

Tecumseh: An Emperor Mired in Unfortunate Circumstances

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*“[Tecumseh is] one of those uncommon geniuses, which spring up occasionally to produce revolutions and overturn the established order of things. If it were not for the vicinity of the United States, he would perhaps be the founder of an Empire... You see him today on the Wabash and in a short time you hear of him on the shores of Lake Erie or Michigan, or on the banks of the Mississippi and wherever he goes he makes an impression favorable to his purposes.”*¹

-William Henry Harrison, Governor of Indiana and rival of Tecumseh, August 7, 1811

Trouble brewed in the Old Northwest as two conflicting cultures grew increasingly less able to live in the shadow of the other. Undeterred by the Indian defeat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, a young Shawnee chief began to cultivate his dream of an Indian Confederacy that would encompass all tribes in the Old Northwest, and possibly beyond. Tecumseh’s remarkable eloquence and foresight, along with his well-known prowess as a warrior, spurred support from his fellow Indians and admiration from white men. Sir Isaac Brock of Britain reported that “a more sagacious or a more gallant warrior does not I believe exist.” Even the chief’s bitter rivals lavished praise on Tecumseh. American Lewis Cass described him as “a man of more enlarged views than are often found among the Indian chiefs; a brave warrior, and a skillful leader.” Indian agent John Johnston also praised Tecumseh as “among the great men of his race... Had he appeared fifty years sooner he might have set bounds to the Anglo-Saxon race in the West.”² Such overwhelming praise suggests that Tecumseh had the ability to achieve his desired goals and outcomes. However, if he was really such an inspiring leader in the eyes of both his peers and enemies, why was his campaign for an Indian confederacy ultimately unsuccessful?

Tecumseh’s prior experiences shaped his desire and vision for an Indian Confederacy. Constant exposure to warfare made him acutely aware of the political irrelevance of small bands of Indians compared to behemoth European powers. Tecumseh watched Britain, France, and the United States acquire resources and influence at the expense of the Indians; in his view, the Indians could not remain in their traditional divisions or attempt to conform to a more European style of life. Instead, he sought to create one voice for all tribes that would gain enough political clout to defend the Indian lands through military means. Despite Tecumseh’s best intentions, a number of forces beyond his control, as well as his own actions, led to the Confederacy’s eventual collapse.

Unfortunately for Tecumseh, the components that strengthened Indian alliances and economies at the beginning of white-Indian relations eventually proved to be the primary undoers of his confederacy. Three successive factors led to the demise of the Confederacy. First, a significant imbalance in the value of goods traded between Indians and Europeans had existed for at least a century prior to Tecumseh’s time.³ Second, the trade imbalance compelled the Indians into a dependent alliance with Britain. Third, Tecumseh never succeeded in mobilizing the full strength of the Indian tribes into a major military confrontation with the United States on Indian lands. The lack of a full-fledged confrontation reduced the Confederacy’s resistance to several relatively small defeats and setbacks in Canada, New York, and Southern states.

A multitude of sources provide clues and insight into the factors that influenced Tecumseh’s Confederacy. R. David Edmund’s *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* and John Sugden’s *Tecumseh: A Life* give extremely informative and captivating accounts of the Tecumseh’s life. Additionally, Richard White’s *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, details the trading partnerships, interactions and rivalries between the French, British, and Indians. Excellent primary source materials include the *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, the Tecumseh papers in the Draper manuscripts, Nicolas Perrot’s *Memoir*, the original records of the Ohio Company, and the French-Canadian Archives Nationales D’outre Mer.

The Trade Imbalance: Beaver For Guns

The seeds of Tecumseh’s failure were planted centuries before the Shawnee chief’s birth. In the Old Northwest, the present-day states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, an imbalance in the value of exchanged trade goods persisted throughout much of white-Indian trade relations during the colonial era. In the seventeenth century, many of the

¹ William Henry Harrison to Secretary of War, 7 August 1811. *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 548.

² R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 222.

³ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 111.

Algonquian tribes living in the region often exchanged goods with French traders. The benefits gained by the Indians from European trades far outweighed any goods the Indians offered in return. Over time, the imbalance worsened and became more destructive.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, furs were the primary good traded by the Indians. Additionally, they offered bark canoes, corn, berries, meat, and fish to the Europeans.⁴ In return, the French, the Indians' major initial trading partner, provided clothing, guns, knives, metal tools, alcohol, and superior West Indian tobacco. In the beginning, trade flourished; French items were new and remarkable in the eyes of the Indians. French trader Nicolas Perrot noted in the 1660s that "the knives, the hatchets, the iron weapons above all, could not be sufficiently praised; and the guns so astonished them that they declared that there was a spirit within the gun, which caused the loud noise."⁵ Because of the high demand for European goods, many French traders profited handsomely from Indian trade.

Although the Indians did not immediately abandon their old way of life in favor of the technologically superior European tools, the French trade goods had an unquestionable importance. European goods allowed Indians to perform common tasks with much greater efficiency. Hunters caught their prey more effectively with guns and knives, food cooked better in metal pots, and metal hatchets and axes made construction and other physical labor easier and less strenuous. Even more important was the authoritative clout that material goods bestowed on their owner. According to historian Richard White, "Gifts that brought influence, prestige, and honor were, by and large, gifts of scarce European goods. They allowed the giver influence across significant social boundaries."⁶

The value of European goods grew exponentially through their scarcity and value in diplomacy. The leaders of entire nations of Indians could be swayed through a simple gift of one metal kettle and a gun.⁷ European goods became a cultural necessity for Indian leaders seeking political clout long before the Indians legitimately depended on the goods for daily purposes.⁸ Indian desire for trade goods only increased over time. In some cases, Indians who interacted directly with the French received goods from initial trades and kept them for extended periods of time until the goods deteriorated. Indians often passed on the worn-out goods to other Indians at a healthy profit.⁹ Nicolas Perrot describes a scene in which the recipients of European trade goods paid a handsome sum for the "old knives, blunted awls, wretched nets, and kettles used until they were past service...hoping that their visitors would not fail to come to them every year."¹⁰

Two crucial developments resulted from the continuation of trade. First, European goods became less scarce and eventually became essential to Indian society. In the words of Perrot speaking to the Ottawas, "You have forgotten that your ancestors in former days used earthen pots, stone hatchets, and knives, and bows; and you will be obliged to use them again, if Onontio abandons you. What will become of you, if he becomes angry?"¹¹ Although Perrot's charge was exaggerated, he highlighted the important effect the trade imbalance had on the Indians' way of life. White adds that, "Indians now clearly desired goods they could not produce themselves, but more than that, they had integrated these valued goods into a series of social relationships on which the honor, power, and prestige of both individuals and groups depended. Those who had access to goods had access to influence totally out of proportion to the physical effects the goods they gave away could achieve."¹²

Second, the trade imbalance decreased the value of Indian furs, which acted in direct opposition to the ever-increasing cost of European goods. Indian trade journeys to Montreal dwindled in the 1670s and essentially ceased by the early eighteenth century.¹³ Governor de Vaudreuil and later officials reported in their "*memoires*" that low prices virtually ended the trade.¹⁴ Even the Indians were fully aware of the diminishing value of their furs. Per Perrot, the "savages could not understand why these men came so far to search for their worn-out beaver robes; meanwhile they admired all the wares brought to them by the French which they regarded as extremely precious."¹⁵ The falling prices created a predicament. The French, unable to take advantage of the potentially favorable position bestowed on them, could not procure enough value from the Indians to continue to make the trade profitable.¹⁶ In the earlier days of frontier traders, the French may have been able to get a bargain on "all the Furs and Skins of the remotest Savages, who...did not know

⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵ Claude Charles Le Roy de La Potherie, *The Adventures of Nicolas Perrot 1665-1670* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 73.

⁶ White, 100.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ White, 100.

⁹ La Potherie, 173-174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

¹¹ White, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³ White, 108.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁵ La Potherie, 73.

¹⁶ White, 116.

their Value.”¹⁷ However, a new challenger soon entered into the fur trade.

By the early 1700s, trade with the British became possible for the Algonquian tribes. As the eighteenth century progressed, British expansion encroached on the Old Northwest and Indians often found British offers better than those of the French.¹⁸ The French felt extraordinarily threatened by the British; their new rivals stole away trading partners and severely limited profits. One French strategist recognized that by 1755 the fur trade in the Old Northwest was “not worth 1 percent of the expense that it had cost the Crown.”¹⁹ Despite unfavorable circumstances, the French repeatedly attempted to expand the fur trade.

The French knew that the unique system of exchange was largely buffered from strict market forces. The Indians thought of the trade as a paternalistic relationship based on needs or *besoins*. Because the French possessed goods that the Indians needed, the father-child relationship obligated the French to provide for the needs of their “children”, the Indians. As the French became increasingly less able to provide goods and presents for the Indians, the Indians became disenchanted with their former French friends and the alliance shuddered.²⁰ The most valuable objective the French could gain from an Indian alliance was the prevention of British influence. As a result, the French made valiant, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to satisfy the Indians.²¹ The Indians felt betrayed because of the inability of the French to provide sufficient goods, so they shifted allegiance to the British.

Although Tecumseh had no role in these initial relations between Europeans and Indians, trade created a fierce European rivalry that greatly influenced the formation of Tecumseh’s Confederacy. Trade was more than an economic exchange; it became a diplomatic method used by the Europeans to seek an alliance involving symbolic and potential military benefits. Indians saw trade as more than a free market transaction; alliance meant a collaborative relationship in which both parties provided for the other’s needs. Many Indians became dependent on Europeans providing for them via presents. According to White, “In the final stages of the fur trade, Indians depended on European manufactures and food supplies, and Europeans dictated the terms of an exchange that reduced them to poverty.”²²

Throughout the eighteenth century, the French steadily lost their foothold in North America. After the American Revolution, the United States adopted the position vacated by France in the rivalry against Britain. Much like the French, the US regularly provided presents and annuities to the Indians. The rivalry between the US and Britain contained many characteristics of the old French-English rivalry, such as the use of trade in establishing or deterring alliance. In existence for over a century beforehand, the trade imbalance persisted into Tecumseh’s time and hindered his quest for an Indian confederacy.

The British Fathers

The Indians willingly turned from the French to the British in search of a more equitable means of exchange. However, the Indians’ decision to side with the British, which was the Indians’ only legitimate option at the time, eventually became the second primary contributor encumbering Tecumseh’s Confederacy. Several decades after the beginning of Indian trade with the British, the tribes of Tecumseh’s Confederacy had several motives to discontinue their long-lasting British alliance in favor of the Americans, though they never chose to do so. Chief among these motives was the fact that the redcoats had abandoned their Indian allies after the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794. Unwilling to provoke the Americans, the British had refused entry to the retreating Indians. John Sugden describes the Indians’ decision to retreat to Fort Miami following their defeat, “The memory of those gates at Fort Miami, shut fast against them at the time of their need” galled the Indians.²³ The feelings of betrayal lingered for decades, despite the loss of less than forty men during the battle. The United States sought to capitalize off these sentiments. Indian agents sent by the United States argued that the Americans had treated their “red children” with kindness since Fallen Timbers and attempted to discourage future Indian involvement in conflicts between whites. Agents like Thomas Worthington, a representative of the governor of Ohio, asserted the strength of the American military and vowed that the Americans would either destroy the Indians or align with them depending on whether or not they supported the British. Worthington based his claim on the American victory in the Revolution, a war the Americans had won despite being “little and very weak like children” at the time.²⁴ After the defeat, the British ceded all of their territory in the Old Northwest to the United States; the Ameri-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁸ White, 119.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁰ White, 116.

²¹ Beauharnois de La Boische et Charles et Gilles Mocquart, « *Ordonnance de M. de Beauharnois et Hocquart 6 Juin 1746* », in *Archives Nationales D’outre Mer*, (Aix-en-Provence, France : Archives Nationales D’outre Mer, 1966).

²² White, 96.

²³ John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

cans subsequently divided up the land into territories, began surveying, and sold certain parcels to land companies.²⁵

Although Indians lived on the land, they were not involved in the peace negotiations, and the American government remained undeterred from auctioning off the land to firms like the Ohio Land Company.²⁶ The Americans claimed the territory in the Old Northwest after winning independence. Burdened by debts from the Revolutionary War and with another potentially costly conflict with the British on the horizon, Congress argued that selling land in the Ohio territory provided a quick and necessary fix for the nation's pressing financial problems. According to the records of the Ohio Company, "Negotiation had to be more than a drop in the bucket; it had to be...sufficient in size to encourage those who had steadily maintained that western lands would materially help to pay the war debt."²⁷

Despite these deterrents, the Indians had no choice but to revert to British dependency. The British were determined in their efforts to win over influential chiefs.²⁸ They began a "new generosity" by increasing the issue of arms, ammunition, and other supplies.²⁹ The British urged the Indians to return to "ancient customs and manners," suggesting the continuance of their warlike customs and longtime alliance with Britain.³⁰ Ultimately, the British promises of overturning the American treaties and reinstating the Ohio boundary were too enticing for the Indians to turn down. The persistent trade imbalance and the growing military conflicts increased the Indians' reliance on British supplies and political support.³¹ "The Indians lacked the logistical capability to keep large numbers of men in the field, and they lacked the artillery necessary to storm fortifications...the only way for the Algonquians to compensate for these weaknesses was with British aid. Necessity and the bonds of common life made the gradual increase of British influence within the confederation a natural development."³²

Indian life near the boundary between white and Indian lands was largely ruled by individual villages, individual chiefs, individual traders and agents, and individual homesteads. This living arrangement also increased the Indians' dependence on the British. Small raids, quarrels, and fights frequently occurred between Kentucky frontiersmen and Indian tribes on the banks of the Ohio River. These skirmishes often burgeoned into larger conflicts, and John Jay feared the Kentuckian "white savages" would "become more formidable to us, than the tawny ones who now inhabit" the region.³³ The American government, and especially the Indians near the Ohio River, had little enforceable power over the backcountry settlers, who ignored the government's land laws, Indian policy, and foreign policy. William Henry Harrison reported in 1801 that, "The Indian chiefs complain heavily about the mischiefs produced by the enormous quantity of Whiskey which the Traders introduce into their country...This poisonous liquor not only incapacitates them from obtaining a living by Hunting but it leads to the most atrocious [sic] crimes."³⁴ Small roving bands of Indians terrorized the white settlers and assaults by both sides often spread into a bevy of revengeful attacks with unclear origins.

Threats of attacks from restless villagers only increased demand for British arms and ammunition. In 1806, as large parties of Indians arrived at Greenville, the murder of a white settler by unknown assailants sparked rumors of an Indian war. Tecumseh, Blue Jacket, and other leaders of the village met with frontiersmen to assure them that the tribesmen were in fact not hostile.³⁵ To ensure protection from American frontiersmen and the American government, individual Indian chiefs sought protection in Tecumseh's British-backed confederacy.³⁶ Convincing individual chiefs of the Confederacy's worthiness proved difficult when the promise of military protection relied solely on other potentially untrustworthy Indian tribes, whom the chiefs may have quarreled with and warred against in the past. Faced with no other alternative, the Indians turned to the British for supplies and protection.

Recruiting the Tribes and Seeking Confrontation

The third primary factor in Tecumseh's failure was the inability of the Indian nations to mobilize the full strength of the Confederacy to confront the United States within the Indian homelands. Authority in Indian society

²⁵ Second Continental Congress, *An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States North-West of the River Ohio*, (Philadelphia: 1787).

²⁶ Ohio Company (1786-1796), "Boston 29th August 1787," in *The Records of the Original Proceedings of the Ohio Company*, ed. Archer Butler Hulbert (Marietta, OH: Marietta College Historical Collection, 1917), 13.

²⁷ Ohio Company (1787-1796), "Introduction: The Ohio Company," in *The Records of the Original Proceedings of the Ohio Company*, ed. Archer Butler Hulbert (Marietta, OH: Marietta College Historical Collection, 1917), lxxiii.

²⁸ Sugden, 165.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 165

³⁰ Sugden, 173.

³¹ White, 435.

³² *Ibid.*, 455.

³³ White, 419.

³⁴ William Henry Harrison to the Secretary of War, 15 July 1801. *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 25.

³⁵ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 87.

³⁶ Sketch of Tecumseh 1824, *Draper Manuscripts*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1YY104.

came from individual chiefs and villages rather than larger, complex tribal governments; this power structure made inter-tribal unity difficult. Tecumseh needed to convince many individual chiefs and small portions of clans and tribes to unite in order to gain legitimate political influence. Although Tecumseh's great oratory and inspirational ability converted many chiefs, other factors influenced the chiefs in ways that no great speech could cure.

Tecumseh frequently travelled to neighboring tribes on recruiting visits. He spent the winter of 1808-1809 in Ohio urging the Wyandots and the Senecas to come to his Confederacy's new capital, Prophetstown, located on the Wabash River in present-day Indiana. Unfortunately for Tecumseh, he met little success with these tribes. Tecumseh attempted to argue that in Prophetstown the "soil was more fertile, game was more plentiful, and, most important, the region in Indiana was farther removed from the evil influence of the Long Knives."³⁷ The Ohio tribes questioned the settlement's true condition, as they had never heard such favorable news.

The Ohio tribes' were correct in their skepticism of Prophetstown. The settlement, newly swollen to a population of nearly four hundred Indians, had spent the past spring and summer neglecting their crops and opting instead to engage in religious and political activity. Desperate food shortages during the intense winter forced the tribesmen to scour the nearby forests for food and to resort to eating their horses and dogs after exhausting their British and American-supplied wares.³⁸ Chiefs in Ohio had no desire to move to Prophetstown, where starvation and submission to Tecumseh seemed unavoidable.

Although Tecumseh did have some initial success recruiting the Ottawas and Chippewas of Michigan to come to Prophetstown, these two tribes showed a particular susceptibility to European diseases. Maladies such as influenza spread rapidly where large numbers of Indians grouped together with scarce supplies such as at Prophetstown. Many Ottawas and Chippewas who did come to Prophetstown blamed Tecumseh's brother Tenskwatawa, the Indian religious leader known as the Prophet, for the death of their kinsmen. They accused the Prophet of poisonings and witchcraft and opted to leave the settlement with many misgivings about the Confederacy.³⁹

The Miamis, Delawares, and Potawatamis initially seemed like the most favorable recruitment targets for Tecumseh. White settlement and land purchases threatened these eastern tribes, who had been the most involved in earlier battles against the Americans. However, the Delawares had already sold much of their original land in Ohio and moved onto land loaned to them by the Miamis. In return for the gratitude of the Miamis, some Delaware chiefs attempted to sell their newly received land to the Americans. After protests from the Miamis, a meeting convened at the American post of Vincennes. After lavishing gifts and thousands of dollars on the Miamis, Delawares, and Potawatamis in attendance, the Americans recognized many Miami land claims and convinced the Indians to sell significant portions of land for increased annuities.⁴⁰ This decision only increased the healthy annuities already received by the Miamis, which outnumbered other tribes by thousands of dollars.⁴¹

Tecumseh also had trouble with the Potawatomi tribal leader Main Poc, whose role as a spiritual leader with powerful medicine presented a challenge to Tenskwatawa. Main Poc, an alcoholic, refused to abandon his drinking habits or follow Tenskwatawa's calls for peace between the tribes.⁴² Although the Potawatomis eventually did join Tecumseh's Confederacy, the rivalry between Main Poc and Tenskwatawa posed a constant limitation to the relations between the two sides.

Not surprisingly, the Delawares and other Ohio chiefs were eager to sell their lands. Their Ohio homeland was sandwiched in the middle of the US-British conflict. Whenever the seemingly unavoidable war between the Americans and British began, any village in Ohio would be directly in the path of destruction, regardless of their allegiance. Even the renowned Shawnee warlord Blue Jacket feared this reality. "The smell of war unsettled [Blue Jacket]. Both Greenville and his own village on the Detroit River would be directly in the path of any American armies marching north from Kentucky or Ohio to the Canadian border."⁴³ The tribes of Ohio had every incentive to move west in an attempt to avoid the devastation of a white man's war.

Tecumseh incidentally facilitated the westward migration of the Ohio tribes by fervently supporting the concept of the joint ownership of land by all Indian tribes. He and the Prophet "organized a combination of all the Indian tribes... to establish a principle that the lands should be considered common property."⁴⁴ If the tribes accepted Tecumseh's policy of joint ownership, then the Delawares were justified in moving west from their endangered homes

³⁷ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 119.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 119.

⁴⁰ Harvey Lewis Carter, *The Life and Times of Little Turtle: First Sagamore of the Wabash* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 175.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴² Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 108.

⁴³ Sugden, 159.

⁴⁴ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 132.

in Ohio. If they held an equal claim to the lands in the west, why would they not choose to move their villages out of harm's way? However, Tecumseh could never convince all the tribes or the United States to adhere to his second major policy: "[no Indian land shall be] sold without the consent of all."⁴⁵ Tribal chiefs continued to sell land to the Americans in search of annuities, gifts, and safer, more abundant lands to the west.

Unfortunately for Tecumseh, the Americans continued to make treaties with the Indians despite his declarations. This predicament resulted from the lack of a universal Indian voice. Tecumseh and other young warrior chiefs constantly clashed with the older "government chiefs." Historically, village chiefs and headmen ruled most tribes during times of peace, but power transferred to the younger warriors in wartime. However, in the words of White, "the Revolution had diminished the power of chiefs and increased that of the warriors and war leaders. And in the hazy half war-half peace that followed the Revolution, neither chiefs nor war leaders could restore political order to the villages nor assert uncontested leadership."⁴⁶

In an attempt to regain their former power, many government chiefs turned to the United States. In return for signing treaties and selling land, "federal Indian agents allowed these chiefs to distribute the annuity payments, which reinforced the old chiefs' position of leadership within their tribes."⁴⁷ Even former warriors such as Little Turtle of the Miamis, who had in the past dealt crushing blows to the US military at Harmar's Defeat and St. Clair's Defeat, pursued a policy of accommodation towards the Americans. After the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, Little Turtle and other older chiefs favored the "civilization" of the Indians in hope that they might live in harmony with the whites. These chiefs remained unconvinced to turn against the Americans despite a "major effort on the part of Tecumseh and his British backers to win support from the old chiefs of the tribes who had, for the most part, opposed a militant policy toward the United States."⁴⁸

Monetary compensation from the Americans also prevented tribes from siding with Tecumseh. Most of the tribes near to the American border received gifts from the United States, which dissuaded the tribes from seeking military action. On the other hand, the tribes most willing to fight inhabited the farther west regions such as Illinois and Wisconsin. According to Edmunds, when Tecumseh "rode west across the prairies to meet with the Sacs, Foxes, and Winnebagos...he found willing recipients for his offers of an anti-American confederacy."⁴⁹ Unlike the eastern tribes, "many leaders among these Illinois tribes gave tacit approval to Tecumseh's plans, and his speeches before their council fires seemed to arouse the younger warriors to a fever pitch."⁵⁰ Although American expansion threatened the western tribes the least, these tribes were the most eager to take up arms. Western tribes did not receive the large annuities and presents from the Americans that the eastern tribes received. White reasons that, "Because most of these groups had not signed the Treaty of Greenville or made cessions to the United States, their chiefs initially received no annuities and therefore did not serve as a buffer against the anger of the young men."⁵¹ The isolated groups' willingness to fight demonstrated the pro-American biases that resulted from annuities and presents.

Tecumseh persistently searched for new recruits for his Confederacy. Not satisfied with simply visiting tribes in the Old Northwest, he expanded his search into the Southern states and possibly as far east as the Iroquois tribes in New York. Tecumseh likely travelled in August 1811 and met with the Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Creeks for several months.⁵² However, these recruiting trips provided little benefit and actually brought the Confederacy's growing momentum to a sudden halt by exposing a fundamental weakness; Tecumseh attempted to unite tribes that were traditionally hostile to each other. The southern tribes even accused some of the warriors accompanying Tecumseh of displaying scalps of southern Indians in their homes.⁵³

In the spring of 1810, the Confederacy began to build momentum. The most recent Treaty of Fort Wayne greatly angered many Indians, and hundreds of warriors arrived at Prophetstown.⁵⁴ Among the growing number of followers were the Potowatomis led by Main-Poc, Kickapoos, Sacs and Foxes from western Illinois, younger Shawnees and younger members of the Ohio tribes disenchanted with Blue Jacket and Little Turtle.⁵⁵ Although Tecumseh believed the Confederacy would eventually grow strong enough to ward off the Americans, he knew they had not yet

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁶ White, 435.

⁴⁷ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 89.

⁴⁸ Carter, 226.

⁴⁹ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 120.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵¹ White, 511.

⁵² Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 219.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁴ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 125.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

mustered the full might of the tribes. Before setting off to meet with the southern tribes, he urged his brother Tenskwatawa to avoid any confrontation with the Americans. Unmoved by Tecumseh's warning, Tenskwatawa decided to make a stand against the "Long Knives."⁵⁶

The Demise of the Confederacy

In October 1811, both William Henry Harrison and Tenskwatawa sought to provoke a conflict between the Americans and the Indians. As an American army marched toward Prophetstown, the Prophet dispatched a war party to Fort Harrison to "remain quietly in the vicinity of the post and to ambush any soldiers who wandered into the woods."⁵⁷ The Prophet, dismayed when William Henry Harrison accepted his flag of truce once the American army reached Prophetstown, opted for a surprise attack on Harrison the following day. The defeat dealt a devastating blow to the Confederacy; the Americans razed Prophetstown and forced the surviving Indians to flee.⁵⁸ The Indians had confronted the United States army on their home soil; however, they had done so without their full military contingent of tribes and against the advice of their war leader. Tenskwatawa had squandered a golden opportunity.

The Americans had known for years about Tecumseh's difficulties in recruiting many Indian tribes, and their victory at Tippecanoe solidified their position of strength over Tecumseh's Confederacy. However, the Indian movement persevered. The Indians had never escaped the shadow of their alliance with the British, and the Battle of Tippecanoe forced the tribesmen to fight on British terms even more than in the past. The Indians still fervently hoped to obtain the decisive victory they had sought for decades that would halt the American advance.

Along with their dependence on the British, their style of warfare lessened the Indians' ability to obtain a decisive victory. The high value placed on European goods due to the trade imbalance undoubtedly affected the Indian warriors. After victories, Indian warriors often plundered European goods, scalped their victims, and then returned to their villages, thus negating any potential lasting strategic victories. In the battle of Fort Meigs in May of 1813, the Indians scored a great military victory over an American army commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William Dudley. Edmunds recounts the result of the battle, "The capture of Dudley's boats had proven an extra bonus. The vessels were loaded with provisions, and in the aftermath of the victory the Indians plundered large quantities of weapons and clothing. Burdened with their new-found wealth, the Indians began to desert the encampment...[within 3 days] most of the warriors had departed."⁵⁹ After the Indians deserted, they had no way to retain or increase the military advantage provided by the victory. White concurs, "Warriors...sought to fight and then return home. After a battle, decisive or not, Indian forces melted away. Time was on the Americans' side. They did not have to win battles; they only had to avoid disastrous defeats."⁶⁰

Victories over the Americans became increasingly scarce for the Indians. The growing number of opportunistic chiefs appearing in Indian camps compounded the problem. Despite his apparent support of the alliance between Tecumseh's Confederacy and the British, the Wyandot chief Walk-in-the-Water "secretly informed the American messengers that he was willing to abandon both the British and Tecumseh...[he] anticipated an American invasion of Canada, and if such a campaign occurred he intended to support the stronger side."⁶¹ With an increasing number of chiefs unwilling to commit themselves, sustaining the Confederacy became impossible.

Unfortunately for Tecumseh, the disastrous American defeat that had become impossible to gain was what he needed the most. The War of 1812 forced Tecumseh to join with British forces in Canada, far north of the Indians' homeland in the Old Northwest. Every American victory over the Indian-British forces dimmed the prospect of a decisive Indian triumph. The British withdrawal shook the loyalty of even the most steadfast chiefs and compelled Tecumseh to retreat farther into Canada and away from the Indian homeland. Led by Main Poc, large numbers of Potawatomis, Sacs, Foxes, Ottawas, and Chippewas crossed over into Michigan and seized American property while awaiting the outcome of the coming battle between the British and Americans.⁶²

Indian sacrifices in battles against the Americans in Canada were made in vain. Tecumseh's warriors in Canada fought in a foreign land under British commanders in a white man's war. The battles afforded the British generals incredible influence over the Indians. Edmunds discusses the differences in goals between the Indians and the British in the War of 1812, "The concept of remaining on the defensive troubled [Tecumseh]. He had joined with the British not to defend Canada but to secure permanent tenancy of Indian lands in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois... Unlike the British, the

⁵⁶ R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 106.

⁵⁷ Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 107.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁹ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 194.

⁶⁰ White, 455.

⁶¹ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 201.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 207.

Indians were fighting for their homelands. If the war remained a stalemate, they would lose. Tecumseh needed a series of decisive victories if the Indians were to dictate terms to the Americans.”⁶³

Unfortunately for Tecumseh, the British alliance failed him in the end. He could not achieve the victory that he hoped could be gained with British support, and he fell on October 5, 1813, in the Battle of the Thames. Despite the retreat of the British, “Tecumseh and his warriors fought back valiantly, but in the ensuing battle Tecumseh fell, with a mortal gunshot wound in his chest. Demoralized the Indians slowly disengaged from their enemy... The Battle of the Thames was over. Tecumseh was dead. The Indian movement had ended.”⁶⁴

The Americans wasted no time in harvesting the demise of Tecumseh’s Confederacy. The Confederacy was constantly under the bounds of the trade imbalance that had existed for over a century prior to Tecumseh’s birth. The Indians’ need for arms, ammunition, and all other varieties of European wares compelled them to consistently seek their historic alliance with Britain, despite the backhandedness of the British. The existence of this dependent alliance, coupled with Indian mistakes, disallowed the Indians from ever confronting the Americans with the full force of the Confederacy on the Indians’ native soil. Unfortunately for Tecumseh, the factors working against his Confederacy were too prevalent even for his remarkable leadership abilities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the British and the Americans, as well as the French before them, saw one primary goal to be gained from the Indians: keeping them from allying with the other side. The British did not strive to keep Tecumseh within their fold because of the economic benefits of trade or their desire for a long-lasting alliance. Instead, they simply wanted to avoid the possibility of a dangerous Indian-American alliance or, even worse, a much larger and increasingly powerful United States encompassing all of the western lands. The Americans sought the same goal but from the opposite perspective.

The great benefit inherent in Indian alliances, which brought Indian affairs to the forefront of the politics of the Western nations for decades, was the same force that led to the ultimate downfall of Tecumseh’s Confederacy. After the War of 1812, British power in the New World and the European rivalry that had in North America for centuries ceased to exist. Consequently, the need for a buffer between two large rival nations disappeared and maintaining amicable relations with members of the old Indian Confederacy lost its previous value. Tecumseh’s dream of an Indian Confederacy would never be realized.

⁶³ Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership*, 194.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.