



To Have a Voice: Tecumseh's Purpose

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Tensions between the native peoples of North America and settlers existed from the moment the first Europeans set foot in the “New World.” As the population in North America grew, the strain inevitably expanded, putting more and more pressure on tribes in the interior of the continent. Trading with European settlers allowed Native Americans to obtain goods previously unknown to them, causing further tensions. Many Native Americans despised the materials that Europeans brought, such as alcohol, because they threatened the traditional way of life. This fear, as well as the continual encroachment by white settlers, inevitably led to violence. One Native American who resisted westward expansion was a Shawnee leader named Tecumseh.

NARRATIVE

Tecumseh was born in 1768 in the Ohio territory, near the present-day city of Dayton. He was a part of the Shawnee tribe, which lived from the Ohio River valley up to Lake Erie. Many of the Shawnee had been displaced as a result of the Beaver Wars in the mid-seventeenth century, a conflict which disintegrated multiple centralized native confederacies. Thus, Native Americans had a difficult time coordinating with other tribes on how to defend against Europeans.

Tecumseh grew up during tumultuous years on the continent. The French and Indian War concluded just a few years before his birth. Tecumseh's father and the Shawnee tribe fought alongside the French; when the war ended with a British victory, however, their territory was placed under control of the redcoats.

In 1763, the British government issued a proclamation stating that no British settlers would be allowed to settle west of the Appalachian Mountains. Although this seemed to offer hope of stable relations with the native peoples, the proclamation was soon overturned through a series of treaties. By the 1770s, floods of immigrants were spilling over the Appalachians, leading to conflict between Native Americans and settlers. Tecumseh's distrust of white settlers grew when his father was killed in one such fight.

After the American Revolution, Tecumseh began to see the value of unifying Native American tribes when he took part in a war against the United States over control of the Northwest Territory (parts of modern-day Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio). Tribes in that area unified under the Wabash Confederacy to fight in the Northwest Indian War in the 1780s and 1790s. Despite the power of unification, the confederacy still lost the conflict. Tecumseh realized that an even broader coalition would be needed to stand against the United States.

NARRATIVE

Eventually, Tecumseh returned to his home in Ohio with his younger brother, Tenskwatawa, who began to have visions. Tenskwatawa started preaching the importance of preserving native traditions and rejecting the incursion of Europeans. He gathered a large following and created a religious revival of sorts amongst the tribes in the region.

It was at this time that Tecumseh began to seriously consider and organize his own confederacy. By 1808 he had become a leader in his own community but continued to believe his ultimate purpose was unifying tribes. This would become Tecumseh's mission for the rest of his life.

He began to travel all across the Great Lakes region, preaching his brother's prophecies as well as his own vision for a great native confederacy. After several more treaties had opened up significant portions of land in Indiana for settlement by whites, Tecumseh took action. He took a large band of men to confront the governor of the newly formed Indiana Territory, William Henry Harrison, who had bribed many of the chieftains into signing treaties to give up their territory. Tecumseh demanded the treaties with the Shawnee chiefs be rescinded. At one point during the conversation, Tecumseh shouted, "Sell a country? Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth? Didn't the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children? How can we have confidence in the white people?"

Tecumseh believed the land belonged to all creatures and he would fight to keep it that way. The atmosphere was tense as he left the meeting, and soon it would get worse. Tecumseh traveled south, bringing even more tribes into his confederacy. He knew the time had come to fulfill his purpose.

While Tecumseh was away, Harrison went on the offensive in November 1811. His army attacked Tecumseh's village at Prophetstown, Indiana, routed Tenskwatawa's forces, and burned the town to the ground. Tecumseh's confederacy lost prestige, and many of his allies began to desert him.

When the War of 1812 began, Tecumseh offered to assist the British. His confederacy helped take Fort Detroit from the Americans, but the Native Americans found little success afterward. The group of tribes did not have the strength and prestige that Tecumseh hoped for, and the confederacy was bound to follow the movements of the much stronger British forces. When Tecumseh was killed in the Battle of the Thames in 1813, the last of his tribes surrendered.

When the war ended, the United States sought to put as much space as possible between its people and the native tribes. What followed was the forceful removal of Native Americans to new lands. Although ultimately a failure, Tecumseh's plan to unite the tribes offered hope to his people. He dedicated his life to maintaining Native American independence and fought to his dying breath standing by his purpose.