

Tecumseh¹

Background: You are Tecumseh, the leader of a small but growing group of Shawnee Indians. You have traveled through much of the eastern United States attempting to persuade other tribes to join you in a military and political alliance to protect all Indians.

Chief White Oak and my red brothers:

The white men are not friends to the Indians: at first they only asked for land sufficient for a wigwam²; now, nothing will satisfy them but all of our hunting grounds, from the rising to the setting sun. The white men despise and cheat the Indians; they abuse and insult us; they do not think the red men are good enough to live. Our ancestors scold us as slaves and cowards for our inaction; I hear them now in the wailing winds. Who are the white people, that we should fear them? They cannot run fast, and are good marks to shoot at: they are only men. If we stand together we will stain the earth red with their blood.

Before the pale-faces came among us we enjoyed happiness of complete freedom. We did not know riches, wants, or oppression. How is it now? Wants and oppressions are our lot; for are we not controlled in everything by the white man? Are we not being stripped day by day of the little that remains of our ancient liberty? How long will it be before they will tie us to a post and whip us and make us work for them in their cornfields? We know their intentions; we have seen them destroy our villages and enlarge their possessions by taking our own. The white theft of our common country must be stopped, or we, its rightful owners, be forever destroyed and wiped out as a race of people. If we do nothing, the Americans will at last drive us into the great lake where we can't stand or work. Will we stand by as the Americans make distinctions between our tribes, treating each as a separate group to be abused? In everything, the white faces seek to divide us, to have us make war with each other over lands that belong to all of us.

These land treaties cannot be accepted. They are made by a few greedy, cowardly village chiefs to pay off senseless trade debts or to gain political favor with the white faces. These chiefs had no right to give away our common land and show themselves as traitors to their people. We now suffer the consequences of their cowardly ways. The pale faces now encircle our lands with their

¹ The speech presented here is based largely on Tecumseh's own words but includes summation of arguments reported to him by other sources.

² A hut or house.

rifles and they threaten to grab more every day. We must reclaim our lands if we are to preserve the hunt and our culture. We must deal harshly with the chiefs who betray us, among the worst of whom is Chief Blackhoof. Men like him sit silently while Indians lose everything and then become filled with rage as their former subjects see the light and join me. We should not turn our men into women by abandoning the hunt for the farm as they advocate. We must not live like the white faces. Blackhoof's path is to our destruction; my path is to our renewal.

If you do not unite with us and fight the white man, they will first destroy my people, and then you will fall easy prey to their warriors. They have destroyed many nations of red men because those nations were not united, because they were not friends to each other. Let us form one body, one heart and defend to the last warrior our country, our homes, our liberty and the graves of our fathers. I beg you to remember that the white faces formed a strict union amongst all the fires (states) that compose their confederacy and we did not object. Let us now do the same. To those who tell us the time is not right: shall we calmly wait until they become so numerous that we will no longer be able to resist oppression? Will we wait to be destroyed without making any effort worthy of our race? Shall we give up our homes, our country given to us by the Great Spirit, and everything that is dear and sacred to us, without a struggle? I know you will cry with me: Never! Never! Then let us by unity of action destroy them all, which we can now do, or drive them back whence they came.

Let us stand united,
Tecumseh, Shawnee Warrior, 1810

Guiding Questions:

1. What is Tecumseh's view of land ownership? How does his view of the land contribute to his views of western expansion?
2. How do Tecumseh's Indian ancestors and religion factor into his views of western expansion?
3. How might Americans benefit from keeping Indian tribes "divided"?
4. Who does Tecumseh blame for the loss of Indian lands?
5. What is Tecumseh's proposal for stopping American expansion? Why must Indians act now?

Chief Blackhoof¹

Background: You are Chief Blackhoof, head civil chief of the Shawnee Indians in the Ohio Valley. Your tribe has traditionally made all political decisions for the Shawnee. You have extensive experience as a warrior fighting against both Americans and British.

To my Red brother, Chief White Oak: the Maker of Life compels me to speak to warn against trying to resist the Americans. As a young Shawnee warrior, I fought bravely throughout the Northwest Territory defending Indian lands from both the British and the Americans. I believe my reputation is well known to you. I have survived more battles than any of your warriors. I am not afraid of war or of dying but men like Tecumseh who believe war is the only solution concern me because they ignore our tragic past and our present realities. In 1796, there were 5,000 whites in Ohio; today, there are 230,000. With the arrival of our white brothers, the Shawnee of Ohio have chosen a new path that avoids armed confrontation altogether. I believe we have chosen wisely and that you should learn from our experience.

Your best hope of staying on your lands and of holding onto your way of life is to adjust and learn to live with the Americans. Once the Americans see that you can live like them, they will leave you alone. Radical Indians like Tecumseh have criticized me for signing the Treaty of Greenville (1795)². My decision to do so was strategic and was not made in weakness. Many white people already occupied those lands and the hunt had already declined to a point that there was insufficient food to support my people. In fact, we had long abandoned that land. By ceding it, I gained a seat at the table for future negotiations. In fact, I am working now to secure legal deeds that will guarantee our right to keep the land we now hold. Learn from our success, Chief White Oak. While you may win a few battles against the Americans should you choose to fight, you cannot win the war. Conflict with the Americans will result in your destruction and in the loss of your lands and the Maker of Life will not forgive you for losing your ancestral lands.

In 1802 and 1803, I traveled to the city of Washington to meet with the Chief of the Seventeen Fires³. There, I charted a new course that accepted our present realities. I asked for and received

¹ This speech is fictional but authentically represents the ideas of the historical character.

² The U.S. and several Indian tribes in the Northwest Territory signed the Treaty of Greenville following the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Large portions of present day Ohio were turned over in exchange for goods and annuities.

³ The Seventeen Fires is the Indian name for the 17 states of the United States. The “Chief” in 1802 and 1803 was Thomas Jefferson. Also sometimes referred to as the Great White Father.

cattle, farm tools, and help with building farms, sawmills, and gristmills. The Indian agents among us are teaching us to farm and to survive in spite of declining hunts. I'm sure you too have wondered from where the food will come once the hunt disappears. If you work with the Americans as we have done, your people will receive similar supplies and support that will make survival possible. Our men have produced a bountiful harvest this year. Our women are freed from plowing the fields and now have time to complete domestic tasks. Our children now attend school where they learn of the Maker of Life and their tribal past. Our community is strong.

I trust that you too are questioning this young Shawnee warrior, Tecumseh, who claims to be the leader of not only the Shawnee but of all Indians. I am the Chief of the Shawnee, not Tecumseh. My tribe has always provided the political leadership for Shawnee people. I do not say that to boast but to convince you that Tecumseh's claims of a grand alliance cannot be trusted; he does not even have the support of his own people. He claims that the British will support his alliance against the Americans but we have seen such promises betrayed in the past and we know that the British are reluctant to get involved in another costly war. Please understand that any war will fail. I have fought too long and too hard to see more of my red brothers die. Your only hope for holding onto your land is to work with the Americans as we have done.

Peace be with you and our white brothers,
Chief Blackhoof of the Shawnee People, 1810

Guiding Questions:

1. What is Blackhoof's view of western expansion by Americans? What main solution does he propose?
2. How might Blackhoof's experience as a warrior give his arguments additional credibility?
3. How does Blackhoof explain his willingness to sign land treaties with the Americans?
4. What benefits does Blackhoof say come from working with the Americans?
5. What questions does Blackhoof raise about Tecumseh?

Chief Yufala of the Lower Creek¹

Background: You are Chief Yufala of the Lower Creek Indians. You are part of the Creek Confederation in Mississippi (Alabama). Large portions of nearby Georgia have already been ceded to the U.S. and the U.S. is currently building a trade road through your land.

Chief White Oak, I speak with a troubled heart. There are 70,000 Indians living on southern lands of oak and hickory forests, reedy streams, cane meadows, broad savannas, and glorious rivers. Our white brothers now threaten to destroy these lands. Like you, I am confronted with a difficult decision – how to respond to our Indian brother Tecumseh and his plan for an Indian confederation. Shawnee efforts to unite the Southern tribes are not new to us but Tecumseh warns and my experience tells me that the stakes are much greater today.

The Creek feel great sympathy for Tecumseh's plans but the possibilities for successfully resisting the Americans with force are not good. The Americans have military forts all over that they use to "civilize" us. We have Indian agents living amongst us, teaching us to improve our farming so we can produce for the white man's market. Resisting is also complicated by the fact that many of our Indian brothers are of mixed Indian and white blood. These men are our leaders, our warriors, and our traders. They are not indifferent to the threats to our native lands but they tell me that Tecumseh's traditional plans for self-sustenance are old-fashioned and impossible. Perhaps the biggest impediment to joining Tecumseh is that many southern chiefs have become completely dependent on the Americans for money and goods. Their willingness to trade land for American assistance will likely cause them to resist Tecumseh at all costs.

Tecumseh's plan is not easy for us but I realize that something must be done. Upper and Lower Creek are dying daily from disease. Many of our people have become worthless drunks thanks to greedy American traders. Traders encourage my people to indebt themselves when purchasing farm implements and supplies; they know the only way we can pay our debts is by selling our lands at whatever price we can get. But what are we to do? The hunt has declined so much that farming is the only way we can provide for our families. Today, I find it nearly impossible to contain the anger of my warriors who desire more than anything to fight along side their brother Tecumseh. Even among the Cherokee, the most "advanced" tribe among us, young warriors are crying out for a new path. The Great White Father² asks too much - to replace our values of cooperation and communal ownership with greed and individually held property.

¹ Chief Yufala is not an historical figure but his speech represents the ideas of many southern tribal leaders.

² Great White Father is the Indian name for the U.S. President.

Tecumseh offers the new path my warriors demand; he may be our only hope. He asks us to stand united against land cessions and chiefs who accept bribes and to fight American aggression. His extravagant dress – shaven heads, scalp locks, hawk feathers, rifle and tomahawk – speaks to his warrior strengths. More importantly, I am convinced that the Maker of Breath favors Tecumseh’s cause. While visiting with us, Tecumseh pointed to his namesake, a shooting star that grew in brightness across the sky as he spoke, as evidence of the Great Spirit’s favor. Tecumseh also promised upon his return to the north that he would climb a mountain, whoop, clap his hands, and stamp the earth three times. The Great Spirit fulfilled his promise; tribes all across the south felt the earth shake in anger at the thieving Americans.³

Tecumseh and his men are impressive but, like you, I worry about the consequences of joining him. While I fear disobeying the Maker of Breath, I know that my greatest responsibility is to protect my people. If the Creek join Tecumseh, we are inviting a war that might destroy us. If we do not join him, we may be missing our only opportunity to stand up. Chief White Oak, the Lower Creek are choosing to wait. The decision is too weighty without knowing first if it can succeed. I must know what other tribes will join and whether your people are committed to Tecumseh’s cause. I cannot yet risk my tribe’s survival on an unclear Indian alliance. We *will* join Tecumseh but not yet.

May the Great Spirit guide you,
Chief Yufala of the Lower Creek, 1810

Guiding Questions:

1. How have America’s “civilization” policies affected the southern Creek?
2. As a southern tribal leader supportive of Tecumseh, what challenges related to the presence of white men does Yufala fear?
3. In what ways have the southern Creek become dependent on white traders?
4. What are Yufala’s views of the Great Spirit? How do his religious beliefs complicate his decision?
5. What is Yufala’s ultimate decision regarding Tecumseh’s confederation? Why does he make that choice?

³ Although the “Great Comet” and the New Madrid Earthquake occurred in 1811 after Tecumseh left the south, these events proved influential in helping Tecumseh gain favor with the southern tribes.

General William Henry Harrison¹

Background: You are General William Henry Harrison. You learned military tactics under the direction of General Anthony Wayne. Later, you served as the first congressional delegate for the Northwest Territory and as Governor of the Indiana Territory.

Dear Chief White Oak:

I am a mild mannered man but I take my responsibilities to the Great White Father² seriously. I have always desired peace but circumstances beyond my control have often forced me to fight. We do not wish conflict with any Indians but if we must fight, we will surely do so to the very last man. I know your warriors are brave but what can a few brave warriors do against the innumerable warriors of the Seventeen Fires³? I beg you not to join Tecumseh's alliance or believe his exaggerated claims about American actions. Should you join him, you may be held accountable for a radical, irresponsible group of Indians over whom you have no control.

I have been criticized by a misguided few for encouraging Americans to settle the Northwest frontier. These people fail to acknowledge that my actions as Governor resulted from the many senseless massacres of American frontiersmen by Indians in the area. I learned that the only way to secure the frontier from continued assault was to extend our settlements westward. At the negotiations for the Treaty of Greenville in 1795⁴, I met with all interested tribes to prove our desire to deal justly with all Indians. Accusations that I would buy lands from chiefs who didn't actually own them are false! We have consistently invited all interested parties to the negotiating table including scoundrels like Tecumseh. From 1802 to 1805, I signed seven treaties with individual tribal chiefs willing to sell their lands. These chiefs received just compensation for their lands in the form of annual cash payments and supplies. They were provided skilled agents willing to train Indians in the ways of agriculture and given access to our trading posts to borrow needed tools and supplies. It is ridiculous that I should be blamed for chiefs' willingness to sell their lands; we have been extremely careful to deal directly with the tribes who had *legal* claim to these lands. Tecumseh does not criticize me for unjust land deals; he criticizes me because he

¹ This letter is fictional but authentically represents the ideas of the historical character.

² Indian name for the American President.

³ The United States.

⁴ The Treaty of Greenville followed the Indian defeat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, the last battle of the Northwest Indian War.

believes that *all* Indians somehow own the land together! Surely you don't subscribe to this idea or to his claim of being chief to all Indians.

Tecumseh is a bold, active, and daring man but his charm cannot hide his work as a British agent. For the past several months, he has done nothing but carry war belts⁵ all across this nation. Tecumseh's brother, Tenskwatawa, is an imposter who falsely claims to perform miracles and to have been chosen by God to unite all Indians. Not even your Indian brothers believe him! Even if Tecumseh was somehow able to unite all tribes, the collective bargaining he proposes is not in your best interest. America can better respond to Kickapoo needs if they are presented separate from other tribes. Tecumseh's alliance is contrary to your tradition and the will of God who created Indians to live as separate nations with separate languages. I assure you that if you civilize and accept the current land cessions, additional lands will not be necessary. The chain of friendship is not beyond repair but let me be clear: the moon that you behold will sooner fall to the earth than the Great White Father would suffer his people to be murdered with impunity. The Great White Father will put his warriors in petticoats sooner than he will give up a country which he fairly acquired. You must decide whether you will choose the large, open, and pleasant path to peace or the narrow and crooked way to misery and ruin.

With hope for a lasting peace,

General William Henry Harrison, 1810

Guiding Questions:

1. Why might Harrison tell White Oak that his tribe "may" be held accountable for the actions of Tecumseh's confederation?
2. How does Harrison defend western expansion by American settlers?
3. What is Harrison's view of land? Who can own it? How does this contrast with Tecumseh?
4. What is Harrison's view of treaties like the Treaty of Greenville? How does he defend their legality? What benefits did chiefs receive from such treaties?
5. Why does Harrison believe Tecumseh's confederation is unnecessary and dangerous?

⁵ War belts were usually made of wampum and used for military diplomacy.