
Red Gentlemen & White Savages, a first book by David Nichols, is an overview of a very significant and complex subject: the formative era in American Indian policy. The years following the Ameri-
can Revolution from 1783 to 1801 were bloody and unstable as thousands of settlers poured across the Appalachian Mountains. In the Old Northwest, a shifting alliance of Woodlands Indian groups, encouraged by the British traders still in their forts along the Great Lakes, persistently opposed the settlers moving across the Ohio River in the 1780s and succeeded in winning important military victories in the early 1790s. In the old Southwest, Creeks and Cherokees sought aid from the Spanish in defense of their homelands. On the contested boundaries, both negotiation and force of arms were employed to attain physical and legal right to the soil. A prismatic cast of historical participants were engaged in this power struggle: Revolutionary war veterans with land warrants, land companies, land-speculating politicians, squatters, federal and state officials, Indian groups ranging from friendly to hostile, and the British and Spanish governments. Wartime debt and widespread opposition to enhancing federal power complicated the problem of establishing peace. U.S.–Indian relations, writes Nichols, were “anarchic” (p. 19).

The search for order, Nichols argues, pivoted on the commonality of interests that united besieged Woodlands leaders and the supporters of the strengthened federal government in the late 1780s. They both “feared, or at least deplored, the lawless behavior of white settlers” (p. 10). Federalist gentlemen like Secretary of War Henry Knox viewed rough, white frontier settlers as “banditti” and blamed them for frontier violence. Simultaneously, Nichols contends, “American officials often came to the conclusion” that their Native American counterparts “had the characteristics of gentlemen themselves” (p. 12). Both Indian civil leaders and American officials opposed the militant Northwest “federationists” and frontiersmen (p. 14).

From the title and the author’s introductory remarks, a reader expects an analysis of social and political “divisions within Indian and white communities” (p. 2): Indian civil vs. war leaders, on the one hand, and Federalists vs. anti-Federalists, on the other. Nichols examines neither. Red Gentlemen is not ethnohistory, but rather a hybrid in which elements of Andrew Cayton’s work on power and civility are loosely grafted onto a standard political history closely paralleling Reginald Horsman’s classic, Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812 (1967).

The book contains contradictions, for Nichols’s purported aims do not accord with his evidence. After Cayton, for example, Nichols argues that treaties were a form of political theatre in which Indian and white leaders displayed civility and publicly legitimized peace agreements and land transfers. Accordingly, rich detail of treaty proceedings are foregrounded in Red Gentlemen. Nichols’s principle evidence for how order

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came of chaos pivots on the demonstration that white "gentlemen" of enlightenment principles rose above European-American cultural superiority as they conformed to Indian protocol—dancing, gift-giving, smoking, and feasting. The bulk of the evidence, however, starkly reveals the duplicity and expedience coloring the era's treaty making. State and federal cession treaties were poorly represented by Indian leaders of authority, were marred by coercion and bribery, and were quickly repudiated by Indians and often by sectors of the white population. Nichol's reductionist analysis fails to summarize his findings adequately. There is no persuasive evidence that enlightened Federalist gentlemen viewed any Indians as social equals. Over-generalizations about ill-defined groups gives Nichol's narrative a blurred quality. See, for example, the opening paragraph of chapter four and the evidence that follows. In a book about disputed boundaries, the lack of but one inadequate map is a very serious drawback.

Because Nichols does not provide a historiographical framework, the reader is left wondering what this book contributes to scholarship that Reginald Horsman, Douglas Hurt, Colin Calloway, and Francis Paul Prucha among others have not already demonstrated in a clearer way. Namely, that forced land cessions based on the conquest theory followed the American Revolution; sunk in debt with no taxing power, the federal government could neither enforce treaty boundaries nor crush mounting Indian military resistance. A new conciliatory, expedient, and ostensibly honorable policy was spearheaded by Secretary of War Henry Knox, falling back on British precedents of acknowledging Indian rights to the soil. This shift in policy was contemporaneous with the centralization of national governmental power under the Constitution. Gaining indivisible authority over Indian country was a means to economic and political problems confronting the Federalists.

Nichols deserves praise for his highly polished narrative and for his extensive research in primary sources. There are forty-five pages of endnotes. This is clearly a serious piece of scholarship that attempts to provide a thorough, readable, and fresh narrative. Unfortunately, the misnamed Red Gentlemen's usefulness is hampered by its overly ambitious scope. Nichols's narrative encompasses both southern and northern Indian frontiers (and a comparative study of same) in a vast area from New York to the Wabash to Georgia during two volatile decades and more. Used in conjunction with other works on the same topic, careful readers will find valuable insights in Red Gentlemen despite the strange disconnection between its purported aims and the information presented. Contrary to Nichols's intention, this book reinforces a very dark interpretation of the foundations of Indian policy. What changed with the ratification of the Constitution appears to have less to do with Indian consent or right to the soil, civility, honor, or enlightenment than the federal government's new-found liquidity,
and hence its ability to grease the wheels of negotiations with bribes, gifts, feasts, and annuities, cynically calculated to increase Indian dependency. Treaties in the age of enlightenment were little more than charades.

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