**Chief White Oak[[1]](#footnote-2) Thinks Aloud**

No one will deny that the Red people face a crisis. Many of the Indian tribes living east of the Appalachian Mountains have been destroyed or forced to move west. Now Indian lands *west* of the Appalachians are being seized by or sold to white settlers. Even worse, these whites have encouraged our men to buy alcohol at such frequent rates that many of them have become worthless drunks. In fact, drunken tribal chiefs have ceded large portions of our territory to the whites in the notorious Treaty of Fort Wayne.[[2]](#footnote-3) As Chief of the Kickapoo[[3]](#footnote-4) I must make the wise decision in the face of this crisis while avoiding the easy temptation to give in to my emotions.

The history of white expansion onto Indian lands remains in the forefront of my mind. If the Americans had followed their own agreements and the wisdom of their own leaders, this crisis might have been averted. Before, British royal officials had legally prohibited colonial settlers from moving west of the Appalachians into our lands. With victory in the revolution, the Americans gained the right to *negotiate* with us. Indian lands were never given to the Americans! Secretary of War Henry Knox[[4]](#footnote-5) rightfully acknowledged this point in 1789 when he said, “The Indians being the prior occupants, possess the right of soil. It cannot be taken from them unless by their free consent, or by right of conquest in case of a just war. To dispossess them of any other principle would be a gross violation of the fundamental laws of nature, and of that distributive justice which is the glory of a nation.”

A new breed of Shawnee leaders, particularly the young warrior called Tecumseh, claim to have a plan to save our communities from destruction. They have come to me and asked me to join with former enemies in one large Indian alliance so we can resist the Americans together. I must consider their request carefully. Tecumseh makes passionate speeches about lost Indian lands but these lands are nowhere near Kickapoo lands in the Northwest Territory (Illinois). Tecumseh’s brother, Tenskwatawa, a religious prophet who seems to gain fame by the day, even claims that the Master of Life[[5]](#footnote-6) desires all Indian tribes to be united. While I have sympathy for the grave situation facing all Red people, I fear religious radicals and their emotional appeals. I’ve heard rumors that Tenskwatawa’s followers have massacred countless Indians who questioned his religious claims. The decision on whether or not to resist white expansion must be made soon. My spies have informed me of a great confrontation between the Governor of Indiana, General William Henry Harrison, and Tecumseh over ceded lands. The meeting ended very badly. Though no one was killed, weapons were drawn.

War may start at any moment but I must do what has the best hope of preserving my tribe and its culture. Should I ignore all of the treaties Indian peoples (including my Kickapoo brothers) have made with Americans and lead my tribe to join Tecumseh’s alliance? This will surely mean war and it could mean the complete destruction of my tribe. The Americans are ruthless warriors and are not likely to lay down their arms easily. If the Americans succeed in defeating my people, I suspect that we will be uprooted and moved to some unknown place west of the Mississippi River. Should I reject my Indian brothers and make peace with the Americans in the hopes that they will treat my people well? The Delaware Indians who have converted to the white people’s religion continue to encourage this path but they are not alone. A prominent Shawnee Chief has urged me to make peace with the Americans as the best way for the Kickapoo to hold onto our ancestral lands. I’m not convinced, however, that my people can live among the white people, whose culture is so very different from our own. Based on my prior experience with American frontiersmen, I also fear that any peace I make with the Americans will be abandoned when the Americans find it convenient to do so. Perhaps, I should wait and see what happens with Tecumseh’s alliance and lead my tribe to resist on its own if necessary. I have been warned, however, that waiting is not an option and that the Indian people are destined to succeed or fail in this moment together and not as individual tribes. While I am scared that we, the Kickapoo, might be incapable of withstanding white aggression on our own, I find it even harder to put our fate in the hands of such a young Shawnee warrior. Perhaps we should all just accept our fate, lay down our arms, and move west of the Mississippi as other tribes have already done. These places would be unknown to the Kickapoo, however. We would not know where to hunt or fish or even where to build our homes. But if moving west would ensure the maintenance of Kickapoo culture, wouldn’t we be foolish not to consider moving?

I am Chief White Oak of the Kickapoo. My people look to me as their father and protector and as their source of stability and strength. I beg the Maker of Life to give me wisdom as I weigh my options. My tribe is at a great crossroads in its long history. The most difficult decision of my time is upon me.

1. White Oak does not exist in the historical record but he represents the dilemma confronting Indian tribes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The Treaty of Fort Wayne ceded 3 mil. acres of land in the Indiana Territory (eastern Ohio / Indiana) to America for an immediate payment in goods worth $7000 and an annual subsidy of $1750 to be divided by all sellers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The Kickapoo are an Algonquian speaking people who were settled in modern day Indiana and Illinois. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Henry Knox was Secretary of War in George Washington’s first cabinet. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In Indian religion, the Maker of Life was the one god who created all things; also called the Great Spirit or Maker of Breath. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)