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Black Hawk War: The White Man's Acceleration to the West

Introduction

The Black Hawk War (August to April 1832) was a defining event in the establishment of the United States of America today. The events, actors, and historical processes of The Black Hawk War directly correlate with the evolution of a 'traditional' American identity encased in domestic violence and expansionist ideology. The war was a short conflict with a long-lasting bearing on all Native American tribes. The loss of native ancestral land to the United States government led to an increase in White settlements supporting the expansionist directive of the U.S. In response to governmental expansionism, Native tribes and their leaders had to gauge how to handle the potential removal of their people. In this conflict, the historical leader Black Hawk chose to lead his people to fight against the U.S. government, even when aware they were outnumbered. In search of a compromise with the U.S., other Native tribes in the Midwest chose diplomacy to curtail settlers' encroachment—but failed as well. Native Americans' losses, both diplomatically and at war, as in the case of the Black Hawk War, enabled White settlers to expand across the Midwest of the United States. In contrast to the idea of *Playing Indian*, in which Philip Deloria analyses the complex relationship among White Americans learning to become 'natives' from American Indians during the early days of the Republic, this paper shows that by the mid-1800s 'playing Indian' was no longer a necessity for an American identity.¹ The Black Hawk War is a testament to how White Americans stopped 'playing Indians' and sought their removal and defeat.

Black Hawk: A Young Warrior

Black Hawk was a fiery and great Native American warrior. At a young age, Black Hawk witnessed his Sauk tribe's cultural transformation from an independent nation to a nation dependent on their relation to white men. The culture of the Sauk partially changed because of the growing economic influence of White settlers since the Sauk became reliant on Whites to trade and buy fur from their tribe.

1 Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Through the years, as his culture changed, Black Hawk understood himself as a defender of not only his village but of the tribal traditions as well. Black Hawk was born to be a warrior. By age fifteen, he had already displayed the skills of an astute warrior, including planning and coordinating many attacks on their enemies. As noted by Antoine Le Claire, Black hawk “and his band killed many Che-mo-ka-ma (white men), as well as many Indians of other tribes and massacred whole families in Illinois.”² Black Hawk saw himself as the defender of the village and tribal traditions for his people. Black Hawk’s actions throughout his life proved his ability to be a great leader. Black Hawk tended to look backward, to favor long-established traditions and practices rather than accommodate the present. Playing a significant role in two major wars also helped Black Hawk to become a leader amongst his tribe.

The assassination of his father marked him as a tribe’s leader. In 1800, Black Hawk sought to avenge the murder of his father. To do so, he organized a group of men to attack the Cherokee tribes for killing his father.³ At the time of his father’s death, Black Hawk’s father was engaged in battle with the Cherokee. During this fight, Black Hawk’s father, the tribe’s medicine man, was mortally wounded succumbing to his injuries. His death allowed young Black Hawk to take the role of medicine man in the tribe.⁴ After the Cherokee killed his father, Black Hawk announced that he “now fell heir to the great medicine bag of my forefathers, which had belonged to my father.”⁵ His rise to the tribal position of medicine man created a motivated warrior who impressed other warriors on the battlefield. By 1800, Black Hawk participated in frequent raids central to the continuity of his tribe’s way of life. He led war parties against other tribes, including the Ottawa, Kaskaskia, Osage tribes and intruding White settlers.⁶ He was known for not only celebrating his tribe’s victories on the battlefield but also for honoring and mourning those who died during the conflict.⁷

The United States Government and the Sauk Nation

Tensions between the Sauk nation and the United States Government predate their first contact. Over his early lifetime, Black Hawk developed amicable relationships with the Spanish and the French before the United

- 2 Antoine Le Claire, “Reminiscences of Black Hawk, by People Who Knew Him,” *The Burlington* (Iowa) Hawk-Eye, March 24, 1907, 7.
- 3 Roger L. Nichols, *Black Hawk and the Warriors Path* (Malden: MA, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2017), 3.
- 4 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 3.
- 5 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 1.
- 6 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 18.
- 7 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 1.

States purchased the New Orleans Territory and became the primary country to influence the region.⁸ The French and Spanish traveled to St. Louis to trade fairly with the Sauk tribe. Both sides respected and trusted each other. The Sauks relied on their fur trade to better their economy and for the purchase of guns. Black Hawk trusted the Spaniards since the Spaniards tended to favor the Sauk tribe over their enemies, the Osage tribe. The United States, on the other hand, favored the Osage since the U.S. had more trading routes and posts with the Osage than the Sauk. As a result, the Sauk felt at an economic disadvantage in relation to their competitors and at odds with the United States. To avoid any problems, the United States government sought to bridge the relationship between the Sauks and the Osages. They tried so by encouraging both tribes to sign a treaty of peace with the United States. This peace treaty protected U.S. commercial interests and trade while placing both tribes in a state of dependency on U.S. trade such as the 1808 Osage treaty and the Treaty of Portage Des Sioux. This resulted in the ability of Black Hawk and Osage chief's' freedom to travel to the East coast cities such as Philadelphia and New York City, a small but willing attempt by the United States to generate better relations with both tribes.⁹

Nevertheless, regardless of the relationship between Black Hawk and the U.S., other Sauk continued killing pioneers, settlers, and hunters, infuriating the Sauk and Mesquakie tribes. The U.S. demanded justice against tribe members who killed innocent civilians. The tribes refused to do so, and additionally, threatened with war. As a result, the U.S. government stopped trading with the Sauk because they did not want the Sauk to have the ability to trade for guns or gunpowder.¹⁰

U.S. Expansionism and Native Tribes in the Midwest

The United States expansionist project disrupted its relationship with the Fox, Sauk, and Mesquakie tribes while invoking fear and violence from these tribes. The U.S acquisition of Louisiana Territory in 1803 led to their first extensive contact with the expanding American nation as it encroached on Indian land. American pioneers demanded that the government remove westward native tribes around the Great lakes, Mississippi.¹¹ In response to these demands, the U.S government devised ways to trick or force Native tribes among them Black Hawk's tribe into relinquishing their land.

8 Le Claire, "Reminiscences of Black Hawk", 1.

9 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 27.

10 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 27.

11 Michael John Witgen, *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 41.

On one occasion, the tribal council of the Sauk, Fox, and Mesquakie tribes sent a small delegation composed of minor chiefs to St. Louis to attempt to negotiate the increasing expansion of the Whites into native lands with the Americans and avoid war.¹² This decision cost the tribes greatly. The negotiations went awry and many of the young chiefs were detained. Tribal chiefs saw it as one of their duties to seek the release of their tribesmen and to keep the peace. The United States military seized the issue as a chance to achieve the U.S. unstated goal to take a land cession from the Sauk and Mesquakie tribes.¹³ The U.S. Military negotiated a treaty promising 1,000 dollars for fifty million acres of tribal land known as the Treaty of St. Louis (1804). The representatives of these Native tribes did not understand the treaty, nor did they have the power of their tribe to sign these agreements. Native Americans from the Sauk, Fox, and Mesquakies tribes felt misinformed and tricked by the United States' expansionist goals.

Black Hawk was angered, as were the rest of the members of the local tribes covering the fifty million acres signed over to the United States. To these events, Black Hawk noted, "I leave it to the people of the United States to say whether our nation was properly represented in this treaty, or whether we received fair compensation for the extent of the country ceded by those four individuals. I could say much about this treaty, but I will not at this time. It has been the origin of all our difficulties."¹⁴ Black Hawk felt that the United States government unfairly misrepresented his tribe in the St. Louis Treaty. This misrepresentation continued to create a hostile relationship between Sauks and settlers for the next twenty-seven years.

Broken Promises, Broken Alliances

The United States failed to uphold its responsibilities of economically aiding the tribes included in the Treaty of St. Louis. This failure led to the starvation of Native Americans. American expansionist ideology and Indian resentment pushed the Sauk, Mesquakies, and Fox warriors to join the British in the 1812 War. Indians and British authorities began to build trade relations in 1811, partly because of the U.S.'s inability to assist the native tribes in their economic pursuits. The Treaty of St. Louis stated that "the United States [would], at a convenient time, establish a trading house, or factory, where the individuals of the said tribes [could] be supplied with goods at a more reasonable rate than they have been accustomed to procure them."¹⁵ The failure to honor the treaty while cutting off trade from Black Hawk pushed

12 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 27.

13 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 33.

14 Frank Stevens, *Black Hawk War Including a Preview of Black Hawk's Life* (Chicago: Self-Published, 1903), 32.

15 United States, Congress, *The Treaty of Greenville, August 3, 1795*. 1919.

his allied tribes to seek help from the British. To worsen U.S.-Indian relations, poor weather conditions killed crops which caused malnutrition among men, women, and children of the Fox, Sauks, and Mequakies tribes.¹⁶

The socio-economic and political relationship between the Sauk, Fox, and Mesquakie tribes (commonly known as the British Band or simply the Band) with the United States began to downward spiral immediately after the signing of the Treaty of St. Louis and continued until 1832 when the Black Hawk War began. Around 1811, rumors reached St. Louis that the Sauk and Mesquakie leaders had sent a speech with wampum to the Kickapoos people, asking that tribe to join them in a war against the pioneers, who were already filtering into Illinois.¹⁷ Settlers began to fear that the Sauk, Fox, and Mesquakie were planning a violent massacre of the pioneers. Kickapoo reported that the Sauk emissaries rode around their village dragging an American Flag from the tail of their horses.¹⁸ This display of aggression increased tension between the Band and the settlers encouraging the United States to remove the tribes from their lands. In 1811, the United States tried to negotiate with the Native American tribes around the Great Lakes area a neutrality stance in the British and United States conflict.

The United States hoped the Native American tribes around the Great Lakes would not become allies of the British in the war against them. However, Black Hawk and his followers refused to stay neutral. This was not a surprise since U.S. had previously failed to fulfill its treaty promises, such as failing to send crops and money to them in exchange for fifty million acres of land. On the other hand, the British had helped them acquire guns, grains, and furs and provided them with food when the tribes suffered from malnutrition and starvation. Black Hawk, in his autobiography, stated, "They (the Americans) made fair promises but never fulfilled them,"¹⁹ the failed promises upheld Black Hawk's logic to fight against them in war, coupled with the increasing numbers of settlers moving onto their land. In 1812, Black Hawk and his men joined the British. The United States publicly cast Native Americans, specifically Black Hawk, as traitors because of their role and alliance in the War of 1812.²⁰ Black Hawk fought in several battles against the United States, gaining the admiration of the British. The American public reaffirmed the nickname Black Hawk and his followers as the British Band, following their support for the British.

16 "Historical Indians: Black Hawk (Sauk)," *Central States Archaeological Journal* 16, no. 4 (October 1969), 166.

17 Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, 22.

18 Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, 26.

19 Black Hawk, *Black Hawk (Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak) an Autobiography* (University of Illinois Press, 1974). 28.

20 United States Congress, *The Treaty of Greenville, August 3, 1795*.

The British capitalized on the failed promises made by the United States to the Sauk. While most of Sauk wanted to stay neutral during this conflict between the British and the United States, some felt they had no choice but to fight.²¹ The British called Black Hawk “General” and gave him medals, new clothes, a British flag, and new weapons to go and fight the Americans. This increased tension between settlers and Native Americans because the Sauk flew a British flag over their land to express their anti-American sentiment. Finally, the British had promised to reinstate the 1795 Greenville Treaty that protected the United States and many tribes located around the Great Lakes. This treaty granted many Native American tribes safe territory around Ohio and the Great Lakes.²² This dream did not come to be as the British lose the war to American armed forces.

War of 1814 Aftermath: Toward the Black Hawk War

The Treaty of Ghent in 1814 led to more skepticism against the United States from Black Hawk’s followers. The Treaty of Ghent created national borders between the United States and Canada, and the British gave back all conquered land.²³ For Black Hawk losing this war meant losing the land of his tribe in the Midwest to White expansionism. An incredible number of more than 200 treaties were forced on tribes, establishing nearly a hundred reservations and relocating native tribes west of the Mississippi River.²⁴ The British Band was outraged with the loss of land; as a result, they continued to raid and kill settlers and hunters trespassing on their land.

After the 1812 War, the need for additional farmland forced the United States to assert its resources as a nation to assist settlers wanting to move west, making land concerns critical for the government. The rising prices of agricultural goods pulled settlers westward to find available land and became farmers.²⁵ In this effort, United States newspapers further painted and expressed a negative image of Native Americans to undermine any backlash from settlers acquiring native lands. White captivity narratives began to emphasize the violence, savagery, and laziness of Natives.²⁶ Some cartoons

21 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 3.

22 United States, Congress, *The Treaty of Greenville*, August 3, 1795.

23 United States, Congress, *The Treaty of Ghent*. 1814. December 24, 1814.

24 Donald Fixico, “Native Nations Contend with the Legacy of the War of 1812” (U.S. National Park Service). Accessed, July 20, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-legacy-of-the-war-of-1812-in-tribal-communities.htm>.

25 *Ontario Grain Farmer*. “The Big Picture: Farming and the War of 1812.” *Ontario Grain Farmer*, 5 June 2017. <https://ontariograinfarmer.ca/2012/09/01/the-big-picture-farming-and-the-war-of1812/>.

26 George Catlin, “Black Hawk and Followers in Balls and Chains (1796-1872).” National Gallery of Art. Accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.50403.html>.

of that time depicted the uprooting of natives from their lands to expand westward. "The Indian is granted subject status only as he becomes subject to white representation."²⁷ Black Hawk's involvement with the British in the War of 1812 intensified the negative publicity for his Band as more Americans viewed them as traitors and savages.

The Sauk and the United States had reasons to seek peace with each other before the events leading to the Black Hawk War. Black Hawk and his people faced starvation and sickness from the lack of resources promised by the U.S. government and the inability to grow crops in Iowa because of a harsh winter. These factors forced the British Band to return to Illinois territory to seek refuge with the Winnebago people. The U.S. reasoned that going to war with Native Americans had enormous financial costs, even if the war was short.²⁸ The U.S. would have to train and supply soldiers with weapons, which by the time the Black Hawk War started in 1832, there had been many lengthy and costly wars against Native Americans. U.S. forces took the British Band act of coming back to Illinois as an act of War in 1832 and violence against White settlers.²⁹ War could have been avoided; however, the British Band had built up reputation of warmongers. On the other hand, United States' violation of treaties that promised money and goods not given to Black Hawk's tribe among others did not inspire trust.

Black Hawk and the Black Hawk War

Black Hawk tried but failed to form alliances with other Native tribes to face the U.S. armed forces. A couple of days before the war began, Black Hawk turned to the Winnebago for help in their resistance to what they saw as white expansionism. The Winnebago initially urged Black Hawk to cross the Mississippi, but once the Winnebago chiefs realized U.S. interference was inevitable, they refused to aid and feed Black Hawks people.³⁰ As Black Hawk's rival Chief in the Sauk tribe announced, the Sauk and Fox supported Black Hawk's pro-war efforts to defend their territory in Illinois from the U.S. government. Black Hawk looked for neighboring Indian tribes to support him in the War. He visited the Kickapoo, Potawatomi, and Winnebago tribes.³¹ Black Hawk's inability to form alliances with neighboring tribes from other tribes helped aid settlers' ability to expand to new lands since there was no sizeable native resistance attribute. "With no provisions and no allies, Black

27 Autobiography: Life of Black Hawk Sauk-Sulattle." *Black Hawk Native American Writer and Storyteller*. <http://nativeamericanwriters.com/blackhawk.html>.

28 Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*, 30.

29 A. K. Fielding, *Rough Diamond: The Life of Colonel William Stephen Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton's Forgotten Son* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 50.

30 Nichols, *Black Hawk*, 64.

31 Stevens, *The Black Hawk War*", 35.

Hawk decided in mid-May that the Band should return peacefully down the Rock to the Mississippi.³² Black Hawk planned to move his followers back across the Mississippi but was faced with an armed military.

The Black Hawk War devastated the British Band as many of their people died in battle. Black Hawk had an estimated 1,100 followers, including women and children, who were at the front of this war supporting Black Hawk. The United States had 5,979 troops in the Black Hawk War.³³ The first battle in the war occurred as the U.S government received information that the British Band was coming back into Illinois. U.S officials feared that Black Hawk was returning to seek revenge on White settlers, which provoked the battle of Stillman's Run. Major Stillman took two hundred and seventy-five soldiers to an area known today as Stillman's Valley. Black Hawk and his fifty warriors successfully fought off and made the soldiers retreat. Nevertheless, the British Band was vastly outnumbered, and his people were very weak, which granted the importance of allying to help achieve their goals. In all, Black Hawk lost 500 of his followers, including women and children to U.S. forces and other rival Indian tribes that formed an alliance against Black Hawk with the U.S.

The Battle of Bad Axe was the war's last and most devastating battle. U.S forces had cornered Black Hawk and his people. U.S forces had steamboats on the Mississippi river and soldiers on foot.³⁴ When Black Hawk and his followers tried to escape, they tried to cross safely the river into Iowa. However, Sioux Indians slaughtered them once they got to shore including the women and children.³⁵ Black Hawk escaped and sought shelter up north. A year later U.S forces captured him. This battle was detrimental to the Indian resistance against white expansionism. Since no more tribes allied and fought along Black Hawk, the lack of a united front made the U.S. government and settlers less fearful of further native resistance. Other tribes aimed to stop white expansion diplomatically instead of using violence or aggression to no avail.

In the aftermath of the Black Hawk War, the United States used the events of the Black Hawk War to continue to force Natives off their land. Black Hawk was taken to St. Louis barracks as a prisoner, along with other captured Native Americans. Andrew Jackson sent Black Hawk across eastern U.S. cities as a

32 "The Black Hawk War Phases." Northern Illinois University Digital Library. <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/illinois/lincoln/topics/blackhawk/phases>.

33 National Archives and Records Administration, "Military Service during the Black Hawk War, 1831-1832." Archives.org. Accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/military/indian-wars/black-hawk-war-1831-1832.pdf>.

34 Wisconsin Historical Society, Battle of Bad Axe, 3 Aug. 2012. <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1604>.

35 Wisconsin Historical Society, Battle of Bad Axe, 3 Aug. 2012. <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1604>.

public spectacle. Black Hawk became President Jackson's symbol of savagery, but a defeated one since "Indian savagery," as represented by Black Hawk, could no longer threaten the civilization of America and its right to colonize the North American continent internally.³⁶

Conclusion

The Black Hawk War enabled the continuous expansion of the white settlers across the Midwest. The Black Hawk War ended Indian reservations in Illinois, including the lands of tribes who had helped the United States against Black Hawk. The end of the Black Hawk War afforded settlers more land without resistance from Native Americans. Native tribes in Iowa, such as the Dakotas, Potawatomi, Winnebago, and Chippewa, eventually ceded their land and were removed from their land shortly after the Black Hawk War. The Natives' defeat essentially ended all Native American resistance east of the Mississippi River and opened up the rest of Illinois and Wisconsin to U.S. expansionism.³⁷

36 Autobiography: Life of Black Hawk Sauk-Sulattle." *Black Hawk Native American Writer and Storyteller*. <http://nativeamericanwriters.com/blackhawk.html>.

37 Black Hawk, *Life of Black Hawk, or Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak: Dictated by Himself* (LaVergne, TN: Simon & Brown, 2018).

