

## **Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh: Blood Brothers**

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Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh were brothers and members of the Shawnee Indian tribe around the turn of the nineteenth century in early America. Although they both recognized a serious threat by the white Americans' infiltration of their land, they each had very different views on how to preserve their way of life. Tenskwatawa, on one hand, took a spiritual approach to the situation, reminding his people that the "Creator" had always provided for them, and they needed nothing more from the white man. Tecumseh, on the other hand, was a warrior and military strategist. His objective relied heavily on the strength of united Indian forces to resist the American invasion. Between Tecumseh's appeal for his people to hold their ground and Tenskwatawa's commandments to reject the American lifestyle, together the two brothers played a major role in the shaping of American history.

The message of the Shawnee Prophet, Tenskwatawa, reveals much about the tribe's traditions, spiritual beliefs, and rich culture. This message also expresses the negative view Tenskwatawa had of the new American ways. The Shawnee prophet sees white Americans as a kind of plague threatening to annihilate the Native American culture. He points to "the poison called whiskey" and the meat of the "filthy swine" to illustrate the toxic effects of American influence. He further expresses his contempt for the Americans through symbolism: "Their foods will seem to fill your empty belly, but this deceives you for food without spirit does not nourish you" (pg.3). Tenskwatawa uses the comparison of the Natives' hunting of wild game to the white man's tamed livestock as a way to portray the American lifestyle as empty and spiritually starved. Moreover, the purity of the Native blood is being contaminated, the prophet declares, by the diseases which were originally introduced to the Indians during colonization.

Tenskwatawa continues by distinguishing the “two kinds of white men.” He tells his people that the Europeans (French, British, and Spanish) are trustworthy and can be considered friends, whereas, “The Americans come from the slime of the sea . . . whose claws grab in our earth and take it from us.” (pg.3). The metaphor is designed to paint an image of white Americans as an evil creature with a powerful grip, capable of tearing the Native’s land from under them. Tenskwatawa is not speaking to his people merely to condemn the Americans but also to deliver a strong message designed to remind the Shawnee of their rich heritage and the importance of preserving their culture.

Tenskwatawa begins his talks by proclaiming that he was chosen by God to deliver this message to the people. Like Moses after descending Mount Sinai, the prophet utters the directives as he was instructed by the Creator. These commandments not only forbid drinking liquor and infidelity, they demand racial segregation and a cleansing of white corruption. He tells his people that if they choose to ignore the Great Good Spirit’s wishes, they will be punished; punishment for not obeying the word of the Spirit is, of course, death.

Aside from laying down the moral laws set forth by the Creator, Tenskwatawa proceeds to awaken his people to the great native traditions and the rapid decay of their culture as a whole. He helps them to realize how American materialism has turned them into beggars, weak and growing ever more dependent on the white man: “now a People who never had to beg for anything must beg for everything!” (pg.2). The prophet stresses that it is the “Great Good Spirit” who has always provided for them and that they must return to their traditional ways, rejecting American innovation, convenience, and luxury. This mixture of religious fear and cultural pride serves to unite the Natives spiritually and awaken them to the disintegration of their own rich culture.

While Tenskwatawa relied on his vision to unite the Native Americans, his brother, Tecumseh, took a more political approach to the unification of Natives everywhere. In Tecumseh’s Speech to William Henry Harrison regarding the 1795 Treaty of Greenville, his differing views of Indian land from that negotiated in the treaty are quickly established: “Houses are built for you to hold councils in. The Indians hold theirs in the open air.” (pg. 4). Here he opens his speech by alluding to the fact that the land itself is where they do all of their business together. Therefore, how can any one of them trade or sell any part of the land as specified in the 1795 Treaty of Greenville which gave the United States parts of the Northwest Territory? No tribe, he says, has the right to sell the land that belongs to us all. “Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as

the earth?" (pg.5). While identifying the contradictions created by this treaty, the Shawnee leader implores the general to retreat from the Indian settlement and warns him that if he does not, there will be a serious conflict.

Although Tecumseh's contempt for the Americans is apparent, he does not place the blame entirely on the white man. He acknowledges that it is the corrupted village chiefs that are selling or trading off the land independently who are to blame as well. In his speech, Tecumseh assures William Henry Harrison that any village chief caught selling or trading land to Americans will be eradicated. He then reaffirms that the land belongs to them all and cannot be used as a bartering tool by any one chief. Tecumseh also adds a word of warning to the general that if the Americans continue to manipulate and corrupt these tribes, war will break out between them which could create a hazardous situation for the white man.

Tecumseh's speech does not avoid the issue of trust. His lack of confidence in the white man is clear as he accuses the Americans of "great acts of injustice" with "no manner of regard." The Shawnee leader refers to the merciless way in which the Americans sweep the natives from their land, driving them "into the great lake [Lake Michigan]" (pg. 5). To exemplify the ruthless nature of the white man, Tecumseh uses the story of the crucifying of Jesus Christ. He reminds Americans, in a bod-ing manner, that when they nailed Jesus to the cross, they mistakenly thought it would be the end of Him. Tecumseh sees his people as being crucified by the white man with no regard for the consequences of their actions.

With the Americans moving across the continent like locusts, Tecumseh sees that the only chance the natives have at stopping this infestation is through the complete unification of all Native Americans. The "red people" must, he pleas, join together as one and claim the land as a "common and equal right" (pg.5). This means that no tribe is granted the privilege of trading or selling any section of land since it "belongs to all." This is the main point Tecumseh makes in his speech to General Harrison and seems to be the Native Americans' last chance to secure their place in the New World while preserving an endangered Indian culture.

Tecumseh's Speech to William Henry Harrison and his brother's message to the Shawnee people reveal that, by the 1810s, the relationship between American Indians and the U.S. government was extremely volatile and rapidly evaporating. The strong forces of resistance engendered by both of these Native American leaders created a barrier between the American colonies and the target of expansion to The West. Although

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Tecumseh is known as the more logical, more politically driven of the two brothers, he does not exclude religious discourse from his speech to General William Henry Harrison. Like his brother, Tecumseh credits the “Great Spirit” for his inspiration to resist the American invasion. The two Shawnee brothers may be distinguished from each other historically for their different approaches in addressing the threat of the American incursion. Yet both were fighting for the same cause with the same source of power within them.

### **Work Cited**

Message of the Shawnee Prophet, Tenskwatawa, “He Who Opens the Door,” and Tecumseh’s Speech to William Henry Harrison.