The Campaign for Civilization or Removal: Thomas L. McKenney and Federal Indian Affairs in the Formative Years

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1. Introduction

On February 20, 1856, a brief obituary in the *Washington National Intelligencer* noted, "[Thomas L. McKenney] was a man of active mind and philanthropic heart, and was always a zealous and true friend to the amelioration and advancement of the aboriginal people." From 1816 to 1830, McKenney managed federal Indian affairs, first as the Superintendent of Indian Trade and then as the head of the Office of Indian Affairs in the War Department. In this sense, he can be regarded as one of the fathers of the federal Indian service in its formative years.

During the years from the War of 1812 to the 1830s, considerable diversity emerged in politics and ideology with regard to the question of "the amelioration and advancement of the aboriginal people," to quote from the above article. The Congress had passed two major bills that affected the Native Americans: One was the Civilization Fund Act of 1819, which "makes provision for the civilization of the Indian tribes adjoining the frontier settlements." A decade later, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 was enacted, which authorized the relocation of some Native American groups to the west of the Mississippi River.³

Given these drastic changes in the federal policy toward the Native Americans in its formative years, the following questions can be raised: What were the cultural and social assumptions of policy makers with regard to the "advancement" of the Native Americans and how did they change to support the removal of some Native American groups? How did they translate their assumptions into concrete policies? How did these policies affect the Native Americans whom policy makers at that time came into contact with? Further, how were these policies affected by them? In this essay, the inconsistency in policy makers' assumptions about the Native Americans will be revealed by focusing on McKenney's position on the three major policies and acts that affect the Native Americans: the factory system, the Civilization Fund Act of 1819, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830. In addition, McKenney's conflicting responses to the benevolent societies and his adoption of Native American children will be discussed.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a note on the definition of the term "Indian" should be considered. According to Felix S. Cohen, an authority on federal Indian law, "[r]acial composition is not always dispositive in determining who are Indians for the purposes of Indian law. In dealing with Indians, the federal government is dealing with members or descendants of political entities, that is, Indian tribes, not with persons of a particular race." Accordingly, in this essay, the terms "Indian" and "Indian tribe" are used

in a legal and political sense, whereas the terms "Native American" and "indigenous people" are used in an ethnological sense.

2. Previous Works on Civilization Programs and the Removal

The early nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in debates on the part of non-Native policy makers on the conflicting issues of the "civilization" and "advancement" of the Native Americans and their removal. In order to place these events in a historical context, in this section, I will review major works on the history of federal Indian policy, emphasizing the years from the enforcement of the Civilization Fund Act of 1819 to that of the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Despite the wealth of literature on the history of "Indian-white relations," a commonly used phrase in scholarly literature on this subject, few available surveys exclusively examine the Civilization Fund Act of 1819. Presumably, this is because the issue of "Indian removal" evoked so much scholarly controversy that it overshadowed the issue of "Indian civilization."

A number of scholarly secondary works, however, give general surveys of the pervasive notion of civilization on the part of the non-native people since the colonial period. A classic account on civilization is Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society; or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization.*⁵ It views Indian-white relations as a static conflict between barbarism and civility, like most works of its time.

There is no doubt that the civilization programs supported by the federal government offer some insights into the value systems of American society. Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* shows how the notion of savagism and civilization worked to foster the federal Indian policy throughout history, even though these notions shed little light on the actual federal policy toward the Native Americans. *The American Spirit: A Study of the Idea of Civilization in the United States* by Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard is the best overall account of the meaning of the term "civilization." Their accounts on civilization are supplemented by Ray Allen Billington in *Land of Savagery/Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* and Bernard W. Sheehan in *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian.*

It seems indisputable that the "civilization" and Christianization of the Native Americans were flip sides of the same coin that formed fundamental continuity in the federal Indian policy; this was pointed out by Alfonso Ortiz in "Indian/White Relations: A View from the Other Side of the 'Frontier'" and Robert Berkhofer, Jr., in *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787–1862.* § James Lewis Axtell's *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* and *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* both deal with the problem of cultural conversion in the colonial period. § They provide a comprehensive overview

of the "Indian-white relations" in the formative years. David Wallace Adams adds one more element to the civilization and Christianization, that is, the quest for land by the non-Native people. In "Fundamental Considerations: The Deep Meaning of Native American Schooling, 1880–1900," Adams considers three perspectives that were at work at that time: the Protestant ideology, the idea of civilization, and the quest for land by the non-Natives. Adams refers to the Civilization Fund Act at the beginning to examine how these perspectives translated into concrete policy.¹⁰ Further, Theda Perdue in "Indians in Southern History" indicates that lands that the "civilized Indians" were expected to abandon account for much of the zeal on the part of the non-Native people for the "civilization" and the removal of the Native Americans.¹¹

Since much scholarly attention has been paid to the theoretical issue of civilization, the gap between theory and practice does not seem to be filled. How did the notion of the "civilization" and "advancement" of the Native Americans held by non-Native policy makers translate into concrete federal Indian policy? How did the idea of civilization and advancement in the history of Indian-white relations interrelate to the quest for land by the non-Native people? It might be impossible to address these questions in a single work; nevertheless, a study on the people who were in charge of federal Indian affairs, such as Thomas McKenney will be the first step toward answering these questions.

3. Federal Indian Affairs in the Formative Years

The Factory System

When Thomas McKenney accepted the office as the Superintendent of Indian Trade in 1816, the system of Indian trading houses was losing its function. Established in 1796 by the government, this system, commonly known as the factory system was dealt with harshly, mainly because of its failure to meet the needs of the Native Americans and those of private fur traders even though France, Great Britain, and Spain had already lost their former ascendancy over the trade with the Native Americans in the New World.

The native people, who paid fifteen dollars for a pound of tobacco and a dollar and a half for a thimble, would easily appreciate the square dealings at the factory, which offered them articles at the cost price and bought their furs at full market value.¹² During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, however, the factory system lost its popularity among the Native Americans, regardless of how fair the dealings at the factory were. Apart from the damages of the War of 1812 and the attack from private merchants, the factory system failed to meet the actual situation of trade between the Native Americans and European traders. The federal government, for instance, overlooked some specific features of the trade when it introduced the cash system that forbade credit. The system soon lost its charm for the indigenous groups involved, because they tended to have no reserve stock of necessities for their winter hunt, such as clothing, firearms, and ammunition.

Moreover, the federal government failed to recognize another important feature in the trade. Public

traders were not allowed to give the indigenous groups any gifts or provide them with any liquor, whereas private traders often distributed these goods as annuities to secure the Natives' favor. Thus, private merchants gradually gained advantage through the support of indigenous groups, dubbing their rival "Damn Yankee peddlers."

As early as 1816, private merchants appealed to the Congress to abolish the factory system. Thomas McKenney, then Superintendent of Indian Trade, remained firmly against its abolition. For McKenney, defending the factory system seemed to serve the ends of both his personal and philanthropic interests. There was no doubt that McKenney expected substantial benefits for himself because he desperately needed to hold on to his job, as he was always in debt.

Apart from serving his personal interest, McKenney used his position to pursue his ideal of the reform of federal Indian affairs, and was regarded as "a friend of the Indians" in those days. McKenney firmly believed that promoting agriculture among the Native Americans was the first step toward "a state of civilization." On June 18, 1816, McKenney wrote to each deputy to ask "what particular implements of husbandry" the various tribes wished to receive. Despite the fact that most tribes denied having agricultural goods, McKenney urged deputies to encourage the Native Americans to take a hoe. "This is the way you will most effectually promote the *great object of the Government* towards these unenlightened people. Invite their attention to agriculture and the arts and help them, for they are helpless." He continued in his letter, "We want to make citizens out of them, and they must be first anchored in the soil." Enthusiastic about the reform of Indian affairs, McKenny asserted, in his correspondence of 1817 with Isaac Thomas, the then Chairman of the House Committee on Indian Affairs, "All cases of advancement may be traced to their contiguity to and intercourse with the whites," which he later contradicted when he advocated the removal of some tribes in the Southeast to the west of the Mississippi. Thus, McKenney continued to urge that the Congress should increase the number of factories to provide more distant indigenous groups with easy access to the dominant culture.

In spite of McKenney's tireless efforts to prolong the life of the factory system, measures to abolish the government trading houses passed into law on May 6, 1822. The termination of the factory system caused little inconvenience to the Native Americans, because the system was already merely nominal. Although McKenney could not realize his wish, he noticed, in the process of defending the factory system, that the missionaries were zealous in educating the Native Americans. Gradually, he turned his attention from the traders to the missionaries to pursue his ideals of "Indian reform."

The Civilization Fund Act of 1819

Believing that civilization was subsumed within Christianity, missionary organizations were enthusiastic about educating the Native American children. In the early 1810s, the Reverend Cyrus Kingsbury of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions took the lead among philanthropists in instructing

the Native American children. Succeeding in obtaining a promise of government aid for the education of Native American youths, Kingsbury initiated a school known as Brainerd among the Cherokees in 1817. Kingsbury employed the Lancastrian system, using the brighter students to teach the slower ones, and expanded this system to other schools. According to the American Board, their instruction was significantly successful. Within a year, thirty-six out of forty-four pupils could read from the Bible, six could do simple arithmetic, and six knew English grammar. 18

McKenney was very impressed by the American Board's "success" in educating the Native Americans. Convincing that "the Indian was, in his intellectual and moral structure, our equal," McKenney started seeking to introduce an adequate system for the highest attainments in civilization, in the arts and religion of the Native Americans. Since the year 1818 appeared to be propitious for the experiment, McKenney urged the missionaries to petition to the Congress.

Beyond all expectations, petitions from various religious associations flooded the Congress. The most prominent one was the memorial sent by the Kentucky Bracken Association of Baptists, representing eleven hundred members across fourteen churches. Finally, Senator Jeremiah Morrow, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs introduced a bill appropriating ten thousand dollars annually for the civilization of the Native Americans, which replaced the House version.²⁰

On March 3, 1819, the Congress enacted the Civilization Fund Act "making provision for the civilization of the Indian tribes adjoining the frontier settlements." The purpose of the act is to provide "against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes" and introduce "among them the habits and arts of civilization." It also appropriated \$10,000 annually as the civilization fund to stimulate the activities of missionaries in providing schools for the Native Americans. Its priority is to instruct the Native Americans "in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation; and for teaching their children reading, writing, and arithmetic."

With respect to the number of schools, the Civilization Fund Act had fulfilled its purpose beyond McKenney's expectations. In 1819, there were only four schools in the areas with relatively concentrated populations of the indigenous groups, whereas, in 1824, there were thirty-two schools educating 916 Native students. Satisfied with these returns, McKenney assured the Secretary of War that there was a "good reason to believe that an entire reformation may be effected—in the course of the present generation."²⁴

McKenney's optimism was strengthened by the apparent "success" in educating his adopted Choctaw youth named James Lawrence McDonald. In 1818, McDonald moved to Georgetown to work in the Office of Indian Trade. McKenney raised his own son, William, and McDonald like brothers. McKenney was assured that McDonald would serve as evidence of the capacity of the Native Americans. Now that the ability of the Native Americans for "civilization" was confirmed, McKenney believed that an effective educational system was needed to make McDonald's success applicable to other Native American youths.

McKenney held, like other missionaries, that Christianity itself included civilization. Believing that "true civilization is found only in Christian countries," Cyrus Kingsbury translated this message into concrete goals, that is, the conversion of "the savage" into "the civilized man" and the Christian. McKenney's view on the "Christian Indians" is well illustrated by his description of them when he stayed near Green Bay in August 1827. While McKenney was about to sign the treaty of Butte des Morts with the Menominees and Winnebagos, he recorded his impression about the "Christian Indian" he saw there, as follows:

The Christian Indians sang again this evening, their hymns being made more strikingly sweet by the yelling and whooping of the wild Indians by whom there were surrounded. What a contrast! The woods made vocal on the one hand by Christian music, and startled on the other by the wild yells of the uncivilized! And yet both proceeding from the same face.²⁶

Throughout his tours in the areas with a population of indigenous groups, McKenney reaffirmed his appreciation of civilization. Having reached "the line where the civilized and savage limits meet," which was near Fort Edwards, he was very glad to hear cattle lowing and see sunburnt, coarse-clad farmers. "How natural were these sounds," he recalled, "and how sweet! How composing was all this and how rapidly arose the associations of civilization, of refinement, and of home! How all this hushed the feelings!"

McKenney's vision of civilization as the highest attainment of human beings remained consistent; however, his tours in the Native American country made him drastically change his assumptions regarding the possibility of "civilizing" the Native Americans. Upon returning to Washington, McKenney urged the Congress to legislate an Indian Removal bill in his official report of the tours on November 29, 1827. McKenney wrote, "The Creeks are a wretched people. Poverty and distress are visible everywhere, and these have become entailed upon them by habitual drunkenness." Then, he suggested, "I hold their recovery from it, and from its long train of miseries, whilst they retain their present relations to the States, to be hopeless." By the mid-1820s, McKenney began to question the value of the ongoing educational programs for the Native Americans, with ambivalent thoughts on the plausibility of achieving his philanthropic goals.

4. The Policy of Removing Native People

Implementing Removal in the South

President James Monroe proposed a voluntary removal policy in a special message in January 1825. Given the increasing pressure by the whites against the Native Americans, "Experience has clearly demonstrated that in their present state, it is impossible to incorporate them in such masses, in any form whatever, into our system," said the message. Monroe rationalized his proposal by saying, "Without a timely provision against the dangers, their degradation and extermination will be inevitable."

McKenney favorably interpreted the message as a warning to the "friends of the Indians," such as himself. He came to regard removal as a necessity for the "salvation of the Indians" and said, "We were admonished not to permit a misguided philanthropy to give accelerated force to those causes that have been so long warring upon the happiness and lives of these people."30 Earlier, McKenney had been in accord with the majority of missionaries in opposing the removal. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which had been McKenney's old ally in the campaign for establishing the Civilization Fund, was very influential in arousing opposition against the removal among church groups and the public. Undoubtedly, the Native Americans, especially the southeastern tribes such as the Cherokee, also criticized McKenney for supporting the removal. For instance, The Cherokee Phoenix, a bilingual weekly newspaper published by the Cherokee, severely attacked McKenney. Responding to a rumor that McKenney planned to visit the Cherokee, the editorial of May 1828 critically stated, "A few years ago, this gentleman would have been welcomed into this country on any business, as a friend of the Indians, but now, we take the liberty to say, a more unpopular Commissioner could not well be sent,"31 As mentioned earlier, McKenney assured the Secretary of War in 1824 that "an entire reformation of the Indians" might be effected within the generation. In January 1825, however, he agreed with President Monroe in suggesting the voluntary removal of some Indian tribes. Undoubtedly, the missionaries and the Native Americans criticized McKenney for his inconsistency.

McKenney himself admitted his change of mind. He rationalized it by emphasizing that he supported the removal not as an alternative but as a prerequisite to the "advancement" of the Native Americans. In his letter dated April 10, 1826, he told Cyrus Kingsbury of the American Board, "I once, like you, hoped to complete success before I was compelled to let go of the hope to which I had like you, been so long clinging, as wholly delusive. It is as much impossible to redeem the Natives situated as they are, and elevate their condition, and place them on a level with ourselves, as it would be for you, or I, to raise the dead." McKenney began to cast doubts about the soundness of the present civilization program. "It was 'distance that lent this enchantment to the view," he wrote, explaining his changes in opinion, "we have since seen for ourselves, and that which before looked like a flying cloud, we found, on a close inspection, to be an impassable mountain." Compelled to admit that the official effort to "civilize" the Native Americans bore little fruit, McKenney drew a conclusion that if the Native Americans did not emigrate, they must perish.

McKenney's attitude toward the Native Americans had deep philanthropic roots. By the mid-1820s, however, he relinquished his hope for the social incorporation of the Native Americans with the non-Natives as an effective means to their "advancement." Convinced that separation from the dominant society was the only way to save the Native Americans, he first urged the Congregationalists and Presbyterians of the American Board to send petitions in favor of their removal to the Congress. Although McKenney hoped that it would work out in the same way as the Civilization Fund Act, the American Board stood firmly against the

removal, rejecting his proposal. McKenney then turned to the Episcopalians and proposed to organize an association exclusively for the purpose of "the security, preservation, and happiness of our Indians."³⁴

McKenney was instrumental in organizing the association named "the Indian Board, for the Emigration, Preservation, and Improvement of the Aborigines of America," which was established on July 22, 1829. Its preamble clearly stated that the only hope for their survival relied on the voluntary consent of the Indians to be removed to the west of the Mississippi. At a meeting of the Board, McKenney appealed as if the Native Americans were present, saying, "Brothers, try us this once. Do not distrust our object; it is your welfare, only, that we seek." In spite of McKenney's enthusiastic support for the Board, it found little legal and moral grounds to assert that the removal was beneficial for the Native Americans.

After the long-standing controversy over the removal in the government and the public, the Indian Removal Act was enacted in May 1830. McKenney was, however, far from satisfied by the act, for the measure did not mention the benefits that he had promised the Native Americans they would receive in exchange for the cession of their lands. In his letter to Hugh Lawson White, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, McKenney asked the senator to sponsor a resolution guaranteeing subsequent legislation for the benefits, but in vain.³⁶ Three months later, McKenney was dismissed from office.

McKenney was now isolated from the missionaries who opposed the removal and the government officials who aggressively pushed for it. The discrepancy in McKenney's views on federal Indian affairs arose from the tension between the missionary-like ideal and the administrative obstacles to its realization. McKenney and prominent benevolent societies like the American Board had once formed a firm alliance and enjoyed the fruits of collaboration such as the Civilization Fund Act of 1819. They gradually disagreed about the nature of the civilizing process. Although McKenney still believed in the transmission to civilization as an ideal on behalf of the fortune of the Native Americans, he started doubting the plausibility of his ideal.

McKenney's Cultural Assumptions toward the Native Americans

During the late 1810s, McKenney declared that incorporation into the dominant society was the best way to "advance" the Native Americans. Impressed by Kingsbury's "success" in educating the Cherokees at Brainerd, McKenney urged the Congress to increase the number of schools as well as factories. In the mid-1820s, however, McKenney drastically changed his view of what ought to be done for the welfare of the Native Americans and became an advocate of voluntary removal.

It is certain that his extensive tour in the Indian country in 1827 and 1828 had a major impact on his perception of the Native Americans, and that it was the reason behind this drastic change. McKenney was shocked to see the situation of the Native Americans who were once independent and lofty, but were now imbued with the vices of civilization, particularly alcohol. Since he entered office, he had protested against the use of whiskey and urged the adoption of more rigid regulations to limit the influx of liquor into the

Indian country. President Thomas Jefferson's words summarized the serious problem of alcoholism among the Native Americans since the very beginning of the federal Indian affairs: "It has weakened their bodies, enervated their minds, exposed them to hunger, cold nakedness, and poverty, kept them in perpetual broils, and reduced their population."³⁷

McKenney became more aware of the serious problems of alcoholism the hard way. He was proud to see James L. McDonald, his first adopted child, as a member of the Choctaws delegations to Washington in 1824. McDonald, now an accredited lawyer, seemed to meet McKenney's expectations in serving as an intellectual liaison between the Native Americans and the non-Native people. He played a prominent role in negotiating with the government on behalf of his people. Mainly due to the pressure of heavy responsibility, however, he gradually relied heavily on alcohol as the negotiations on the removal of his people dragged on. McKenney recalled, "I sought all proper opportunities to restore him," and "on one occasion, I detained him in my office, after the rest of the delegation had retired, and locking the door, spoke to him on his fall with every tenderness that I could employ." McDonald was, in the opinion of McKenney, no longer a distinguished role model of the educated Native Americans.

Nevertheless, even after this incident, McKenney adopted three other Native youths for several years. One of them was Dougherty Colbert, son of a prominent Chickasaw leader, who stayed with McKenney for two years. The others were William Barnard, a Creek, and Lee Compere, an Uchee who were adopted "at the request of their parents and friends" during his tour in the Indian country. Until McKenney was dismissed from the Indian office in 1830, he took care of them in Washington, D.C. These youths were sent home after McKenney left office. Bernard became desperate and never recovered from his depression. As for Compere, McKenney did not hear anything from him. McKenney's relations with these youths, which ended fruitless and unpleasant for him, cast a shadow on his conviction of the possibilities of "civilizing" the Native Americans. Such conviction shattered itself on the hard fact of the death of his forlorn hope, McDonald. In the summer of 1831, McDonald, who had never recovered from alcoholism and mental depression, died from either falling or jumping off a cliff.

5. Conclusion

From the beginning of his career in federal Indian affairs, McKenney had been ardent in his support of Native American schooling as a means of promoting the dominant society's standards of civilization. Believing that the Native youths were qualified to pursue a course of "civilization," he continued to promote the increase of federal subsidies for the education of the Native Americans. Even in 1826, McKenney still asked for federal support for schools for Native youths; at the same time, he gradually shifted his focus from schooling to voluntary removal. Through a course of instruction, McKenney affirmed in his *Annual Report* for the Year 1826 that the Native Americans would be expected to fulfill their function as "an intermediate

link between our own citizens, and our wandering neighbors, softening the shades of each, and enjoying the confidence of both."⁴⁰

It is certain that at the end of the 1820s, McKenney was vacillating between the civilization programs based on the ongoing schooling system and the voluntary removal of some Native groups. His official report dated November 1, 1828, revealed his complete self-doubt in his conviction of the physical and moral welfare of the Native Americans. He raised a fundamental question, "What are humanity and justice in reference to this unfortunate race?" As for the means to "save the Indians," "I leave to be determined upon by those who are more competent than I am to decide."

One historian described McKenney as a self-seeking opportunist who swam with the tide of the political arena. Another regarded him as a man of honor and integrity with the only exception of his attitude toward the removal of some Native groups. To a certain extent, McKenney managed to maintain a balance between his ideal and the reality as a government official of Indian affairs. His ideal was too weak to stand firm under the dominating sway of the removal. McKenney was typical of many good-natured citizens in those days: He wanted to be a true defender of the Indians who was compassionate to the plight of the Native Americans but failed to be a true defender of the indigenous rights that most Native American groups made repeated claims to and that were even partly guaranteed by the treaties with the United States.

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³ 4 Stat., 411-12.

⁴ Felix S. Cohen, *Handbook of Federal Indian Law, 1982 edition* (Charlottesville, Va.: Michie Co., 1982), 19.

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- ²⁰ Senate Journal, 19 February 1819, 15th Cong. 2nd sess. (serial 13), 288.
- ²¹ 3 Stat., 516.
- ²² Ibid.
- 3 Stat., 517; Francis Paul Prucha, ed., Documents of United States Indian Policy, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 33.
- ²⁴ Viola, McKenney, 186.
- ²⁵ Sheehan, Extinction, 127.
- ²⁶ McKenney, *Memoir*, 83-4.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 135.
- Viola, McKenney, 210.
- ²⁹ Prucha, ed., *Documants*, 39.
- 30 McKenney, Memoir, 240.
- ³¹ Viola, McKenney, 219.
- ³² Ibid., 202.
- 33 McKenney, Memoir, 241.
- Francis Paul Prucha, "Thomas L. McKenney and the New York Indian Board," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 48 (June 1961- March 1962): 639.
- 35 McKenney, Memoir, 247.
- ³⁶ Viola, McKenney, 222.
- 37 Sheehan, Extinction, 239.
- ³⁸ Viola, McKenney, 199.
- 39 McKenney, Memoir, 187.
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