

**A BRUTAL RECKONING: ANDREW JACKSON,
THE CREEK INDIANS, AND THE EPIC
WAR FOR THE AMERICAN SOUTH**

(PETER COZZENS)

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I have long been fascinated by the wars between the European settlers of America and those whom they conquered and displaced, the American Indians. I grew up near a famous battlefield memorial of those wars; maybe that is the reason I have often wondered why it is that in North America, unlike in other conquered areas of the world, Europeans usually saw the Indians not as interchangeable savages, but as men not so different from themselves. Peter Cozzens here assists by offering another of his kaleidoscopic histories of those conflicts, portraying both whites and Indians as men in full. Virtue and vice; mercy and barbarity; glory and shame—all are on display, in a tale of a time when men were men, and did not seek to escape their nature.

Cozzens is a sometime soldier and Foreign Service Officer (he retired from the latter in 2002, before the total corruption of the State Department and its mutation into a chief enforcement arm of globohomo, though perhaps with Michael Anton now to be there as director of policy planning, the tide has turned). More relevantly, he is the author of nearly twenty books about the two wars that had the greatest impact on the United States in the nineteenth century: the Civil War and the Indian Wars. His books (two of which I have previously favorably discussed, *The Earth is Weeping* and *Tecumseh and the Prophet*, which Cozzens states form a trilogy with this book) strike a balance between the detail of a military historian and the sweep and voice of a popular historian.

The subject of *A Brutal Reckoning* is the Creek War, also known as the Red Stick War, from 1813 to 1815, centered around what is today Alabama and western Georgia. The Creeks (who called themselves the Muscogee) descended from the Mississippian cultures, which flourished for a thousand years in the southeast of today's United States, until shortly before the Spanish arrived in the 1600s. Between disease and battle, the Spaniards completed a societal failure that was already well advanced. The Indians gradually regrouped, but at a more primitive level (for example, they never returned to the building of massive mounds that

had characterized the Mississippians). From the time the English began to spread into North America, the Creeks were one of the Five Civilized Tribes, who adopted elements (including holding African slaves) and tools of the white man's culture. Ultimately the rapidly expanding Americans, in the 1830s, evicted all of the Five Tribes, exiling them to Oklahoma (where around one hundred thousand Creeks live today). But that is a story that takes place after the events in this book, which nonetheless also revolve around the white man's eagerness for land.

The Creek War was extremely complex, more so than the topics of Cozzens's other two books (the Indian war chief Tecumseh and the later wars with the Indians of the American West), something that no doubt was challenging to Cozzens in his successful attempt to write a coherent narrative. The battle lines were not clearly drawn except at specific times and specific places. This is primarily because the Creek War was not only a war with the Americans, but also among the Creeks themselves. Moreover, many of the most important personages had a foot in both worlds, white and Indian, being *métis*—mixed-blood children of (usually) a white father and his Indian wife. Many of these had English (often Scottish) names, spoke fluent English and could easily pass for a white man, not just in looks but in dress and manners. For reasons Cozzens does not explain, Creek Indians regarded *métis* members of their tribe not with suspicion for their mixed blood, but rather, it seems, with admiration. Cozzens helpfully provides a cast of characters, but the reader has to pay careful attention to not get lost in the sea of names, and in the shifting loyalties.

The central character around whom Cozzens structures his book is not an Indian, however. It is Andrew Jackson, that archetype of the Scots-Irish who built a great deal of America through their violent ways and boundless appetite for honor and glory. He begins his book with Jackson's near-death experience in 1813, when in Nashville he went looking for a fight with a former (and later again) close friend, Thomas Hart Benton, and was rewarded with "a slug and two balls" from the pistols of Benton and his friends (fortunately for Jackson, in those days men still used smoothbore single-shot pistols). The War of 1812 was ongoing, and while the main battles of that war took place further, often much further, north, there was great fear that the British would take advantage of the nascent war between the Americans and

a portion of the Creeks, which had begun a few months earlier. This fear was certainly not without foundation, but until the very end of the Creek War, and then ineffectually, the British were not focused at all on the southeast, having bigger fish to fry towards Canada. Regardless, Jackson, with his “unwavering will,” soon became the man around whom the organized action of the Americans during the Creek War revolved—leading extensive fighting while convalescing, his arm in a sling as he rode cross-country on horseback in great pain, with a massive wound in his shoulder spitting bone fragments.

It was inevitable that the Creeks would eventually come into conflict with the Americans. As with all Indian tribes, their numbers were few and their fecundity inadequate. By the eighteenth century, they lived a hybrid life, of traditional hunting in their well-stocked hunting grounds, combined with “modern” crop and livestock farming. But on their borders was an exploding population of whites desperate for land and opportunity, who were still by treaty and practice largely confined relatively close to the seaboard.

The traditional term used for the Creek organizational structure is “confederacy,” in essence loosely-affiliated settlements, mostly in what is today western Georgia, divided into two major groupings, the Upper Creeks and Lower Creeks. Essentially, theirs was a clan structure, where squabbling among the Creeks was not uncommon, and seasonal fighting with their non-Creek neighbors expected. Each *talwa*, or major town, of which at the time of the Creek War there were about sixty, had between fifty and five hundred inhabitants, which in times of peace were under a *micco*, a clan leader who governed with the assistance of a tribal council, with the main tool to force compliance being simply public ridicule. Each *talwa* also had a military leader, who took command in times of war, but was otherwise merely a prominent citizen, with the loyalty of the able-bodied warriors. Creek warfare was typical for Indian tribes—small occasional seasonal raids, low body count, and frequent killing of noncombatants and seizure of prisoners for death by torture or enslavement. Rape, however, was rare, unlike among some Indian tribes, especially the Western Indians, because it was seen as diminishing a warrior’s future military prowess.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Creeks flourished, developing extensive trading networks with the British, whom

they provided with tens of thousands of slaves (mostly “Carolina Indians,” captured from small Gulf Coast and Florida tribes who were allied to the Spanish). Florida was a common destination for travelling Creeks; the Seminoles there (also one of the Five Civilized Tribes), had their origin in restless or exiled Creeks who had migrated to Florida after wars among the Indians, and the Creeks generally regarded the Seminoles as allies. The Creeks were never formally allied to the British; rather, their policy was to play off the British, French, and Spanish against each other for Creek advantage.

When Georgia was first settled by the British in the 1730s, the Creeks were happy with new markets and new providers of goods, and the opportunity to make fat cash by returning fugitive black slaves. By the 1760s, with the diminution of Spanish power and the rise of British power and population, the Creeks began to wonder what the future would hold, especially as the British kept negotiating land cessions with them. The Proclamation of 1763, while it forbade white settlement beyond a set line, also expanded the rights of whites to set up trading posts inside Indian territory. Previously, white traders had been carefully selected men, who had been issued a difficult-to-obtain British license, and then formed relationships with a *micco*, married a Creek woman, and became an integral permanent part of the local community. Now many new traders authorized by the British arrived, with no local connections and no desire to make them, to sell alcohol by the barrel, with the usual deleterious effects on the fabric of Creek society (though not as extreme as on some of the Indian tribes in the northeast).

As Creeks overhunted their lands in order to buy alcohol and other goods, and as Creeks began to herd cattle on communal farming grounds, the fabric of Creek society tore further, and their traditional enemies the Choctaws to the north eroded Creek lands. Real trouble began toward 1790, when Alexander McGillivray, a charismatic métis leader, claimed leadership of the Upper Creeks (which meant not his rule, but that many of the *miccos* regarded him as their essential counselor). Creeks under his direction staged hundreds of raids on settlers from Georgia, mostly those who had settled in land that had been, McGillivray claimed, illegitimately ceded to the state of Georgia. Both sides slaughtered each other indiscriminately, and the Creeks did a roaring trade in selling kidnapped white women back to their relatives and captured slaves to the Spanish.

In 1790, lacking resources or interest in fighting the Creeks full-scale, President Washington invited McGillivray to New York City, where the Americans bribed all the Indian leaders to end the conflict (including making McGillivray a brigadier general in the United States Army and giving him an annual payment of \$1,200). McGillivray returned the favor by ceding more Creek land—mostly Lower Creek land, over which he had no authority, exacerbating divisions among the Creeks. He died in 1793, but the fissures among the Creeks were just getting started.

For the next two decades, Creek relations with the federal government were conducted through Benjamin Hawkins, a senator from North Carolina whom Washington made Indian agent for the Creeks. Hawkins was a highly competent man who was keenly interested in furthering the interests of the Indians, though as with all whites, he interpreted this mostly through the prism of civilizing them—that is, changing their lifestyle to be more like that of the white man, primarily through making them settled farmers. He traveled often throughout the Creek *talwas*, and established a National Council of *miccos* to negotiate collectively. As one might expect, some Creeks, especially the ones who grew rich as a result, thought this was an excellent path for the Creeks. Others, especially the young men and traditionalists, bridled. For the next several years, until the Red Stick War began, negotiations, cessions of land and of rights to build roads through Creek territory, and internal Creek dissension continued, the latter further exacerbated by famine resulting from bad weather and dwindling of the deer population, making those Creeks already rich from farming and trading even richer, while others descended into grinding poverty.

In 1811 the great Shawnee war chief and aspiring uniter of the Indians, Tecumseh, travelled to the Creeks, to persuade them to join his grand alliance. His first wife was Creek, and he hoped to convert both the Creeks and the other southeastern tribes to his cause, and take advantage of tension between the British and the United States to forge his alliance. But the Creeks, and the other tribes, rejected his overtures, in large part because of the oratory of another influential métis, William Weatherford, who played a crucial part throughout the Creek War. Tecumseh departed, but he left behind a trusted lieutenant, Seekaboo, to preach the spiritual teachings of his brother Tenskwatawa, known to the Americans as the Prophet. Seekaboo was successful among some

of the Creeks (helped by the New Madrid Earthquake, taken by some as an omen of impending destruction of the Americans), and inspired Creek imitation prophets, notably Josiah Francis, yet another métis. They and their followers vowed to remove the whites forever from the continent, and they named themselves the Red Sticks, taking for their own the name used for the Creek war club, a wooden club with a metal spike, painted red. Cozzens notes that the exact content of Red Stick religious doctrine is lost, but as with Tecumseh, much of it involved admonitions to forswear the ways of the white man (other than guns), especially farming and livestock.

The Red Sticks, few in number at first, began murdering isolated white settlers and travelers on the new American postal road through Creek territory. Meanwhile, Britain and America declared war, and the Georgians and Tennesseans feared the Creeks would join the British while American attention was focused on the north. Among the Creeks, however, many of the *miccos* had no love for the Red Sticks, and cooperated with the Americans to hunt down those among them who had murdered whites. Such executions were common, but they also rallied more Creeks to the Red Stick cause. The Red Sticks formed three rally points, in essence large fortified encampments, in locations outside of existing *talwas*, and there they grew in strength. Hawkins tried to keep the friendly *miccos* in power and to prevent their assassination by the Red Sticks, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But by mid-July of 1813, nearly all the Upper Creek *talwas* were under Red Stick control, while the Lower Creeks successfully resisted Red Stick attempts to dominate them. Thus, the entire Creek confederacy suffered under a state of civil war, which, like all civil wars, featured many men with divided loyalties and family on both sides—a particularly thorny problem in a clan-based society.

The Creek War began officially on July 25, when a party of Red Sticks attacked a United States fort, Fort Madison, eighty miles northeast of Mobile, one of several forts the Americans had built in Creek country, most of which were undermanned and under the command of careless men. This began several months of skirmishes among the Red Sticks, the United States military, and various groups and types of state militias. On August 30, the Red Sticks overran Fort Mims, where several hundred

civilians had taken shelter from the fighting, and killed everyone inside, massacring all the noncombatants, about three hundred in all.

The killings at Fort Mims enraged the American nation. But the federal government did not have the troops to deal with this southern conflict, because the War of 1812 was in full swing, and the action there was on the Canadian border. Jackson, however, had twenty-five hundred volunteers, fiercely loyal to him, and he, and they, were ready to fight. And fighting was what Jackson wanted to do. When Jackson was a young congressman, Thomas Jefferson said of him, "His passions are terrible. He could never speak on account of the rashness of his feelings. I have seen him attempt it repeatedly, and as often choke with rage. His passions are, no doubt, cooler now; he has been much tried since I knew him, but he is a dangerous man." He was a complex man, too—he adopted an Indian orphan baby, for example, Lyncoya (who died of tuberculosis in 1828). I should find a good biography of Jackson and write about him; his kind will be needed to renew America.

All the militias, of which Jackson's was only one, formed and dissolved rapidly and often lacked for adequate supplies, but Jackson's charisma and discipline made his forces much more effective than most. In cooperation with limited regular forces, Jackson aimed to destroy the Red Sticks by invading their territory and destroying their rally points. Cozzens narrates, for more than half his book, this sequential destruction in detail. The only real hope for the Red Sticks was that the Americans would lose focus; their hope that the British or Spanish would help was always forlorn. Jackson ensured that whatever the American government thought or wanted, the Red Sticks would be eliminated as a threat to the Americans.

The war ebbed and flowed; the Red Sticks more than once succeeded in repelling invading forces, though never Jackson's. As so often with the Indians, they trusted in their prophets' promises of magical protection, and prophets fell with defeats, while others rose to take their place (often accompanied by the ubiquitous habit of the American Indians of ferreting out and killing witches in their midst blamed for defeats). On March 27, 1814, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, leading nearly 3,000 Americans, along with several hundred Cherokee and a handful of Lower Creeks, Jackson broke the remaining Red Sticks, killing nearly a thousand warriors—the largest body count of Indians in any battle

of the Indian Wars. (Sam Houston fought in this battle as a young man, surviving two musket balls that nearly killed him.)

The Red Sticks dissipated, mostly fleeing to Lower Creek *talwas*, to Florida, or to relatives among the other Five Civilized Tribes. William Weatherford, the most prominent of the Red Sticks, though one who spent much of his time trying to mitigate the war, simply walked into Jackson's camp, found Jackson's tent, and announced he was there to surrender. True to form, after Weatherford assured him he had had nothing to do with the massacre at Fort Mims (which he had not), Jackson welcomed Weatherford as an equal and proceeded to drink rum with him into the night, negotiating terms for Weatherford's followers. (Weatherford became a wealthy man, dying in 1824; his nephew was the first Indian graduate of West Point.) Jackson issued rations to ten thousand Creek refugees, and summoned the Creek nation to a peace conference. Surviving Red Stick leaders came, but there were few of those; most who had not fled had already been killed by other Creeks. Jackson demanded half the Creek lands, "roughly three-fifths of the present state of Alabama and one-fifth of Georgia," twenty-one million acres, along with the right to build roads and forts in remaining Creek territory. He ignored that many of the Creeks had stayed neutral or allied with the Americans against the Red Sticks. His primary aim was frontier security, not land for settlers, but inevitably the cession would mean white expansion into the ceded lands. The Creeks had no choice; they signed, re-naming Jackson "Sharp Knife," and the treaty set the pattern for all future dealings with the Indians by the Americans.

The war was not quite over; some thousand of the Red Sticks regrouped in Florida, seeking Spanish assistance. The British finally turned to trying to open a southern front, and with the Spanish at their last gasp on the American continent, sent a British commander and ships to Pensacola to outfit and direct the Red Sticks. Jackson responded by invading Florida, defeating and expelling the British from Pensacola, and then smashed the British again at the Battle of New Orleans. As it happened, the War of 1812 had already ended, and the Treaty of Ghent obligated the Americans to restore to the Indians all lands taken since 1811. Jackson ignored President Madison's commands to do so, and fought against the remaining recalcitrant Indians in Florida for the next several years, finally ending their resistance in 1818 (usually regarded as

part of the Seminole Wars, not the Red Stick War), including hanging Josiah Francis, the last remaining of the original prophets inspired by Tecumseh's agent Seekaboo, upon his return from London, where he had been unsuccessfully seeking British sponsorship. The remaining Red Sticks merged with the Seminoles, and the wars with the Creeks concluded. Within a decade, the Americans began to expel all the Five Civilized Tribes from their ancestral lands—and, as Cozzens notes, their displacement opened the fertile land of the Deep South to cotton cultivation, and thereby, to a significant degree, led to the Civil War.

I am no expert on the American Indians, but in these days when “heritage Americans” are often spoken of, the rightful rulers of America, despite that our elites have invited millions of migrant invaders into America to replace the heritage population, it is worth considering the position of Indians today. Strictly speaking, they are not heritage Americans, which refers to the conquerors and their descendants, not the conquered. Yet with the *modus vivendi* eventually reached with the American government, after much blood and suffering, Indians have as much right to be here as any American—no more, certainly, but no less, either. I suspect that Indians, similar to other groups that have long kept their identity inside America (notably the Tejanos in Texas), have even less love for the aliens invading America than does the mass of Americans. There is some evidence for this; it was widely noted a post-election poll found that Indians voted heavily for Donald Trump in the 2024 election. The truth of this seems reinforced by desperate attempts made since by the Left, and Indian “leaders” in hock to the Left, to claim this is not the case.

What the future holds for the Indians, in an America that, one way or the other, is going to change drastically over the next decade, I do not know. Their birth rate is appallingly low; their total fertility rate is 1.47, lower than any other ethnic group. True, census-counted “Indians” increased by eighty-seven percent between the 2010 and 2020 census, but most or all of these are merely whites falsely claiming to be Indians, seeking advantage or ideological differentiation from their white roots. I do not know enough about Indians to say if they could renew their culture within a new America; perhaps the answer depends on the tribe, many of which are very small. But as I say, a hundred thousand Creeks live in Oklahoma (and two thousand in Alabama,

the federally-recognized Poarch Creek Band, wealthy from casinos); this is certainly a large enough group to matter, if they can radically reverse their birth rate decline. Whether they still have the fiber to do that, I have no idea, and in today's ideologized environment, it is likely impossible for an outsider to determine if they do.

As to this book, Cozzens invariably respects and evenhandedly treats the Indians without, for the most part, sentimentalizing or airbrushing them (though there is a bit more of that in this book than in his past books, probably because it was written at the height of the post-Floyd Riots demonizing of whites). He is a little too quick to apply negative adjectives to whites, and a little too slow to do the same for Indians. Still, this is a history book very much worth reading, and given that whatever America's future holds, it will always be a multi-ethnic state, reading it is a worthwhile way to inform yourself about important aspects of America's history, which may yet bear directly on our future.