Understanding the Cherokee War

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The Cherokee Nation launched a war against its former English allies in the fall of 1759, which lasted until the fall of 1761. The complex diplomatic relationship between the English and the Cherokees led to this relatively brief period of conflict. Against the backdrop of the North American Seven Years' War between France and England, Britain's continued exploitation and condescension toward the Cherokees, and its insatiable hunger for Cherokee land led to a great bloodshed of colonists and Cherokees. An examination of the events leading to the dissolution of this once robust alliance reveals the motivations for both British and Cherokees, as well as the cultural misunderstandings that existed between the two. This in turn helps us recognize and understand the near inevitability of the Cherokee War.

Resulting from tension concerning valuable land in the Ohio River Valley, the Seven Years' War in North America (1754 to 1763) shaped the dynamics and policies for France and England. Britain gained a vast new territory, and France lost some claims in North America. During this conflict, and within the context of a variety of other Indian alliances, England utilized help from the Cherokees in numerous battles. For instance, seven hundred Cherokee warriors offered their services to John Forbes during his 1758 campaign to recapture Fort Duquesne – aid that General Braddock had disastrously scorned in 1755.[1] According to Gregory Dowd:

[1] Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 458.

> No people as independent and numerous [as the Cherokee] had been a better and more consistent friend of the British colonies. . . with gift exchanges essential to the alliance.[2]

Being one of the largest Native American groups, the Cherokees maintained a mix of an agricultural and hunter-gatherer economy, until trade with the English bound them to the acquisition of European trade goods. The first recorded contact of the British with the Cherokees occurred with De Soto's 1540 expedition to Guasili, located in the western area of North Carolina. This first contact was "chronicled as peaceful, domestic and hospitable."[3] By the 1670s and 1680s, this large group with approximately sixty towns numbered around 22,000, with 6,000 warriors located in present day Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama.[4]

In the early eighteenth century, the Cherokee Nation seemed to be organized into three separate regional clusters of villages. The Lower Towns was located in Western South Carolina, and had towns such as Keowee and Estatoe. The Middle Towns were situated in Western North Carolina, with Etchoe and Stecoe as towns, and the Overhill Towns were farthest inland along the Lower Little Tennessee, with Settico and Tellico, and the seven Chota towns. By 1730 Alexander Cuming was referring to the seven Chota villages as "Mother Towns," each with chiefs elected from matrilineal descended families.[5] The Cherokees lacked a central governing body; instead each town was organized and ruled by the two town chiefs. Whereas the peace chief took charge of the domestic affairs and the ceremonies so important to each individual town, the war chief maintained control over negotiations, alliances, and conflicts that could lead to warfare.[6] During times of conflict, the war chief's power usually exceeded that of the peace chief.

By 1761, and following a power struggle between Chota and Tellico, Lieutenant Henry Timberlake was describing Chota as the "Cherokee capital,"

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[2] Gregory Evans Dowd, "Insidious Friends," in *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750-1830*, edited by Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 114.

[3] Stanley W. Hoig, *The Cherokees and Their Chiefs: In the Wake of Empire* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 8.

[4] John Oliphant, *Peace and War on the Anglo-Cherokee Frontier: 1756-63* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 1.

[5] David Corkran, *Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740-62* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 3.

[6] Robert J. Conley, *The Cherokee Nation: A History* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2005), 6.

or "Mother Town." Chota's leader was Connecorte, or "Old Hop," and he was known as the First Beloved Man of Chota (Uku), town over which he presided for the remaining of his life.[7] Notwithstanding Chota's leadership, individual Cherokee towns had considerable independence, with each maintaining local leaders, councils meetings, and making decisions in large council houses. The dual leadership between the peace and war chiefs took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this, the peace chief commanded the respect of the people, which was based on the leader's communication skills, power of political persuasion, and wisdom. Women also held a position of respect in the affairs of the community, as they could sit in council meetings, and participate in warfare. This active political presence of women led Timberlake to remark:

> The story of the Amazons is not so great a fable as we imagined, many of the Indian women being as famous in war, and as powerful in the council.[8]

Like with many local native groups, warfare permeated the life of the Cherokees; however this warfare was different from the ones that the Europeans were used to experiencing. Inter-tribal conflict could arise from the extensive trade connections that existed among the tribes, as well as from other cultural interactions. The Cherokees, although considered relatively peaceful, had some cultural practices that previewed war, such as their rite of passage into adulthood for young men, which could only be achieved through the attainment of a war name in combat.[9] The conflicts that existed between native societies prior to the European invasion often resulted in a set of "traditional" enemies. When the British entered into this bag of mixed tribal relationships, they sometimes failed to understand these previously existing struggles. South Carolina's colonists did not seem to take these pre-existing conflicts too seriously, as they "perceived [natives] as serious threats only if they fell under the corrupting influence of another European power."[10]

Historians such as Steven J. Oatis have argued that to understand the first half of the eighteenth century, one must tackle the:

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[7] Corkran, *Cherokee Frontier,* 4.

[8] Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 55.

[9] Corkran, *Cherokee Frontier,* 6.

[10] Steven J. Oatis, *A Colonial Complex: South Carolina's Frontiers in the Era of the Yamasee War, 1680-1730* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 42.

> region-wide pattern of social and economic exploitation driven by the English South Carolinians through their successful trade, diplomatic aggression, and enslavement of racial 'others.[11]

According to Oatis, it is important to understand the exchange process not only to know how it affected the Europeans, but also to observe how it affected other native groups. Within the context of the already complex relationships among the various Southeastern native groups, the addition of the British and their desire for land created a situation in which the Cherokee nation was ultimately diminished and devastated.

When Virginians James Needham and Gabriel Arthur arrived at the Overhill villages in 1673, the Cherokee men already possessed muskets from Spanish Florida. In a relatively short time, the Cherokees became increasingly dependent on English trade goods, gradually changing their lifestyle. By the dawn of the 1700s, traders began making regular trips into Cherokee country, and by 1716, they established year-round posts, with South Carolina creating trade alliances with the Cherokees.[12] From this increased trade, South Carolina's settlers became aware of the importance of maintaining this large and powerful group as allies. By 1713, and within the context of this newly forged alliance, the Cherokees enabled South Carolina to defeat the Tuscarora Indians by providing 300 warriors.

In the eighteenth century, other types of agreements and treaties were reached between South Carolina and the Cherokees. In 1721 Cherokee chiefs from thirty-seven towns met at Charles Town with Sir Francis Nicolson, reaching an agreement on boundaries, as well as making an agreement concerning some practices of the English traders.[13] This was the first of many times the Cherokees would lose land to the English. In March 1730, when Alexander Cuming descended on his whirlwind tour of the many Cherokee towns, he demanded that the Cherokees swear allegiance to King George II. Whether he actually received what he desired is unclear, but Cuming decided that it was to his advantage to appoint an "emperor" for the Cherokees, choosing Moytoy of Tellico.[14] Those in Chota felt that the First Beloved Man should have been chosen; however, some warriors decided to take advantage of Cuming's presence to ask for a trip to London to meet King George.

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[11] Ibid., 5.

[12] Ibid., 147.

[13] Hoig, *Cherokees and Their Chiefs,* 18.

[14] Oliphant, *Peace and War,* 7.

Tassetchee, Ookounaka, later known as Chief Attakullakulla, and several other warriors departed for England by May 1730.[15] They stayed in England for four months, being entertained and celebrated by London's society, while at the same time time the Board of Trade was revealing a treaty with a series of "Articles of Friendship and Commerce," binding the Cherokees to British mercantile, military, and legal systems.[16] Following the London adventure, Attakullakulla remained loyal to the British for many years, but other Cherokees in Chota began to lean toward a friendship with the French, feeling no allegiance to Great Tellico or the Carolinian-appointed emperor. This division in loyalties ultimately led to many conflicts, as many Cherokees resented the English for presuming authority over the selection of their leaders.

Life continued to change for the Cherokees during the eighteenth century. Their desire for a variety of European goods continued to grow and to become enmeshed in their lives, with a need for daily items such as textiles and other domestic goods, as well as guns and ammunition. The deerskin trade kept Cherokee men away from their villages, and it also decreased the supply of deer for food. Along with this increased dependency on trade there were more land cessions from the Cherokees to South Carolina, as well as an increased departure from traditional Cherokee culture and social relations. It was said that before the English trade expansion "the life of the wealthiest Cherokee was almost indistinguishable from the life of the poorest."[17] The new wealth and loss of hunting grounds provoked an increased competition between the tribes, which was reflected in conflicts with the Creeks and other native groups. The Southeastern tribes also became involved in the fights between European countries for the possession of land. Adding to this situation, the Cherokees felt that the South Carolinian traders refused to treat them with respect, as they refused to understand their need for reciprocity in the giving of gifts, a significant component in the ideology of many Native American cultures.

In answer to this situation, the Cherokees made frequent unannounced trips into Charles Town. In June 1745 the *American Weekly Mercury* printed a report from Charleston, which included an event from April 30 reading:

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[15] Hoig. *Cherokees and Their Chiefs*, 20.

[16] Oatis, *A Colonial Complex,* 261.

[17] Michelle Daniel, "Blood Feud to Jury System: The Metamorphosis of Cherokee Law from 1750 to 1840." *American Indian Quarterly* 11 (Spring 1987): 97-125.

> the Emperor of the Cherokee Indians . . . arrived in Town. . . The Cherokees had not been in this Province for some years . . . [but] received large Presents.[18]

Misunderstandings between the Cherokee and British cultures, occasioned by their different expectations, eventually led to a break in their relations. According to Oatis, "Cherokees viewed trade as a community rite rooted in reciprocity and mutual respect," or even as a way of "boost[ing] one's ego or social standing."[19] On the other hand, South Carolinians thought of Cherokees as troublesome savages, with little understanding of mutual respect and exchange. This dissimilar perception was even noticed during the times when British and Cherokees fought together, as in the Seven Years' War.

Cherokee numbers began to decline after 1730, as their continued involvement in conflicts increased. Stemming from a need to satisfy the British, the Cherokees found themselves fighting people against whom they had no quarrel, and becoming allies of traditional former foes. Along with the fighting and increased contact with the British, a smallpox epidemic in 1738 became another disaster for many towns. In May 1746, royal governor of South Carolina James Glen persuaded the Cherokees to drive the Northern natives from their towns, in an attempt to counter French influence. By June 1753, Attakullakulla arrived at Charles Town with a delegation to meet Glen. Glen wanted Carolinian settlers and traders to be safe within the Cherokee country, and he desired peace between the Creeks and Cherokees. Aware of France's achievements with their own native allies, Glen was seeking to broker agreements and alliances with the Cherokees.[20]

By the following year, the English pursued an assurance of Cherokee loyalty, to secure their help with the fight against the French and their allies. Each group expected a fulfillment of needs for an alliance; however Old Hop from Chota decided on neutrality. Old Hop wanted peace with both the French and their Indian allies so as to trade with them, yet he was also seeking the building of a fort by the British. Glen on the other hand sought an end to Cherokee raids on the Creeks and the Catawbas, and hoped Old Hop would sell Cherokee lands to expand Carolina's territory. Glen expected to have the loyalty of the Cherokees against the French, and in return he promised guns, ammunition, and forts to protect the women and children while the warriors were away from their villages. With this promise, the Cherokees gave up more

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[18] *American Weekly Mercury*, "Charles Town, South Carolina, April 30," issue 1329, June 20 to June 27, 1745.

[19] Oatis, *A Colonial Complex*, 191.

[20] Dowd, "Insidious Friends,"118.

land, and South Carolina obtained one fourth of the western part of today's state.[21] Carolinian authorities also received a promise from Oconostota of Chota, providing warriors against the French and their allies in Illinois, along with Attakullakulla's continued support of British troops.

By July 1755, the Treaty of Saluda reduced Cherokee territory once more, and in return the Cherokees were promised better prices from the traders, the prohibition of rum, and a new fort to be built by the Carolinians.[22] Attakullakulla felt that an alliance with Governor Glen had been forged; however Glen viewed this as a promise of submission to King George II. This agreement proved to be another failure in the communication between the two parties.

As was typical of many of the promises made by the British, no additional forts appeared for a while since Fort Prince George was built in 1754. Nevertheless, by 1956 the new governor of South Carolina, William Henry Lyttelton, sent Raymond Demere to repair Fort Prince George and to build a new fort called Fort Loudoun. This new fort was to be located in the Tellico River basin, south of modern Knoxville, TN.[23] The Cherokees requested these forts for protection, but the British hoped to keep a watch over the Cherokees, since they had a particularly hard time trusting the Chota Cherokees, who remained on friendly terms with the French. Attakullakulla approached the new governor to assure him of continued support, and to seek promises to force the traders into fair business practices with the Cherokee. In return Attakullakulla made additional promises of support, and continued his assaults on the French forces.

In his 1853 *Annals of Tennessee*, J.G.M. Ramsey reported that the Indians were wary once they saw the large number of troops sent to Fort Loudoun, feeling "displeased at seeing such a large number of white people, well-armed, among them."[24] Although the Cherokees were seeking provisions, they were not only suspicious, but also alarmed by the presence of a large number of armed soldiers within their territory. Division among the Cherokees intensified, with Tellico warriors murdering the pregnant wife of Fort Loudoun's commander, "hoping to cause a break with the English."[25] Attakullakulla forced these warriors to go to Fort Loudoun to renew their pledge of support for

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[21] Hoig, *Cherokees and Their Chiefs,* 26.

[22] Oliphant, *Peace and War,* 14.

[23] Perdue, *Cherokee Women,* 96.

[24] J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Charleston: Walker and Jones, 1853), 52.

[25] Hoig, *Cherokees and Their Chiefs,* 32.

England. Consequently, in July 1756 the *Pennsylvania Gazette* printed a report from Charleston, depicting South Carolinians expressing reassurance:

> The late alarming rumour concerning the Cherokees seems to have no Foundation; if it had, doubtless his Excellency's Presence among them, with a Body of Men, must have some good effects.[26]

With continued Cherokee support in the Ohio country, George Washington professed appreciation for the fighting of the Cherokees; yet some British soldiers felt differently about their native allies, as they humiliated Cherokee warriors when they requested gifts following battle. The Cherokees saw themselves as equals with the British, and believed that they naturally deserved rewards for their efforts in battle. The British on the other hand, saw Cherokees as crude and unsophisticated people, whom could be useful in battle, but whom were certainly not equal to the "civilized" English soldiers. Gregory Dowd summed up these opposing cultural viewpoints in his *Insidious Friends,* stating:

> The British learned that the Cherokees sought not only good rewards but respect from their contribution to the war effort; the Cherokees learned that the British thought their Indian allies would fight in subjection and for cheap pay.[27]

The continuous misunderstanding and ethnocentric outlook of the British was reflected in Virginia's legislation, which offered "seventy-five dollars for the scalps of Frenchmen or their Indian allies."[28] To some Virginians who took up the prompting, all native scalps looked alike, and as a consequence they killed many Cherokees along with their intended targets. Whether by mistake or not, about forty Cherokee warriors were scalped in Virginia as they were on their way back home from fighting with Forbes' successful campaign. In addition, the warriors who returned home discovered an invasion of their hunting ground by English settlers, with a resulting decrease of trade and food supply. These murders sparked an intense anger and need for revenge among the Cherokees, resulting on the killing of Carolina settlers and traders.

Rumors of Attakullakulla's defection began to swirl in the Carolinas, even as he and his warriors continued their assault against the French. However, Old Hop did open up communication with the French, and Mankiller of Tellico

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[26] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, "Charles-Town, South Carolina, May 22," issue 1436, July 1, 1756.

[27] Dowd, "Insidious Friends," 119.

[28] Hoig, *Cherokees and Their Chiefs,* 33.

made an alliance with France, resulting in numerous French goods and presents to the Cherokees. In the midst of this muddled situation, Governor Lyttelton halted the trade of guns and ammunition with the Cherokees. Indian agent George Croghan wrote to Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the north, about the impending trouble:

> The people of Virginia . . . killed about forty Cherokees, and the General last Fall ordered all the Guns and Cloathing to be taken from the Chief of the Cherokee Indians [Attakullakulla]; these differences I fear will not tend to our advantage . . . He [Lyttelton] seems very backward in doing anything in Indian affairs.[29]

In October 1759, Lyttelton declared war on the Cherokee nation.[30] Oconostota and a party of warriors tried to negotiate peace. At the peace meeting, Lyttelton demanded the surrender of the warriors who had murdered English settlers, holding Oconostota and others in his party as hostages when they refused, and marching them to Fort Prince George. As a result of this action, Cherokee anger intensified, and more English traders and settlers were killed, with more fleeing to Forts Prince George and Moore.[31] Oconostota was eventually released, but others in his delegation remained prisoners, and some died with smallpox while confined. During an attempt by Oconostota to free the prisoners, the British guards killed the remaining thirty Cherokee hostages.[32]

The Cherokee War was the culmination of an accumulation of frustrating events that had been swirling between the two parties for decades. With the advancement of Carolinian settlements, and with their increase in commercial and military power, the question of Cherokee autonomy must have been raised. It appeared that the Cherokees were losing their territory to the same people they were fighting for. They must have asked, when would the English stop taking land that was necessary for our subsistence? With their growing dependence on English trade goods and the hostility shown by the British in the killing of the hostages, many Cherokee warriors wondered about the feasibility of an alternative partnership with France. This possibility may have looked attractive by 1754, when there were reports of a French offer to build a fort for the Cherokees. In addition, English traders became notorious for cheating, while Cherokee's deer population continued to plummet. This

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[29] William Johnson, *The Papers of Sir William Johnson: Volume III* (Albany: University of New York, 1921), 90.

[30] Oliphant, *Peace and War,* 69.

[31] Ibid., 37.

[32] Perdue, *Cherokee Women,* 95.

decrease in deer caused a reduction in deerskins, and the Cherokees became increasingly indebted to the traders. Along with the killing of the negotiating warriors, Lyttelton's ban on the trade of guns and ammunitions further aggravated the already exasperated warriors. A perfect storm was unleashed, and the Cherokee war began.

Lyttelton seemed to have made a grave mistake in stopping the trade of guns and ammunition, anticipating Jeffrey Amherst's colossal blunder of the early 1760s, which helped bring on Pontiac's War. By refusing to negotiate peace, and by ordering the taking and slaughtering of hostages, Lyttelton provoked the Cherokees mightily. Cherokee anger and hostility became rampant, and Fort Loudoun became a target for the warriors, whom maintained a siege of the fort from February to August of 1760. Captain Paul Demere, commander of the fort, expected the soon arrival of reinforcements, and British commander-in-chief Sir Jeffrey Amherst sent Colonel Archibal Montgomery along with 1,200 highlanders as relief forces. This group of soldiers arrived in Georgia to create havoc, burning twenty Cherokee towns, and killing women and children in the villages of Lower and Middle Towns.[33] In retaliation Oconostota attacked Montgomery and his men, killing up to 140 men, and causing Montgomery to retreat.

With their rescue thwarted, Demere's men became more desperate for food, despite some efforts by Cherokee women of the surrounding areas in supplying their lovers from the fort. This effort was eventually blocked by Oconostota, and the women banned from resuming their deliveries. Concerning this situation, an article by the *Boston Evening Post* reported in Charlestown:

> The women who used to come to the fort, were forbidden to go thither again on pain of death; and that there were continually scouts about in search of white people's tracts . . . Oconostota answered [Demere] that they were not guilty of any of the outrages complained of.[34]

Finally, the British reached an agreement with Oconostota for the surrender of the remaining Fort Loudoun garrison, which was set to leave for a 140-mile trip to Fort Prince George. With typical mistrust and lack of communication, the warriors discovered that the soldiers had buried a great quantity of ammunition, despite the agreed upon terms of surrender that banned this. Following these findings, Cherokee warriors attacked the starving soldiers killing many, including

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[33] Ibid., 96.

[34] *Boston Evening Post*, "Charles-Town, South Carolina, November 1," issue 1268, December 17, 1759.

Demere. Attakullakulla saved Lt. John Stuart, who was to become superintendent of the Southern Indian department. He was safely delivered to Virginia.[35]

By the end of 1760, the Cherokees seemed ready to negotiate peace, but the British thought otherwise. Amherst's soldiers began a systematic onslaught in the Lower and Middle Towns, with 5,000 men, women, and children "driven to the mountains to starve."[36] The devastated Cherokee towns were burned, along with fields of crops. In his *Cherokee Women*, Perdue estimates that the Cherokee population became depleted by a half. There were no more than 2,000 warriors left, in a total population between 8 and 10,000 inhabitants.[37] Amherst used similar tactics later, when he confronted the Pontiac in the Great Lakes region.[38]

By August 1761, Attakullakulla and other Cherokee warriors met British commander James Grant at Fort Prince George. They smoked the peace pipe and settled on terms for an end to the fighting. New mandates became a requirement for peace, including death for any Cherokee who murdered an English settler. On the other hand, any settler killing a Cherokee was to be turned over to British authorities, where jury nullification often made conviction and punishment impossible. No Frenchmen or their allies was allowed in Cherokee territory, but English traders were protected. Attakullakulla requested that John Stuart be appointed "British Superintendent of Indian affairs," and the treaty became a signed document on December 30, 1761. New boundaries became formalized, but another boundaries adjustment occurred in 1763, depriving the Cherokees of even more land.

The Cherokee War lasted from the fall of 1759 until the fall of 1761, being the "largest single concerted effort made by an individual Indian nation against the white colonists during the eighteenth century."[39] Given just how divided the Cherokee warriors were, the misunderstanding and lack of trust between Cherokees and Anglo-Americans, and the incessant clamoring of settlers for Cherokee lands, the hostility and aggression of the Cherokee War seemed an inevitable course. Gifts or booty from the spoils of war were never offered with mutual respect, but rather as a manipulative, paternalistic device to

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[35] Hoig, *Cherokees and Their Chiefs,* 41.

[36] Ibid., 43.

[37] Perdue, *Cherokee Women,* 98.

[38] David Andrew Nichols, "Of Conciliation and Incineration: The Cherokee War and the Remaking of British Imperial Indian Policy," *Reviews in American History* 30 (2002): 373-380.

[39] David A Copeland, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on Events* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 180.

maintain order and subordination. The dependency of the Cherokees on European goods drove them to abandon their guard, enabling the British to accomplish a continued encroachment upon Cherokee territory, without any further resistance following the Cherokee War. Division among the Cherokee chiefs led to an inability to control revenge killings among the warriors. English ethnocentrism manifesting in a widening gap in understanding and communication, resulted in a catastrophic event and a decimated nation, which with the ensuing struggles of the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the presidency of Andrew Jackson, lost its valued native land and was relocated in Oklahoma.