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Inter-tribal Disunity: An Analysis of Inter-tribal Conflict During the Black Hawk War of 1832

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Dr. Noeleen McIlvenna

Dr. McIlvenna notes that Megan did a wonderful job of unravelling a complex story with clarity and great analysis. She started early and was willing to work through multiple drafts.
During the spring of 1832, approximately eleven hundred Native Americans from the Sauk and Fox tribes defied an explicit order by the United States federal government to leave their homelands in Illinois and settle on the western banks of the Mississippi River. Under the leadership of the courageous Sauk warrior Black Hawk, the Sauk and Fox nations, known as the British Band, attempted peaceful resistance against the federal government’s expansionist policies. However, a series of violent events quickly escalated Black Hawk’s controlled demonstration of resolve into a full-scale war against the United States during the summer of 1832.¹

When examining the Black Hawk War of 1832, modern historians and scholars have primarily focused on tensions between Native Americans and the United States, Black Hawk’s character and celebrity, the United States federal government’s Native American removal policies, and the numerous skirmishes and battles of the Black Hawk War. However, there are few historians who have extensively analyzed and written on the impact of inter-tribal conflict during the Black Hawk War. A series of events prior to the summer of 1832 heightened inter-tribal conflicts between the Sauk, Fox, Menominee, Winnebago, and Santee Sioux tribes. These pre-existing rivalries led to intense betrayal and violence among differing tribes during the Black Hawk War of 1832. Additionally, the United States government exacerbated tensions between the various tribes, which thwarted the pan-Indian revitalization movement and resulted in inter-tribal treachery, violence, and death. Thus, inter-tribal hostilities, heightened by tribal recruitment and monetary bribes from the United States government, played a significant role in the eventual demise of Black Hawk and his followers.

Black Hawk maintained that the Black Hawk War of 1832 originated from the treaty of 1804, which was signed by various members of the Sauk and Fox tribes. The treaty of 1804 ceded an extensive amount of land to the United States in exchange for money.

The total extent of relinquished land included large sections of eastern Missouri, western Illinois, and southeastern Wisconsin. However, numerous Sauk warriors, including Black Hawk, insisted that Quashquame, the Sauk who signed the treaty, had no authorization to do so. Because of this, Black Hawk refused to acknowledge the treaty as binding. He further believed the Americans had been dishonest and evasive with Quashquame concerning the treaty and amount of land ceded to the United States. In his book *The Black Hawk War of 1832*, historian Patrick J. Jung writes that as a result of the Machiavellian 1804 treaty, the Sauks and Foxes “developed an intense distrust of federal officials and the documents they bore.” The treaty of 1804 also resulted in heightened tribal tensions and the inevitable fracturing of the Sauk and Fox nations. A significant number of bitter members from each tribe, including Black Hawk, joined the pan-Indian alliance headed by the Shawnee chief Tecumseh and his brother, the Shawnee Prophet, who temporarily united the disparate tribes of the trans-Appalachian West with the British against the United States during the War of 1812.2

Jung writes that following the War of 1812, the victorious United States began to strengthen and expand “its military presence in the Mississippi Valley and upper Great Lakes.”3 By doing so, the United States sought to control and mediate the growing inter-tribal conflict between various American Indian nations. Lengthy and bitter rivalries between the Northwestern tribes had resulted in frequent murderous attacks, despite the War Department’s attempts to organize peace councils at Prairie Du Chien, in present day Wisconsin. Ironically, these violent attacks were primarily due to the United States government’s blatant disregard for previously signed treaties. According to distinguished author and historian Ronald Satz, the federal government failed to undertake “any long range planning concerning the location of a permanent home for the Indians of the Old Northwest.”

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3 Ibid., 33.
Native American tribes were continuously dislocated from their lands and forced onto lands inhabited by rival tribes. Consequently, the United States federal government’s refusal to adhere to the treaties’ binding contracts often resulted in excessive inter-tribal hostility.⁴

Differing stances concerning the United States government’s Native American removal policies also played a significant role in heightening tensions between various members of the Sauk and Fox tribes. In an article titled “Prelude to Disaster: The Course of Indian-White Relations Which led to the Black Hawk War of 1832,” author Anthony Wallace discusses the complicated power hierarchies between members within the Sauk and Fox tribes. He writes that there were particular members within the tribes, primarily peace chiefs, who favored cooperation towards the U.S federal government’s removal policies. For example, Keokuk, a well-known Sauk leader and Black Hawk’s lifelong rival, encouraged Native American cooperation with the United States while maintaining a neutral position toward Black Hawk’s resistance. However, there were also war chiefs and warriors, including Black Hawk, who favored both peaceful and violent resistance. Wallace surmises that these differing ideologies tragically resulted in apathy, betrayal, and violence among tribes during the war.⁵

Black Hawk’s tenuous relationship with Keokuk requires further examination when studying inter-tribal conflict prior to the Black Hawk War. Both Black Hawk and Keokuk were highly respected leaders and warriors throughout the Sauk and Fox nations. Thus, their differing opinions regarding how the Sauk and Fox tribes should handle the United States’ expansion policies resulted in heightened intra-tribal tensions.⁶ In his autobiography, Black Hawk recalled, “we were a divided people, forming two parties.

Keokuck being at the head of one, willing to barter our rights merely for the good opinion of the whites…I was at the head of the other party, and was determined to hold on to my village.”\(^7\) Black Hawk and his supporters also considered Keokuk’s policy of accommodation concerning the United States government an act of cowardice. In his autobiography, Black Hawk coolly observed “I looked upon him [Keokuk] as a coward, and no brave, to abandon his village to be occupied by strangers.”\(^8\)

A series of fresh problems in the 1820s played a significant role in furthering anti-American sentiment among the Northwestern tribes. In response to the 1827 Winnebago Uprising against the United States, governor Ninian Edwards requested that the federal government remove all Native Americans from Illinois ceded lands. Black Hawk and his followers, however, refused to leave their lands. After a series of standoffs between Black Hawk, his followers, and U.S. General Edmund Gaines, Black Hawk reluctantly agreed to remove himself from the eastern side of the Mississippi on June 30, 1831. A few months later, however, Black Hawk was misinformed by Napope, a “ranking civil chief of the British Band,” that the British and other Native American tribes had offered to support his cause against the United States. Emboldened by this supposed support, Black Hawk once again resolved to move his people back across the Mississippi River. In reality, Black Hawk and the British Band “were an isolated ‘village,’ abandoned by their fellow tribesmen,” and without adequate provisions.\(^9\)

The United States government responded to Black Hawk’s “acts of rebellion” by recruiting rival American Indian tribes to support their cause against Black Hawk and the British Band. For example, the United States formed a calculated alliance with the Sauks and Foxes’ sworn enemy, the Santee Sioux.

\(^8\) Black Hawk, Black Hawk Autobiography, 101.
\(^9\) Jung, Black Hawk War, 51-52, 64-66, quotation, 65; Wallace, “Prelude to Disaster,” 287.
Additionally, the United States enlisted the aid of the Mississippi River Winnebagos, who had heavily inter-married with the Sioux and were the Sioux’s allies. Consequently, the Santee Sioux and Mississippi Winnebagos possessed valuable knowledge of the land and offered crucial intelligence concerning the whereabouts of Black Hawk’s band numerous times throughout the war. It is also important to note that although the Rock River Winnebagos provided some assistance to Black Hawk’s band during the war, they also served as guides to the United States military. Thus, due to monetary bribes from the United States, it was difficult for Black Hawk and the British Band to form and maintain a trustworthy alliance with other Northwestern tribes.10

The United States further used inter-tribal hostilities to their benefit by enlisting the help of the Menominee tribe. The Menominee, Fox, and Sauk tribes possessed an incredibly complicated and tempestuous history prior to 1832. For example, on July 31, 1831, a war party consisting of approximately one hundred Fox and Sauk warriors massacred twenty-six Menominees encamped near Prairie Du Chien. The Menominee massacre was in response to the murder of fifteen Fox delegates by a party of Santee Sioux and Menominees in early May 1830. The Fox delegates had been summoned by U.S. Captain Wynkoop Warner to discuss a peaceful settlement with their enemies but were tragically massacred to atone for past offenses. The Warner incident and Menominee massacre heightened inter-tribal hostilities to such an extent that war between the Fox, Sauk, Menominee, and Sioux nations appeared inevitable. Although a full-scale war was ultimately prevented by peace councils and a United States compensatory treaty, inter-tribal hostilities continued to simmer. Additionally, relations between the Menominees, Sauks, and Foxes were so hostile that the Menominees began assisting the United States military during the Black Hawk War before their assistance was officially requested.11

11 Ibid., 48-49, 137; Wallace, “Prelude to Disaster,” 272-274.
Black Hawk, aware of the United States military’s tribal recruitments and intentions for a full-scale war, was prepared to acquiesce to the terms drawn out by the government. The federal government, however, was determined to wipe out the rebellion once and for all. Additionally, tensions were high between both the Sauk and Fox tribes and the United States. These mounting hostilities consequently led to a series of skirmishes, particularly the Battle of Stillman’s Run, which ended all hope for a peaceful settlement. On August 2, 1832, the final clash between Black Hawk’s Band and General Henry Atkinson’s forces took place. Interestingly, Black Hawk and sixty of his followers were unintentionally absent from the main slaughter. Unaware that Atkinson’s forces were only one day’s march away, Black Hawk had split from the British Band’s main body and headed north to seek refuge with the Ojibwas. The remaining members of the British Band, which included women and children, desperately attempted to escape from Atkinson’s forces and Native American allies across the Mississippi River. However, a large majority were needlessly and ruthlessly butchered by United States martial volunteers during the attempt.12

After the Battle of Bad Axe, roughly half of the original eleven hundred Indians who comprised the British Band were killed. Tragically, those who had escaped across the river were massacred by a party of recruited Sioux warriors. In his autobiography, Black Hawk sorrowfully recalled, “I found to my sorrow, that a large body of Sioux had pursued, and killed, a number of our women and children, who had got safely across the Mississippi.”13 Black Hawk denounced the actions of the Sioux by declaring “none but cowards would ever have been guilty of such cruelty, which has always been practiced on our nation by the Sioux.”14 Although the Sioux were acting at the behest of United States officials, their bitter rivalry and violent history with the Fox and Sauk nations undoubtedly contributed to the Sioux’s willing participation in the massacre.

14 Ibid.
Sadly, by the end of the Black Hawk War, only one hundred and fifty members of the British Band had survived.\textsuperscript{15}

Black Hawk was also pursued and eventually captured by the Mississippi River Winnebagos and handed over to the government for a bounty. In a letter written to F.P. Blair of the \textit{St. Louis Globe}, General Joseph M. Street reveled in the United States military’s victory over Black Hawk and the British Band. Street wrote, “Dear Sir: The Indian war is over. The celebrated leaders of the hostile Indians, Black Hawk and the Prophet, were delivered to me at this place on the 27th ultimo [\textit{of the previous month} - editor], by the Winnebagoes of my agency…I expect to receive about fifty or sixty more prisoners taken by the Indians.” General Street further revealed that during the battle of the Mississippi he enlisted a number of his Native American agents to provide personal protection from other hostile Native Americans. Thus, the Mississippi River Winnebagos’ decision to deliver Black Hawk and his remaining supporters to the United States government illustrates the importance of understanding inter-tribal conflict during the Black Hawk War. Although a large quantity of Indians resisted white expansion, bitter rivalries between tribes and monetary interests aided in the eventual demise of Black Hawk and the British Band.\textsuperscript{16}

Modern historians and scholars could argue that inter-tribal conflict played only a minor role in the Black Hawk War. After all, United States military forces heavily outnumbered Black Hawk’s band. Therefore, the United States would have been victorious regardless of inter-tribal conflict. However, if Black Hawk had been successful in evening out the playing field by uniting the Northwestern tribes, the Black Hawk War could have had a far different outcome.


Furthermore, the United States heavily relied on the Winnebagos, Menominees, and Santee Sioux for intelligence concerning the whereabouts of Black Hawk and the British Band. The United States also did not possess adequate knowledge of the unsettled Northwestern Territory. Thus, without the aid of various Native American guides and scouts, Black Hawk and his supporters could have easily evaded capture. And, in the end, it was the Mississippi River Winnebagos and not the United States who succeeded in capturing Black Hawk.\footnote{Jung, \textit{Black Hawk War}, 103, 136-137, 182.}

Inter-tribal warfare irretrievably damaged the British Band’s success in the Black Hawk War. Without the crucial support of the Northwestern tribes, resistance against the United States military was futile. Unlike Tecumseh during the War of 1812, Black Hawk was unable to unite the rivaling tribes under one pan-Indian alliance against the United States in 1832. Although various tribes, including the Chippewa and Potawatomi, sympathized with Black Hawk’s stance of resistance, they refused to openly support and join his pan-Indian movement. This was predominantly due to their belief that resistance against the United States government was a lost cause. Thus, the success of Black Hawk and the British Band to reclaim their ceded homelands was thwarted by inter-tribal divisions, monetary bribes, tribal recruitment, and the sheer martial strength of the United States.
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