade. We must reestablish our fate back into our own hands. John Ross adamantly states “all that remains for the Cherokee Nation is to decide for itself whether it will contribute most to [its] own welfare and happiness, for [it] to retain [its] present title to its lands, and remain where [it] is.”¹³ Let us remain who we are.

We remain strong in numbers. Let our beliefs stand firm. Let our brethren reunite under one kindled flame of unity. We cannot win this battle alone. Without you, our fight is lost, and our life here can be no more. Lost is our history, our ancestors, and our traditions. Is this what you choose?

Elijah Hicks

Humble servant of the people

12 Ridge, John. “Letter to Albert Gallatin.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 32.

13 Ross, John. “Letter to John C. Calhoun.” *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*. Ed. Jace Weaver and Laura Adams Weaver. 2010. Print. 48.