

Thomas Jefferson on Native Americans (1780)

This excerpt from a letter by Thomas Jefferson addressed the question of how the new government should treat Native American tribes, including the Shawnee, who had sided with the British during the revolution. Jefferson recommended that a force be sent to deal harshly with the Indians, to remove the Shawnee to land west of the Mississippi or Great Lakes, and to set an example by terrorizing other "savages" into reducing their attacks on frontier settlements.

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I have heard with much concern of the many murders committed by the Indians...in the neighborhood of Pittsburg[h]. Hostilities so extensive [indicate]...a formidable Combination of that kind of enemy. Propositions have been made for...stations of men as present a safeguard to the Frontiers, but I own they do not appear to me adequate to the object; all experience has proved that you cannot be defended from the savages but by carrying the war home to themselves and striking decisive blows. It is therefore my opinion that instead of putting our Frontier Inhabitants under that fallacious idea of security, an expedition must be instantly undertaken into the Indian Country. Want of full information...put[s] it out of my power to direct the minute parts of such an expedition or to point it to its precise object. Such a plan laid here would probably be rendered abortive by difficulties in the articles of provisions, ill adjusted times and places of rendezvous, and impose unforeseen events and circumstances, which if to be explained and amended from here time to time, the evil will have had its course while we are contriving how to ward it off. I can therefore only undertake to authorize such an expedition and put it into a train for execution....

It might be premature to speak of terms of peace but if events will justify it, the only condition with the Shawnees should be their removal beyond the Mississippi or the [Great] Lakes, and with the other tribes whatever may most effectually secure their observation of the treaty. We have been too diverted by interests of Humanity from enforcing good behavior by severe punishment. Savages are to be curbed by fear only; We are not in a condition to repeat expensive expeditions against them. The business will more be done so as not to have to repeat it again and that instead of making peace on their Application you will only make it after such as shall be felt and remembered by them as long as they a nation.