“Civilization as Self-Defense? American Republicanism and Cherokee Resistance to Removal”

Burke A. Hendrix

Department of Political Science

1284 University of Oregon

Eugene, OR 97403

[bhendrix@uoregon.edu](mailto:bhendrix@uoregon.edu)

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Scholars of American political thought have as yet given limited attention to American Indian political action during the period of American colonial expansion. When that political action is given attention, it is commonly in the form of militarized resistance or charismatic religious revivals. Yet there is a great deal that should be of interest to scholars of American political thought in considering the political strategies adopted by Elias Boudinot and other members of the Cherokee Nation who sought to resist Andrew Jackson’s program of Removal across the Mississippi. Boudinot was editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, a newspaper intended to generate support for Cherokee efforts among Northerners, as well as a prominent speaker and fundraiser for Cherokee efforts. This paper considers the strategy that Boudinot and other Cherokee leaders adopted in attempting to prove their “civilized” status: they sought to show that they had become agriculturalists, Christian, and literate and law-abiding citizens. Yet they also sought to maintain a measured distance from the United States, to remain “not great, but faithful allies” rather than citizens. This paper considers the degree to which these Cherokee efforts could reasonably be understood as resistance to colonialism rather than accession, and suggests the value of examining American Indian responses to American republicanism closely. The paper gives special attention to Boudinot’s short essay “Address to the Whites,” which it suggests may be a good primary resource for syllabi in American Political Thought to include.

Section I: American Indians in American Political Thought

American Indians are rarely integrated into discussions of American political thought as political actors or thinkers, rather than as representatives of populations who are primarily acted upon by others. This is understandable in many ways: American Indian political thinkers seem to have had relatively limited influences on the documented currents of American political thought, even if Indians as subjects of theoretical discussion played a variety of roles in imagining the frontier, the boundaries of state and nation, and so on. Yet American political thought has become much more inclusive in recent years toward the intellectual activities of African Americans, from before the Civil War up to the present, often by rediscovering overlooked texts and moments of agency. This is an important development in obvious ways, which needs to continue. Over the long term, it seems essential for American Political thought as a field to similarly engage with American Indian thinkers, and to locate them in relation with or against broader political currents. This is essential for the capacities of those we educate if nothing else: students should have the opportunity to see American Indian thinkers as active agents engaged carefully with the ideas of American political traditions, in the same way that African American political actors are increasingly recognized to be.

Scholars of American political thought would be more likely to undertake these engagements, and to include more American Indian figures in their courses, if they knew where to begin. This paper represents the early stage of a book chapter for a volume to be entitled *Not Great But Faithful Allies: American Indian Responses to American Republicanism 1776-1936*. Many compilation volumes in American political thought include Indian voices primarily from the “wild West” period of the frontier, and often focus on American Indian leaders who speak from positions relatively outside of the main currents of American thought: they often speak, for example, about the impossibility of owning the Earth, or the binding force of treaties so long as the water runs and the grass grows, or about the desires of the Great Spirit for peace or against displacement. Though there is much of theoretical interest in selections of this kind, they often have the effect of reinforcing conventional American narratives about the alien character of Indian nations, about their inherent demise in the face of an encroaching civilization, and about the limited imagination of Indian political actors in new political conditions. Perhaps more troublingly, such selections often require trust in the capacities of transcribers: often Indian speeches and other texts were written down by those engaged in the colonizing process, whose motivations and reliability are not always clear.

In this book, I want to focus instead on American Indian political actors who were engaging with American political thinking within its own idioms, who were unambiguously the writers of the words attributed to them, and who sought to navigate American colonialism in non-violent encounters far from the frontier. I am interested, then, in Indian intellectuals and publicists who sought to counteract American policies by their words and arguments, rather than by military force. Given their deep engagement with American political thought, these figures are often more ambiguous in the “Indian” nature of their thought: often they seem too deeply intermeshed with other currents, “corrupted” as pure voices. Nonetheless, these figures were often seeking to construct very different conceptions of North America’s future, usually in ways that retained space for Indian nations of distinctive political form. They envisioned, in other words, an America that did not exclude them as actors with ongoing political agency. Considering their efforts carefully can help to reclaim some of what they sought to achieve, while making the teaching of American political thought more vivid and more fair toward this complex history for the future citizens we are now creating.

This paper examines the theoretical efforts of a key member of the Cherokee Nation’s attempt to resist Removal west of the Mississippi: Elias Boudinot. Boudinot served as editor of the bi-lingual newspaper *Cherokee Phoenix*, and through the newspaper played a central role in debates about the Cherokee response to the election of Andrew Jackson and its aftermath. Despite the ferocity of his defense of Cherokee self-rule, he was also one of a party of unauthorized Cherokee actors who ultimately signed the treaty of removal. He was subsequently executed, as authorized under Cherokee law, for selling the lands of the Cherokee Nation. This paper focuses on a specific speech by Boudinot, intended to raise funds for the opening of the newspaper in the period before Jackson’s ascension to the Presidency (if not before his rise to political dominance in the United States). I consider this speech relation to a letter by Thomas Jefferson written 20 years earlier. Boudinot’s strategy, as much of the strategy of the Cherokee resistance as a whole, was to assert that the Cherokee Nation was swiftly becoming “civilized” in appropriate ways, so that there were no grounds for displacing it from its lands. This speech raises complex questions about the ethics of political speech and action which haunted many American Indian political efforts. In short form: could “civilization” ever effectively serve as a method of self-defense, or were such efforts mistaken from the beginning? Did American Indian leaders have an obligation to reject claims of civilization in the interests of their people, or were they instead required to adopt such language (and accompanying social practice) where it had any chance of success?

The paper proceeds in four sections. First, it outlines the content of Jefferson’s 1806 letter, locating this within Jefferson’s broader Indian diplomacy and theoretical presumptions. Second, it outlines Boudinot biographically, to illustrate the degree to which his education itself was representative of larger Cherokee strategies of resistance. Third, it turns to Boudinot’s 1826 “Address to the Whites”, and shows the degree to which this speech responds (broadly speaking) to much of Jefferson’s letter, while also describing an imaginable role for the Cherokee nation in regard to the United States: as a “not great, but faithful ally.” The final section considers the ethics of political actions of this kind more generally.

Section II. Thomas Jefferson’s 1806 Letter

The Cherokee Nation faced multiple political crises long before Indian Removal became the formal policy of the United States. The history of what eventually emerged as the “Cherokee Nation” from a loose grouping of communities united by language, descent, and cultural practices into a relatively determinate political grouping prior to the American Revolution is itself deeply complex. Individual Cherokee towns with relatively divergent forms of political organization and multiple clan systems that had previously been enmeshed within complex patterns of authority and independence found themselves increasingly regarded by others as a single unit, and forced by military engagements and political negotiations to begin acting accordingly. In the American War of Independence, the Cherokees fought (mostly) on the side of King George, to mixed effect. The 1785 Treaty of Hopewell recognized relatively broad Cherokee territorial boundaries, while specifying that the Cherokees were “under the protection of the United States” and subject to its authority for many purposes.[[1]](#endnote-1) Despite initially generous terms in this regard, the Cherokees were swiftly under pressure to transfer more land to the United States in formal ways, and under considerably more informal pressure from land speculators and would-be settlers to vacate portions of their territory.

The Treaty described the Cherokees as a single unit, but in many ways the individual towns and powerful clan figures remained highly independent, and Cherokee individuals were deeply divided about how to respond to incursions into their territory or to requests for the purchase of land. Some Cherokee leaders were eager to sell lands that they regarded as their own or as the specific property of their town (rather than of a single abstraction called the “Cherokee Nation”), while others were completely resistant to such steps. Some relatively prominent Cherokee women had intermarried with non-Cherokees, including many British Loyalists, and these also created uncertain patterns of expectation for how the future should be envisioned. While these men were integrated into Cherokee society in relatively determinate ways, as clan membership traveled matrilineally, this nonetheless led to uncertainties about the relative value of deeper political and economic engagement with the United States, as well as challenges around the value of English as a language and of the safety of social relations with white society.

In 1805, a relatively small number of Cherokee headmen signed a land-sale agreement at Tellico with the United States. In 1806, Doublehead, one of the leaders of this group, went to Washington DC to negotiate a further land cession. The culminated in an orchestrated meeting with Thomas Jefferson, and a formal address.[[2]](#endnote-2) Speaking in his Presidential capacity to his “Friends and Children” of the Cherokee Nation,[[3]](#endnote-3) Jefferson delivered a speech that was soon afterward printed and send home with the Cherokee visitors. It was afterward circulated to other Cherokee leaders by the permanent American agent to the nation, who described the message as a template for what the Cherokees must do if they wished to retain any of their territories over the long term.[[4]](#endnote-4) While it would be a mistake to attribute great causal weight to the address itself, the ideas that it contained were reiterated multiple times afterward in a variety of forms.[[5]](#endnote-5) The address represents a relatively concise (and highly teachable) articulation of a particular kind of future for the Cherokees, and careful attention to it is necessary to recognize the strategy that Elias Boudinot later adopted in relation to arguments of this kind.

Jefferson both praised the Cherokee delegation and American efforts lead them into civilization. He thus attributes agency to the Cherokees, but it is primarily for their swift uptake of American examples and “encouragement”:

I cannot take leave of you without expressing the satisfaction I have received from your visit. I see with my own eyes that the endeavors we have been making to encourage and lead you in the way of improving your situation have not been unsuccessful; it has been like grain sown in good ground, producing abundantly.

The agricultural metaphor is no accident. The primary focus of the letter is the importance of the Cherokee adopting agriculture, and thereby transforming themselves socially in fundamental ways:

You are becoming farmers, learning the use of the plough and the hoe, enclosing your grounds and employing that labor in their cultivation which you formerly employed in hunting and in war; and I see handsome specimens of cotton cloth raised, spun and wove by yourselves. You are also raising cattle and hogs for your food, and horses to assist your labors.

The letter assures them that the pursuit of such a course will unquestionably be to their benefit, and that it will cumulatively build toward a very different model of civilization than they had previously experienced: “Go on, my children, in the same way and be assured the further you advance in it the happier and more respectable you will be.” Though the language of “respectability” does not have a clear referent here, it is easy to see how the Cherokees would have interpreted in: respectable in the eyes of the United States and their white neighbors.

Jefferson describes a number of specific social changes that are expected to follow from the adoption of agriculture, including a change of gender roles: “You will find your next want to be mills to grind your corn, which by relieving your women from the loss of time in beating it into meal, will enable them to spin and weave more.” These changes in gender roles will also accompany a fundamental change to conceptions of family and the way in which property rights are acknowledged and protected:

When a man has enclosed and improved his farm, builds a good house on it and raised plentiful stocks of animals, he will wish when he dies that these things shall go to his wife and children, whom he loves more than he does his other relations, and for whom he will work with pleasure during his life. You will, therefore, find it necessary to establish laws for this.

Although easily overlooked, the change Jefferson describes here represents a deep shift from traditional clan relationships, in which the property of the deceased often went to clan relatives rather than necessarily to the widow or children. In this light, Jefferson’s claim that property should go to “his wife and children, whom he loves more than his other relations”, can be seen as prescribing a certain kind of love rather than simply describing: the transformations here are suggested to fit better with natural human affections than the peculiar Cherokee alternative, which could thus been as only the result of confusion or force.

Jefferson’s address focuses not only on social transformation, but on legal transformation as well. To truly progress, the Cherokees would need to create systems of legality which Jefferson seemed to believe were previously missing. “When a man has property, earned by his own labor, he will not like to see another come and take it from him because he happens to be stronger, or else to defend it by spilling blood.” The cure for this problem will surprise no one who knows Jefferson’s views on neutrality, reason, and popular sovereignty: “You will find it necessary then to appoint good men, as judges, to decide contests between man and man, according to reason and to the rules you shall establish.” The need to create a legal system with widespread political participation along the (idealized) lines of the American model are clear, and Jefferson offers the help of the United States in relaying important lessons already learned: “If you wish to be aided by our counsel and experience in these things we shall always be ready to assist you with our advice.”

The address frames Cherokees as a people who naturally lived by hunting and warfare prior to contact with whites. (Though Jefferson could not know this, historically Cherokees had been primarily farming people prior to their involvement in international trade networks.)[[6]](#endnote-6) Jefferson praises their progress while “reminding” them of this history, and its continuing hold on some of the nation’s young men:

My children, it is unnecessary for me to advise you against spending all your time and labor in warring with and destroying your fellow-men and wasting your own members. You already see the folly and iniquity of it. Your young men, however, are not yet sufficiently sensible of it.

These young men, Jefferson claims, are crossing the Mississippi to raid Indian tribes on the other side. Jefferson argues that this must be stopped, because the Mississippi is now the property of the United States:

The Mississippi now belongs to us. It must not be a river of blood. It is now the water-path along which all our people of Natchez, St. Louis, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky and the western parts of Pennsylvania and Virginia are constantly passing with their property…

Another kind of crossing of the Mississippi is permitted, however, in ways that point toward the vast programs of Indian removal that would follow in the age of Jackson: “If [young men] go to visit or to live with the Cherokees on the other side of the river we shall not object to at. That country is ours. We will permit them to live in it.” The era of war and the hunt, Jefferson indicates, has closed firmly, and questions about what lies to its west have been settled: that country belongs to the United States, and it will “permit” Cherokees “to live in it.”

The address closes with warm words about what the future will hold, a future of equality and close relationship:

Tell all your chiefs, your men, women and children, that I take them by the hand and hold it fast. That I am their father, wish their happiness and well-being, and am always ready to promote their good. My children, I thank you for your visit and pray to the Great Spirit who made us all and planted us all in this land to live together like brothers that He will conduct you safely to your homes, and grant you to find your families and your friends in good health.

This is a powerful vision in many ways: if whites were intended by God to live in America, so were Indians, and the two were to live together “like brothers”. Jefferson had taken them by the hand to “hold it fast”, entrenching these political relationships of equality with what the Cherokees will in the future become. It is not an entirely unthreatening vision, with its suggestion of American “fatherhood” and intimations of the Removal policy to come, but it is possible for it to be read sincerely, and it is not implausible to believe that some Cherokees might have found authentic moral appeal in the vision, particularly in light of the chaos of the near past. Leaving aside its potential moral appeal, however, Jefferson’s address contains a tacit bargain: if the Cherokee do as they are asked, they will be treated as equals and (apparently) allowed to maintain their own institutions of popular sovereignty. It was this tacit bargain, whether best articulated through Jefferson’s address or otherwise, that the Cherokees tried over the next decades to force the American nation to uphold.

Section III. Elias Boudinot’s Civilizational Upbringing

There are many potential Cherokee texts that one might read in considering the difficult political task of maintaining a national existence as the United States became increasingly more overt in its hostility to American Indian nations as the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 retreated into the past. This essay will focus on Elias Boudinot, who was a complex figure in multiple ways. He is best known for two important roles in Cherokee history: as the editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix* newspaper, and as one of the minority of leaders who ultimately signed a treaty of Removal with the United States in the 1835 Treaty of New Echota. He and other signers of this document were subsequently executed by other Cherokees for their clear violation of the 1828 Constitution of the Cherokee Nation. Boudinot’s life thus crystalizes many of the ambiguities in the Cherokee strategy of resistance. Despite signing the Treaty, I will not read him as a traitor in the paper’s final section, but as a sincere and (generally) careful political thinker and strategist facing deeply non-ideal conditions for political action.

Elias Boudinot was born as Buck Watie in 1804 in what is now Northwestern Georgia, to community that had already begun to adopt many aspects of non-Cherokee society under the influence of his powerful uncle Major Ridge.[[7]](#endnote-7) (Members of the Ridge and Watie families would remain central figures in Cherokee politics past the end of the Civil War.)[[8]](#endnote-8) As a young man, Watie was educated in Moravian mission schools, which emphasized “civilization”, non-Indian styles of dress and economic, social, and political life, and (unsurprisingly) Christianization. At the age of 13, the Moravian missionaries invited him to transfer to a school for Indians from multiple nations in Cornwall, Connecticut. On the journey to the school, he was introduced to American Bible Society President (and former member of the Continental Congress) Elias Boudinot. After this meeting, Buck Watie changed his name as a sign of honor and lived the remainder of his life under this appellation. While at Cornwall, he met the daughter of a prominent Moravian family, who he would eventually marry (to considerable controversy).[[9]](#endnote-9) Boudinot was thus raised for “civilization” from the time of his youth, as part of a clear project shared by many Cherokee families to change many traditional Cherokee social practices. Yet this did not thereby make him less dedicated to the political survival of the Cherokee Nation.

[Much more biographical information and overview of Cherokee anti-removal politics to follow in this section. Apologies for the incompleteness of this section; this is where I need to do the most research to relay the history effectively.]

Section IV. “Not Great, But Faithful, Allies”

Elias Boudinot is now best known as the founding editor of the bilingual *Cherokee Phoenix* newspaper, which ran in English and the newly invented Cherokee language syllabary created by Sequoyah. Purchasing and operating a printing press was economically demanding, however, and the Cherokee Nation lacked the resources to fund this effort by itself. In 1825, Boudinot was asked by Cherokee leadership to undertake a speaking tour of Northern cities with the goal of raising funds from churches and other organizations and, more generally, to act as a physical instantiation of the success Cherokee efforts at social reorganization.[[10]](#endnote-10) In 1826, he published a pamphlet from one of these speeches under the title of *An Address to the Whites*. This section of the paper considers this short speech in some detail, given its inherent interests and usefulness for courses in American Political Thought.

Boudinot’s efforts to solicit financial help, and more broadly to defend the political rights of the Cherokee Nation, begin by acknowledging a broad story of civilizational progress that poses Indians as irredeemably violent and savage that he wishes to deny:

Some there are, perhaps even in this enlightened assembly, who at the bare sight of an Indian, or at the mention of the name, would throw back their imaginations to ancient times, to the savages of savage warfare, to the yells pronounced over the mangled bodies of women and children, thus creating an opinion, inapplicable and highly injurious to those for whose temporal interest and eternal welfare, I come to plead.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Boudinot frames this description as incorrect, without precisely denying that it has elements of truth: he does mention that the imaginations of the audience may be thrown back to “ancient times”, and the wording suggests the character of these times may in fact be as envisioned correctly. What seems more important for Boudinot, however, is not the accuracy of this description, but the universality of “savagery” among all peoples at particular points in time:

What is an Indian? Is he not formed of the same materials with yourself? For “Of one blood God created all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth.” Though it be true that he is ignorant, that he is a heathen, that he is a savage; yet he is no more than all others have been under similar circumstances. Eighteen centuries ago what were the inhabitants of Great Britain?

The story that Boudinot wishes to tell is thus one of civilizational progress and change, which presumes uniformity of human behavior in equivalent conditions of knowledge and social organization. Whatever the fairness of accounts that portray Indians as brutal and warlike, they do not go to the inherent character of a people, but only represent a description of where they are along a civilizational trajectory: Indians and whites are ultimately the same kinds of creatures, whatever their differing circumstances in the recent past or in the present.

This is in many was a strategy intended to put claims about inherent savagery aside. What matters for Boudinot’s speech is not the past, but the present and the future that can yet be. In this regard, he is clear about his mission as a “representative” of the Cherokee Nation in a double sense: both as an authorized speaker, and as someone who is representative of what the Cherokee Nation is becoming and will become in the future, as it continues to grow into civilization:

But I am not as my fathers were–broader means and nobler influences have fallen upon me. Yet I was not born as thousands are, in a stately dome and amid the congratulations of the great, for on a little hill, in a lonely cabin, overspread by the forest oak I first drew my breath; and in a language unknown to learned and polished nations, I learnt to lisp my fond mother’s name. In after days, I have had greater advantages than most of my race; and I now stand before you delegated by my native country to seek her interest, to labour for her respectability, and by my public efforts to assist in raising her to an equal standing with other nations of the earth.

Boudinot draws on more appealing images of Indians here, of a birth “overspread by a forest oak”, and of maternal love. But the emphasis is on the present day, of “broader and nobler influences”, and of his current “delegation”. Importantly, Boudinot does not talk here of his “tribe” or his “people”, but his country and other “nations of the earth”. The political implications of the speech are thus overt from the beginning: as the Cherokees are becoming civilized, they can no longer be treated as timeless savages outside of the human community, but as nations which must be respected in their own right.

The core of the argument for respecting the Cherokee Nation rests on an attempt to show that the kinds of social change requested by Jefferson and by many other kinds of civilization policies have in fact been accepted and acted on. Boudinot is clear that the Cherokees have not only accepted the plausibility of these goals, but have acted on them to a great extent:

In 1810 There were 19,500 cattle; 6,100 horses; 19,600 swine 1,037 sheep; 467 looms; 1600 spinning wheels; 30 wagons; 500 ploughs; 3 saw-mills; 13 grist-mills &c. At this time [1826] there are 22,000 cattle; 7,600 Horses; 46,000 swine; 2,500 sheep; 762 looms; 2488 spinning wheels; 172 wagons; 2,943 ploughs; 10 saw-mills; 31 grist-mills; 62 Blacksmith-shops; 8 cotton machines; 18 schools; 18 ferries; and a number of public roads. In one district there were, last winter, upwards of 1000 volumes of good books; and 11 different periodical papers both religious and political, which were taken and read.

The statistics here are intentionally presented as overwhelming: they are difficult to ignore, but very difficult to process individually, so that one is left primarily with an impression of many changes, many instruments of agriculture, and many other forms of material productivity. The existence of the facts themselves constitutes evidence of social change, as they come from official censuses in 1810 and 1824, the latter carried out by the Cherokees themselves.[[12]](#endnote-12) “Savages” would be unlikely to have these kinds of figures readily available, whatever their content might be.

Boudinot is clear about the organization of Cherokee political life, describing in detail the territorial boundaries of the Nation, and describing many of the features of the nation’s governmental organization. Jefferson’s letter argued that the Cherokees would need to develop written laws and determinative forms of political decisionmaking, and Boudinot seeks to articulate clearly the structural features of Cherokee political organization for his audience:

The Cherokee Nation is divided into eight districts, in each of which are established courts of justice, where all disputed cases are decided by a jury, under the direction of a circuit Judge, who has jurisdiction over two districts. Sheriffs and other public officers are appointed to execute the decisions of the courts, collect debts, and arrest thieves and other criminals. Appeals may be taken to the Superior Court, held annually at the seat of Government. The Legislative authority is vested in General Court, which consists of the National Committee and Council. The National Committee consist of thirteen members who are generally men of sound sense and fine talents. The National Council consists of thirty-two members, beside the speaker, who acts as the representatives of the people. Every bill passing these two bodies, becomes the law of the land. Clerks are appointed to do the writings, and record the proceedings of the Council.

The effect is, again, to give many details that may not be important to readers individually, but which build together for a clear portrait of a nation living under law. Jefferson argued that laws would be needed to prevent conflict, to resolve property disputes, and to control wrong-doers. Boudinot, interestingly, focuses on these aspects of law before focusing on patterns of governance. What is presumably more important are Cherokee methods for ensuring that laws are followed, rather than the specific political structures described. The standards for these structures nonetheless seem appropriate. Decisions, as Boudinot notes, are to be recorded in writing, in ways that Jefferson would surely have endorsed.

Because his audience is Christian, Boudinot is also eager to describe two related kinds of social changes that are similarly taken to indicate progress for missionaries and many others: the creation of a system of writing, and the translation of the New Testament into Cherokee. Boudinot is clear that the creation of a written form of Cherokee speaks well to Cherokee capacities, being created entirely without the help of missionaries, and yet fully successful as a written form:

The Cherokee mode of writing lately invented by George Guest [Sequoya], who could not read any language nor speak any other than his own, consists of eighty-six characters, principally syllabic, the combinations of which form all the words of the language.

The most powerful purpose of the syllabary, in Boudinot’s description, lies in its religious implications:

The translation of the New Testament, together with Guest’s mode of writing, has swept away that barrier which has long existed, and opened a spacious channel for the instruction of adult Cherokees. Persons of all ages and classes may now read the precepts of the Almighty in their own language. Before it is long, there will scarcely be an individual in the nation who can say, “I know not God neither understand I what thou sayest,” for all shall know him from the greatest to the least.

It is easy to see why a missionary audience (if likely not Jefferson himself) would find this argument powerful. Only a relatively small percentage of Cherokees were as yet Christian, but it was easy to see how this Bible translation might make a great deal of difference to missionary efforts.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Boudinot’s appeal to his audience is ultimately for the funds to purchase a printing press and ultimately to found a seminary to continue this religious work:

Sensible of this last point, and wishing to do something for themselves, the Cherokees have thought it advisable that there should be established, a Printing Press and a Seminary of respectable character; and for these purposes your aid and patronage are now solicited.

Yet the political goals of this press are not far from the surface, and in fact Boudinot has little of depth to say about the seminary.[[14]](#endnote-14) Much of what he has to say about the importance of printing is instead overtly political:

They wish the types, as expressed in their resolution, to be composed of English letters and Cherokee characters…. The simplicity of [the Cherokee] method of writing, and the eagerness to obtain a knowledge of it, are evinced by the astonishing rapidity with which it is acquired, and by the numbers who do so. It is about two years since its introduction, and already there are a great many who can read it. In the neighbourhood in which I live, I do not recollect a male Cherokee, between the ages of fifteen and twenty five, who is ignorant of this mode of writing. But in connexion with those for Cherokee characters, it is necessary to have type for English letters. There are many who already speak and read the English language, and can appreciate the advantages which would result from the publication of their laws and transactions in a well conducted newspaper.

What is described is thus not only continued printing of the New Testament in the Cherokee language, but “laws and transactions”. There is far more than simply religious knowledge at stake here.

Indeed, Boudinot argues that a Cherokee newspaper would be important not only to allow the Cherokees to communicate with one another publicly, but to communicate with non-Indian society as well. The very existence of such a press would make the same impression as his listing of agricultural growth, but would reach a much wider audience, with implications for all Indians, not only the Cherokees:

Such a paper, comprising a summary of religious and political events, &c. on the one hand; and on the other, exhibiting the feelings, disposition, improvements, and prospects of the Indians; their traditions, their true character, as it once was and as it now is; the ways and means most likely to throw the mantle of civilization over all tribes; and such other matter as will tend to diffuse proper and correct impressions in regard to their condition — such a paper could not fail to create much interest in the American community, favourable to the aborigines, and to have a powerful influence, on the advancement of the Indians themselves.

Unless at least some Indians can express their own thought in their own words, there will be no way for Americans to recognize what it means to treat them fairly, or to understand the progress they have made and are continuing to make. A bilingual newspaper in ones hands would be a powerful statement on its own, with potentially broad ramifications in spreading correct information:

And I am inclined to think, after all that has been said of the aborigines, after all that has been written in narratives, professedly to elucidate the leading traits of their character, that the public knows little of that character. To obtain a correct and complete knowledge of these people, there must exist a vehicle of Indian intelligence, altogether different from those which have heretofore been employed. Will not a paper published in an Indian country, under proper and judicious regulations, have the desired effect?

It is thus not sufficient, Boudinot seems to recognize, for the Cherokees actually to undertake social change of the kind that Jefferson and others asked of them. It is instead essential that they be seen to be undertaking such change, and that its tangible effects be readily available to those who would doubt it.

The vision of what the Cherokees can accomplish is a glorious one, as Boudinot presents it, in which the Cherokee Nation will ultimately join the other nations of the world in full civilization. It is no surprise, from Boudinot’s language, that the newspaper he headed was eventually called the *Cherokee Phoenix*:

The Cherokee authorities have adopted the measures already stated, with a sincere desire to make their nation an intelligent and a virtuous people, and with a full hope that those who have already pointed out to them the road of happiness, will now assist them to pursue it. With that assistance, what are the prospects of the Cherokees?... Yes, methinks I can view my native country, rising from the ashes of her degradation, wearing her purified and beautiful garments, and taking her seat with the nations of the earth. I can behold her sons bursting the fetters of ignorance and unshackling her from the voice of heathenism. She is at this instant, risen like the first morning sun, which grows brighter and brighter, until it reaches its fullness of glory.

This is a Christian vision for a Christian audience, to be sure, but it is a deeply political vision nonetheless. They will “take their seat with the nations of the earth”, not dissolve into a larger American nation. They will instead remain Cherokee – civilized and enlightened Cherokees – but Cherokees nonetheless.

The political vision described by Boudinot is ultimately one of alliance rather than merging. If the Cherokees can prove that they are the kinds of people who are worthy of moral respect, they can join together with Americans in a kind of multinational citizenship in which both sides can live together well without merging. Cherokees are worthy of being citizens, but for the same reason they deserve the respect of political difference. Unfortunately, American Indian politics has historically lacked powerful rhetorical figures such as Frederick Douglass, whose words could draw on deep currents in American political argument, and it continues to do so today. The words of Boudinot are not perfect for that purpose, perhaps, but they have a plausible resonance nonetheless (and for that reason deserve highlighting in courses on American Political Thought):

She will become not a great, but a faithful ally of the United States. In time of peace she will plead the common liberties of America. In time of her intrepid sons will sacrifice their lives in your defence. And because she will be useful to you in coming time, she asks you to assist her in her present struggles. She asks not for greatness; she seeks not wealth; she pleads only for assistance to become respectable as a nation, to enlighten and ennoble her sons, and to ornament her daughters with modesty and virtue. She pleads for this assistance, too, because on her destiny hangs that of many nations. If she complete her civilization – then may we hope that all our nations will – then, indeed, may true patriots be encouraged in their efforts to make this world of the West, one continuous abode of enlightened, free, and happy people.

The Cherokees are not to become merged into a broader American demos, but to live alongside it, perhaps surrounded by it, still as Cherokees. This is the natural endpoint of the faith in reason and social progress that the newspaper promises to help in building: a “continuous abode of enlightened, free, and happy people”, who themselves nonetheless constitute distinctive peoples with independent political institutions. Civilization, in this view, demands not merging but alliance.

Boudinot closes the speech on a darker note. If the Cherokee’s effort fails, he suggests, that other Indian tribes will also necessarily be destroyed. The Cherokees are the best hope of showing what Indians can achieve, so that the stakes go much beyond their nation narrowly construed. The only clear future for Indian tribes lies in civilization, but even that is not assured if outside circumstances are hostile or uncaring. “There are, with regard to the Cherokees and other tribes, two alternatives; they must either become civilized and happy, or sharing the fate of many kindred nations, become extinct.” The Cherokees are the linchpin of this effort: “But if the Cherokee Nation fail in her struggle, if she die away, then all hopes are blasted, and falls the fabric of Indian civilization.” Boudinot’s plea for assistance to form the newspaper and continue the civilizational program is in many ways seen as a decisive test of what sort of people non-Indian Americans are and are to become. The plea stretches, in many ways, beyond the narrow context (request for donations) in which he writes:

There is, in Indian history, something very melancholy, and which seems to establish a mournful precedent for the future events of the few sons of the forest, now scattered over this vast continent. We have seen every where the poor aborigines melt away before the white population. I merely speak of the fact, without at all referring to the cause. We have seen, I say, one family after another, one tribe after another, nation after nation pass away; until only a few solitary creatures are left to tell the sad story of extinction. Shall this precedent be followed? I ask you, shall red men live, or shall they be swept from the earth? With you and this public at large, the decision chiefly rests.

The stakes are indeed high, and the implications for non-Indian political action clear.

Boudinot succeeded in raising the necessary funds. In 1828, the *Cherokee Phoenix* began publication in New Echota, capital of the Cherokee Nation. In 1830, Indian Removal became the official policy of the United States, and in 1835 Boudinot was one of a handful of leaders who signed a treaty to remove to Indian Territory. In 1839, he was informally executed in Oklahoma for illegally transferring away the territories of the Cherokee Nation to the United States. The *Cherokee Phoenix* was published sporadically in Oklahoma in the years soon after Removal, though never again under Boudinot’s leadership, and then shuttered for a very long time. Reborn once again the modern era, the newspaper is currently published online in bilingual form by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

Section V. Civilization as Self-Defense?

There are multiple normative questions that arise from investigation of this text and the accompanying political circumstances. At the most obvious level, there are questions about the ethical responsibilities of those who teach courses on American Political Thought, and about the appropriateness of including someone like Boudinot (Christian, in many ways culturally assimilated) as a representative of American Indian politics. It is not questions of this kind that I want to take up in the paper’s concluding section, however, but rather the substantive questions raised by the political strategy Boudinot adopts in this speech.

Perhaps the most obvious question is whether “civilizing” is a plausible strategy of political self-defense in circumstances of this kind. This question is itself complex, with many others nested within. I only want to consider some of them in this paper. Some of these questions may at first appear only conceptual, but at their heart they are essentially normative. Consider the question of whether such cultural change is itself a possible way of preserving a culture. At first glance, it may seem impossible for profound changes of this kind to constitute “cultural protection” in any meaningful way, because they by their very nature involve relatively broad changes to existing cultural practices. Yet it would be a mistake to think that such strategies could not be plausible methods for saving the central elements of a culture, if those central elements are not deeply embedded in the aspects of social life that are being revised. In some circumstances, given some scales of value, these kinds of social changes are almost certainly self-defeating, but in other kinds of conditions, with other sorts of value scales, they may not be. Cultural insiders will generally be best suited to make these determinations, and outsiders will have plausible grounds for doing so only with detailed knowledge of the stakes in any particular case. There are at least some reasons for believing that decisions of this kind could constitute plausible resistance where something as momentous as massive Removal across half of the continent is involved, for those who saw possible routes to protecting the core of what they valued. This response is not at all dispositive, of course, and there are many issues that deserve more thought in seeking to evaluate this question.

The questions of representation and authorization involved in this case are in many ways much harder ones, though they are easily overlooked. The core problem might be described as that of vanguardism. In short form, Boudinot and other highly educated Cherokees who controlled the instruments of Cherokee governance were engaged in a project of social change that was, in many of its features, neither recognized nor endorsed strongly by the majority of non-educated Cherokees. (Or perhaps more accurately, traditionally-educated Cherokees.) The instruments of the Cherokee government were, at the time of Boudinot’s speech, only partially responsible to electoral constituencies, though they would become more responsible to them with the Cherokee constitution of 1828. Given the potentially very high cultural stakes involved, there are reasons for concern about the authority of these Cherokee leaders to undertake many of the political changes that they were pursuing. The eventual printing of the *Cherokee Phoenix* in English and the new Cherokee syllabary allowed for a broader spread of information than was possible previous to its publication, so it is not implausible to believe that the possibility of authorization was increasing over time. But these “civilizing” leaders were nonetheless operating with a relative legitimacy deficit in many of their activities.

On the other hand, traditional principles of Cherokee governance did not allow for a great deal of national unity, and they were thereby often exploited by strategies of “divide and conquer” (or more often “confuse and conquer”). Moreover, even if traditional forms of Cherokee governance had been perfectly effective at managing Cherokee activities for Cherokee purposes, the unfortunate fact was the United States was entirely uninterested in recognizing any forms of governance and social life that did not already fit its expectations about the criteria of political respectability. In 1806, Jefferson made clear that the Cherokees were expected to change their form of life profoundly, and subsequent government actions, along with missionary schools and many other institutions, continually reinforced these messages, as did lower-level removals of many Indian tribes to the West prior to the emergence of Removal as a unified government policy. The situation in regard to states like Georgia was much worse than this, however: Georgia asserted that the Cherokees had no legal rights to exist politically whatever they might do, and argued for the immediate dissolution of the Cherokee Nation and other Indian nations. Their individual members to be absorbed under Georgia law, where as non-whites they would be unable to vote, testify in court, or reliably hold property. The options for Cherokee political action where thus sharply limited.

In circumstances of this kind, it is hard to envision a more likely winning political strategy than the one that was adopted, of seeking change toward “civilization” coupled with a public relations campaign through the *Cherokee Phoenix* and other means, and, unaddressed in this paper, a legal effort that involved two cases reaching as far as the United States Supreme Court. Given the ultimate failure of these efforts, it seems reasonable to believe that there was no possible political strategy that could have been effective, though it is perhaps worth imagining conditions under which this one might have succeeded, to force serious thought about the normative questions at stake. If this was the only potentially successful political strategy that could be adopted, does this justify its adoption by the set of leaders who supported it despite a relative dearth of broader Cherokee authorization? It seems likely that it does, though it remains disquieting nonetheless.

It is worth thinking about the limits of this kind of under-authorized political action, by imagining a slightly different case – one that is foreshadowed in Jefferson’s 1806 address. Soon after the end of the American Revolution, small numbers of Cherokees began voluntarily settling west of the Mississippi, and groups continued to join them until a relatively large number arrived in 1817, followed by some others afterward (including eventually Sequoyah, inventor of the syllabary). The United States constantly pressured the politically established Cherokee Nation – that portion of the Cherokee people that remained in its historical territory as acknowledged under treaties – to remove west to join the minority who had already done so. In conditions of this type, it is not impossible to imagine that the Cherokee modernizers might have undertaken the radical step of signing a treaty of removal more quickly, perhaps immediately after raising funds for the printing press that eventually produced the Cherokee Phoenix. Relocated in the West with a greater lead on encroaching white settlers, and perhaps with a slight economic bonus from moving swiftly, could the Cherokee Nation have re-constituted itself with sufficient capacity to be taken more seriously as an established civilizational power? It is hard to say, but if one thinks the odds of success in this strategy were higher than the one that they in fact adopted (which did not work either), then one faces complex questions about the balance between authorization, vanguardism, and risk. How should decisions that might have a greater factual likelihood of success weigh against questions of authorization and political transparency? To what degree can leaders legitimately decide how to bear risk for others, and what ought they to consider in making their decisions?

In the end, Elias Boudinot was executed for making a decision roughly of this kind, though when circumstances were even more ambiguous. In 1835, Boudinot, along with a minority of other Cherokee leaders, signed the Treaty of New Echota, which finally acceded to government demands for Removal, and which led directly to the Trail of Tears. He was afterward executed (albeit informally) for his violation of Cherokee constitutional law. It seems plausible to believe that these Cherokee executioners were doing the correct thing legally, and something permissible in normative terms, given the depth of Boudinot’s choice to decide for others. But was Boudinot also deciding rightly, in seeking to accede to one last American demand in hopes of retaining an independent Cherokee Nation in the West? It is hard to say with certainty, but at a minimum the question gives one more appreciation for the difficulty of what Michael Walzer has called the problem of dirty hands, and – perhaps more acutely – of the brutality of forcing other human beings to make such choices.[[15]](#endnote-15) At the same time, it reinforces the importance of including American Indians as political agents when we teach courses in American Political Thought, to help render more vivid and visible to students the complex decisions that American self-conceptions and policy have so often required others to undertake.

Notes (Skeletal Draft Version)

1. William McLoughlin notes that the Treaty “accepted the Cherokee version of their current boundaries, even though many whites had already settled within those boundaries; second, it gave the Cherokees the right to evict any whites who were within their boundaries… In effect the new American nation agreed to protect what was left of Cherokee territory from land-hungry citizens and to allow the Indians to maintain their own tribal self-government.” William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 21. I have taken the quoted section of the treaty from the same page of McLoughlin’s work. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Jefferson, “To the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation: Washington, January 10, 1806,” in *Public and Private Papers*, ed. Tom Wicker (New York: Library of America, 1990), 235-237. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The American agent to the Cherokees in 1806 – Return J. Meigs – retained that position until his death in 1823, so that his influence on Cherokee politics remained strong for a very long time. Meigs was by no means a morally unambiguous character: he was both an ardent proponent of assimilation and an often energetic defender of Cherokee rights. For discussions of his efforts and samples from a wide variety of his letters and other documentation, see McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence*, 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The biographical information in this section draws from Theda Purdue’s introduction to Boudinot’s writings. See *Cherokee Editor: The Writings of Elias Boudinot*, ed. Theda Perdue (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See e.g. *Cherokee Cavaliers: Forty Years of Cherokee History as Told in the Correspondence of the Ridge-Watie-Boudinot Family*, ed. Edward Everett Dale and Gaston Litton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995). The politics of this time period are often deeply surprising: despite the centrality of Southern states to Indian Removal, Boudinot’s brother Stand Watie eventually became a general in the Confederate Army during the civil war, and was the last major Confederate leader to accept the war’s end. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The school was closed after this marriage, to prevent similar pairings in the future. See Perdue’s introduction to *Cherokee Editor*, 10. For more details of this relationship, see *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriet Gold and Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839*, ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Perdue’s overview in *Cherokee Editor*, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This text is presented in its entirety in *Cherokee Editor*, 68-79. All selections here are from an electronic version of the speech that is frequently used for classroom purposes; the specific quotations therefore do not yet have proper attribution to this print edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Perdue’s note 5 in *Cherokee Editor*, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Perdue’s note 9 in *Cherokee Editor*, 80, suggesting that only about 5% of Cherokees would have been Christian at this time. Perdue notes that the translation of the New Testament could have had only limited impacts in any case, since without a printing press there was only a single physical copy in existence. See Perdue’s note 17 in *Cherokee Editor*, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Perdue (note 29, *Cherokee Editor*, 82) argues that Boudinot did not actually mean a “seminary” by this term, but only a public high school. If so, the politically educative nature of the appeal becomes even clearer. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973): 160-180. I have written about similar questions of political strategy in an in-progress manuscript on current American Indian/Native Canadian politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)