8

Tecumseh: The First Advocate of Red Power

Raymond Friday Locke

Raymond Friday Locke, the editor for Holloway House Publishing Company, has long taken an interest in the history of the American Indian. His Book of the Navajo *(rev. ed., 1986) is his most noteworthy contribution to the field. In this article, Locke paints a colorful portrait of the man many regard as the greatest native American leader in history. Locke's listing of Tecumseh's admirable qualities—leadership, humanitarianism, education, diplomacy, wisdom, and even a romantic nature—give him a universal appeal. The tragic end to Tecumseh's great organization and planning demonstrates that even great men are at times undone by small flaws.*

It is difficult to escape the conviction that the Indians had justice on their side and that, as Oliver LaFarge indicated in his earlier article, they had much to offer the whites who engulfed them. Tecumseh's story also suggests that bigotry, part of the dark side of the American character, has denied the nation the valuable contributions of many people because they didn't happen to be white. Because of whites' failure to absorb much of the native Americans' wisdom, the original inhabitants of the continent have

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been only a small tributary stream in their influence on the American character rather than a significant part of the mainstream.

If the present day advocates of Red Power and Pan-Indianism need an idol they need search no further than the great Shawnee Chief Tecumseh. Realizing that the contact of white and Indian civilizations always meant the eventual supremacy of the white, with the decay and destruction of the Indian, Tecumseh attempted to block the white advance into the old Northwest Territory by forming a federation of Indian tribes that reached all the way from Alabama to Minnesota and from Kansas to New England—and almost succeeded.

Born in Ohio in the spring of 1768, Tecumseh was the son of the Shawnee chief Pucksinwah, head of the Kispolotha sept, or clan. His mother was named Methotasa (early writers incorrectly referred to her as a Creek or Cherokee) and at the time of Tecumseh's birth his parents were on their way to an important council at Chillicothe, located at the present site of Oldtown, Greene County, Ohio, three miles north of the county seat, Xenia. For five years the various septs of the Shawnee had been meeting at Chillicothe at intervals in an effort to determine what the Shawnee should do, as a nation, about the white who, despite treaties forbidding it, were crossing the mountains to the east and spilling into lands used by that tribe.

When Tecumseh was six years of age, his father was killed by a white hunting party. Thereafter, the young boy was guided and trained by his older brother, Chiksika. He was taught Shawnee history, traditions and the codes of the tribe. As was the custom, Tecumseh had to commit these matters to perfect memory and learn to repeat them verbatim. From his mother and older sister, Tecumapese, the young Indian learned the value of patience and the need for pity for those without power, and that cruelty for the sake of cruelty, whether to animals or man, degraded a person. By the time he was eight years old, Tecumseh was already exhibiting signs of leadership. By this time the Americans were already establishing settlements in the traditional hunting grounds of the Shawnee—Cantuc-kee (Kentucky)—and the Shawnee, like other tribes of the old Northwest, increasingly realized that their total elimination was not far distant if they did not fight back. The ever-increasing number of whites were driving off the game and taking possession of the land. Far away in Washington, the government of the whites continued to give lip service to the fiction of Indian independence and land ownership, but the Indian was more impressed by the rapidity with which the whites obtained any area they coveted. No opposition short of war seemed to have the least chance of damming the white flood. And in the spring of 1777, the Shawnee, under the leadership of Tecumseh's godfather, Black Fish, went to war against the

settlers of Kentucky. It was to be a war without end for the Shawnee, who were supported by the British, who desired to retain the lucrative Great Lakes fur trade and were glad to help the Indians keep the aggressive American frontiersmen as far from Canada as possible. The Indians preferred trading with the British to trading with the American and felt no danger from Canadian expansion.

As the Shawnee war waged on, year after year, other tribes occasionally joined them in battle against the Americans. The Indians, even those who had been friendly toward the whites in the beginning, were becoming resentful of the way in which they suffered at the hands of the white men. They were cheated at trading posts after being plied with whiskey until their reasoning powers were gone. An Indian might trade a year's catch of furs for a few trinkets and a little bad whiskey. He gave the trinkets to his wife and drank the whiskey and was left with nothing but a heavy head to show for a year's work. Too, the white man's diseases wrecked havoc among the Indians with whom they came into contact along the advancing frontier. Such was the world in which Tecumseh grew up.

In the spring of 1779, the situation grew so bad for the Shawnees that the nation split up and hundreds of men, women and children left the homeland in Ohio and moved across the Mississippi, hoping to find peace there—and relief from the constant war. But Black Fish, Chiksika, and the white chief, Blue Jacket, remained behind. Of course, Tecumseh and the rest of his family stayed in Ohio with his brother, Chiksika.

In the spring of 1783, Tecumseh took part in his first battle against the whites, and at the age of fifteen, outshone even the ablest warriors of the Shawnee. He killed four men in the fight and helped Chiksika kill another. The most any other Shawnee killed in the battle was two. One white was taken prisoner. Later, at the Shawnee camp he was burned alive. Tecumseh found the torture and burning of the prisoner so revolting that, without any voice in tribal matters as of yet, he protested. In an impassioned speech he pointed out that such cruelty was unworthy of real men, of Shawnees, and swore that never again would he take part in the torture of any living creature, man or animal, nor would he consider as friend any man who allowed himself to take part in anything so degrading. The vigorous manner and eloquence with which he spoke so impressed his companions that they agreed with him not to repeat the act. Tecumseh never altered his resolution. Time and again he protected women and children from his infuriated followers. Years later, at the battle of Fort Meigs, a party of Americans were captured by the British and Indians. Although the Americans had surrendered as prisoners of war, they were herded into an outdoor pen and the British General, Henry A. Procter, gave the Indians leave to select any man each of the prisoners and kill him in any manner desired. The Indians were firing

point blank into the huddled Americans, others were being selected and tomahawked in cold blood when Tecumseh arrived on the scene. Slamming to a halt, leaping from his mount and brandishing his war club, he rushed to the aid of an American, Colonel John Dudley. Two Indians had grabbed him, one had jerked his head back by the hair and the other was just about to stab him. Tecumseh knocked the knife-wielder aside and ordered the other to turn the prisoner loose. Instead, the Indian whipped out his knife and cut Dudley's throat, severing the jugular vein. Tecumseh struck the Indian a blow on the head with his club, killing him. Tecumseh then ordered the other Indians to stop the slaughter, which they did, then addressed them scathingly, calling them cowards and saying that he would slay anyone who harmed another prisoner. Turning to Procter, he asked, "Why have you allowed this massacre?"

"Sir," replied Procter, "your Indians cannot be commanded."

"Begone," was the angry reply of the outraged Tecumseh. "You are unfit to command. Go, put on petticoats."

Tecumseh put the remaining prisoners under the guard of four warriors, warning them that if any more were killed or abused, all four would be executed. He then ordered the others to mount up and follow him back to the battle, where brave men, not cowards, were needed.

When Chiksika was killed in battle in April, 1788, there was no question of Tecumseh's taking over the command of the remaining Kispolotha Shawnee who were then fighting against the whites with the Cherokees. The occasion was so automatic that no vote had to be taken. Time and time again the young Tecumseh led his band to victory. He was possessed with an uncanny knack of assessing any situation in an instant and acting immediately in a manner which at once swung the scales in his favor. The Shawnees realized that no one else approached his qualifications for leadership.

Tecumseh watched the advance of the whites and the progressive deterioration of the Indians with an evergrowing surge of anger. He was certain in his own mind that the land belonged to the Indian tribes forever, no matter by what show of legality it might be taken away from them, and that they could cling to their culture and traditions. From the east the tide of whites was ever-increasing, moving toward the lands west of the Ohio river and filling up the Kentucky hunting grounds where the once great herds of buffalo were now becoming scarce. It is not known when the idea of banding the Indians into a vast confederation to drive the white invaders back again beyond the Ohio and the mountains occurred to Tecumseh. But he was still a young man when he concluded that the only possible method of opposing the white advance successfully was to obtain the cooperation of all the Indians and to have them act in concert.

By 1794, Tecumseh found himself with a large number of followers. Tall, handsome and modest, he refrained from boasting of his own prowess, being content to let others boast of him and let his actions speak for themselves. It was in the spring of that year that Tecumseh moved the members of his sept to the banks of Deer Creek in the vicinity of present London, Ohio, and several hundred members of other septs, most of whom were young men, followed him, seeing in Tecumseh the makings of a great new chief. Everything the young chief did turned out well—with two exceptions. One was allowing his younger brother, Lowawluwaysica—who would become known as the Prophet—to assume second in command of his following. Where Tecumseh was tall and perfectly proportioned, his brother was a head shorter and ugly; where Tecumseh was gentle and good-natured, Lowawluwaysica was devious and surly—and would eventually destroy his brother's plans for an Indian confederation.

Tecumseh's second mistake was marrying the Peckuwe maiden, Monetohse. While she was slender and attractive, she was also demanding and found fault in everything her husband did. While Tecumseh was able to overlook her behavior toward himself, he could not overlook the fact that she neglected to care for his son, born two years after the marriage. He invoked an ancient Shawnee marital law and dissolved their marriage, sent Monetohse back to her parents in disgrace, and placed his son in charge of his older sister, Tecumapese.

On August 20, 1794, General Anthony Wayne, commanding an American army, defeated a large Indian force on the banks of the Maumee river in Ohio. In the battle, Tecumseh, leading a party, was with the advance which met the attack of the American infantry. The defeat of the Indians on the Maumee produced an entire change in the relations between the Indians and the Americans and led to treaty negotiations.

Tecumseh refused to have any part of the peace treaty signed at Fort Greenville in August, 1795, between the whites and representatives of various Indian tribes as a result of the defeat administered by Anthony Wayne. The treaty gave the whites twenty-five thousand square miles of Indian territory as well as sixteen tracts *within* lands left to the Indians for government reservations. Representatives of the twelve tribes who attended the treaty conference were given $1,666 for each tribe and promised an annual allowance of $825! As far as Tecumseh was concerned it was out and out thievery of Indians lands and any agreement with the whites was worthless. Upon being told of the terms of the agreement by the white Shawnee chief, Blue Jacket, Tecumseh said: "My heart is a stone: heavy with sadness for my people; cold with the knowledge that no treaty will keep whites out of our lands; hard with the determination to resist as long as I live and breathe. Now we are weak and many of our people are afraid. But hear me; a single twig breaks, but

the bundle of twigs is strong. Someday I will embrace our brother tribes and draw them into a bundle and together we will win our country back from the whites."

The Treaty of Greenville brought peace to the Ohio land and the settlement of Ohio by whites began in earnest. William Henry Harrison was given command of Fort Washinton and charged with protecting the new white settlers as the Shawnee land became checkered with new farms.

A short time after the signing of the Greenville Treaty, Tecumseh took a new wife, an older woman named Mamate. Mamate gave birth to a son in the summer of 1796 and died soon afterwards. The new baby was named Nay-tha-way-nah and given to Tecumapese to care for. Perhaps the birth of his second son reminded Tecumseh that the place of his own birth was already the site of a white farm. He became determined to win back the land that rightfully belonged to the Shawnee. Too, the plan of an Indian confederation was never far from his mind and the way to just such a confederation was shown to him when the Delawares, who had been pushed out of lands given to them by treaty time and time again, came to him in 1798. The Delawares had heard much of the young Shawnee chief who was so strong in all ways. Would Tecumseh come and bring his Shawnees to live with the Delawares and lead them too? Tecumseh would and led his followers into Indiana territory to join the Delawares. Within a year other Ohio tribes had come under Tecumseh's sphere of influence, impressed not only with his reputation for fairness and proven ability to lead men, but also with the eloquence with which he held audiences spellbound.

Soon after joining the Delawares, Tecumseh began traveling and addressing councils of various Indian tribes in an effort to bring them into what he saw as a powerful amalgamation of Indian strength and power. He traveled to the council fires of what remained of the Iroquois Confederation in the east; nearer home he spoke to the Wyandots, the Potawatomies and others. The Hurons, Ottawas and Chippewas, Winnebagos, Foxes, Sacs, Menominees of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Canada would hear him, as would the Sioux, Mandans and Cheyennes west of the Mississippi; in the south the Natchez and Choctaws of Mississippi, traditional enemies, sat down together in council with him, as did the Creeks, the Seminoles, Chickasaws, Alabamas, the Biloxis and his old friends, the Cherokees. He urged the Indians to prohibit the consumption of any alcoholic beverages and the smoking of marijuana, to study closely and seriously the ways of the whites, to break all alliances existing between themselves and the whites, and to take no part in the white man's fight with other whites.

Too, he encouraged the Indians to appear weak, to swallow their pride and fall back, and under no pretext take up arms against the whites

until the time was ready, the time when all Indians would take up the fight together. For that fight, Tecumseh told them, he would give the sign. It would be a sign that would come to all the tribes on the same day and at the same time. Tecumseh hoped that when the time came the whites would vacate the Indian lands west of the mountains peacefully but if they would not then the great wave of Indians from all tribes, fighting together, would sweep across the land and destroy the whites to the last man.

Meanwhile, William Henry Harrison had pulled political strings to have himself appointed governor of Indiana. He arrived at his new post in early 1801 and soon began new land acquisitions by negotiations with the Indians. In 1802–1803, another million acres were added to lands available for white settlement. Other treaties followed, and the resulting Indian resentment was attributed by Harrison to British influence. Harrison had little sympathy for the Indians and was convinced that the only possible way to deal satisfactorily with them was to destroy them. He had visions of himself as a great conqueror of Indian lands and mapped out grandiose campaigns and felt that all he needed was an opportunity to exhibit his abilities as a strategist. He was not yet aware of Tecumseh, but the Indian leader was very aware of William Henry Harrison.

Tecumseh continued to travel, recruiting tribe after tribe to join his confederation and give their aid when the great sign was given. When he spoke of the great sign he never failed to awe his audience. When the period of waiting was over, he told them, and tribal unification had been completed, he would stamp his foot and the earth would tremble and roar. He promised that great trees would fall, streams would change their courses and run backwards and lakes would be swallowed up into the earth and elsewhere new lakes would appear. The sign would shake men everywhere to their very bones like nothing they had ever known before. But when it came they were told to drop their hunting bows, their hoes, leaving their fields and camps and assemble across the lake from the fort of Detroit. On that day tribes would cease to exist. They would all be Indians, one people united forever for the good of all!

In the summer of 1802, Tecumseh preached his message across the northeast, in Vermont and Massachusetts, two years later he was in Minnesota talking to the Sioux. Everywhere he went he carried the same message and when he left it was with the assurance that another tribe would join him when the time came. In 1805, Tecumseh and Lowawluwaysica, who now called himself the Shawnee Prophet, established a new village near Fort Greenville that was not a Shawnee village but an *Indian* village where all Indians, regardless of tribe, were welcomed. A year later, William Henry Harrison became aware of Tecumseh's activities and wrote a letter to the Delawares in which he accused them of pursuing a "dark,

thorny" path by following the "pretended prophet" and asked them to call upon the Shawnee Prophet and demand that he show some sign of his powers. A party of forty Delawares did call upon the Prophet, who, frightened, turned to Tecumseh and asked what he must do. Tecumseh pointed out that he could foretell what would happen just as their brother Chiksika and their father, Pucksinwah, had been able to do. The fact that Tecumseh was the true prophet was known only to himself, his brother and others close to the family. Tecumseh allowed everyone else to think that his younger brother could foretell the future. Tecumseh instructed his brother to tell the Delawares that fifty days from that day the sky would turn black at high noon, the night creatures would stir and the stars would shine. The Shawnee Prophet did as he was told and, of course, was credited with predicting the eclipse. Unfortunately, the Shawnee Prophet forgot that his brother was the true prophet as he enjoyed his new-found fame.

Meanwhile, Tecumseh became friends with a family of whites named Galloway and one of his greatest joys was discussing, at length, matters of politics, religion, ethics and such with James Galloway. Galloway had a fine library with which the Indian chief acquainted himself, *Hamlet* becoming his favorite tale. Tecumseh could speak English quite well, but while he could read and write the white man's language, he was not fluent enough to read the more difficult books in the Galloway library. James Galloway's daughter, Rebecca, offered to help him. She spent many hours teaching the Shawnee chief, who was then thirty-eight years of age. In the spring of 1808, when she turned seventeen, Tecumseh asked for Rebecca's hand in marriage. Rebecca thought over the marriage proposal for a month and then agreed to marry Tecumseh, with whom she was in love, but only if he would adopt her people's mode of life and dress. He thought over her request for a month, then returned and told her that to do as she wanted would lose him the respect and leadership of his people. Rebecca Galloway wept when Tecumseh took leave of her for the last time.

That same year Tecumseh had his first interview with William Henry Harrison. He promised Harrison peace if the United States did not make further treaties involving land cessions and added that if such cessions were made, he would form an alliance with the English and make war on the Americans. Harrison dismissed Tecumseh's request as preposterous. A year later the two men met again but by this time events made peace impossible. Illinois Territory was created, leaving Indiana with its present boundaries. Harrison received permission from the secretary of war to buy more Indian land; the purchase of 2,500,000 acres in the fall of 1809 increased the number and wrath of Indians hostile to the United States. While Tecumseh maintained that the Indians held the land in common, that no one tribe owned this or that territory, Harrison couldn't agree with him less and pointed out that had the Great Spirit intended to make one nation of the Indians, he would not have put different languages

into their heads, but would have taught them all to speak alike. Tecumseh replied bitterly that no one tribe had the right to give away or sell what belonged to all and not until the United States agreed to cease purchasing lands from Indians and restored the lands recently bought, would peace be possible. Pointing to the moon that had risen on the council, Governor Harrison said that the moon would sooner fall to the earth than the United States would give up the lands. "Then," said Tecumseh, "I suppose that you and I will have to fight it out."

Another council was held in August, 1810, between Tecumseh and Harrison that was just as fruitless. Describing the arrival of Tecumseh at the conference, Captain George R. Floyd, commanding officer of Fort Knox, wrote: " . . . they were headed by the brother of the Prophet, Tecumseh, who perhaps is one of the finest looking men I ever saw—about six feet high, straight, with large, fine features, and altogether a daring, bold looking fellow."

The next day this "daring, bold looking fellow" let Harrison know for the last time that he meant business. The meeting got started on a bad note when Harrison told Tecumseh that, "Your father wishes you to take a chair." The very idea of the governor calling himself "your father" was repugnant to Tecumseh.

Tecumseh spoke first and pointed out that he felt that the Americans were trying to force the red people to do some injury to the whites so the latter would have an excuse to war on the Indians and that they were "continually driving the red people; when, at last, you will drive them into the Great Lakes, where they can't either stand or walk." The Shawnee chief ended with a threat: "We shall have a great council, at which all the tribes will be present, when we shall show to those who sold that they had no right to the claim that they set up; and we will see what will be done to those chiefs that did sell the land to you. I am not alone in this determination; it is the determination of all the warriors and red people who listen to me. I now wish *you* to listen to me. If you do not, it will appear as if you wished me to kill all the chiefs that sold you the land. I tell you so because I am authorized by all the tribes to do so. I am the head of them all! I am a warrior and all the warriors will meet together in two or three moons from this. Then I will call for those chiefs that sold you the land and shall know what to do with them. If you do not restore the land, you will have a hand in killing them."

As for confidence in yet another treaty with the whites, Tecumseh asked: "How can we have confidence in the white people? When Jesus Christ came on earth, you killed him and nailed him to a cross . . . "

Harrison's reply was as highhanded as ever and caused the followers of Tecumseh to bring out their arms. They were stilled by the chief and left the council. Another council in July of the next year ended much the same way.

Autumn of 1811 found Tecumseh in the south addressing councils of Cherokees, Seminoles, Choctaws and Chickasaws; autumn of 1811 found William Henry Harrison planning to attack Tecumseh's Tippecanoe village in his absence. Harrison gathered 1,000 men, mostly volunteers, and with a well-planned campaign already formulated, prepared to annihilate *his unsuspecting enemies—an act that he forgot to report to the president.* He left Vincennes on September 26, 1811, and moved directly up the Wabash, paused long enough to build Fort Harrison on the present site of Terre Haute, and on the night of November 6, encamped on Tippecanoe Creek. Before leaving, Tecumseh had warned his followers, and especially his brother, the Shawnee Prophet, to avoid battle with the whites at all costs. At long last he could see the fulfillment of his years of work: The Indian confederation now actually existed and the time for war was almost at hand.

That night the Prophet sent a deputation of three men to Harrison and it was settled that the terms of peace were to be arranged the next day. But the next morning, under orders from the Prophet, who told them that they would not only be victorious but that he had rendered the bullets of the white men to be harmless when fired against them, the Indians treacherously attacked the Americans. The conflict was fierce and bloody, with the Indians rushing boldly and openly to clinch with the enemy. The Prophet perched himself on a hill nearby and chanted a war song—but not for long. When messengers raced to him to say that the Indians were dying in a most natural way, he urged them on, then deserted them. When the warriors saw that the fire of the whites was just as lethal as ever and that the Prophet had fled, they became demoralized and retreated. The white casualties were 61 killed and 127 wounded; the Indian losses were unknown. Harrison immediately dispatched messengers to the East with reports of an overwhelming defeat of the Indians. In later years there was much controversy as to whether or not Harrison had actually won. He had avoided rout and repulsed the Indians, but he also found it necessary to retreat almost immediately. But the fact that the Indians had fought and had not won an overwhelming victory all but ruined Tecumseh and dashed the Indian confederation on the very eve of its birth.

Tecumseh arrived back at Tippecanoe only four days after the fateful battle, his face as frozen as stone. Shaking his brother, fallen and disgraced, by the hair until his nose began to bleed, he told him that death was too good, too easy, for him. In a day he had destroyed what it had taken Tecumseh a decade to build. The Prophet was drummed out of the camp. He was no longer an Indian, he no longer existed.

As Tecumseh had predicted, the earth did shake. On December 16, 1811, a deep, terrifying rumble was felt in the south of Canada. Trees fell and huge rocks toppled. Lake Michigan and Lake Erie trembled and

great waves broke on the shores, though the day was windless. In the west the earth shuddered so fiercely that great herds of bison staggered to their feet and stampeded, and in the south whole forests fell. In Missouri the town of New Madrid was destroyed, the Mississippi River turned and flowed backwards. The earthquake lasted for two days and filled the atmosphere with choking dust. A second struck on January 23 and a third hit four days later. The fourth and worst quake came on February 13 and lasted for an hour. It did more damage than the other three combined. Many of those that had deserted Tecumseh's cause reconsidered, for this was very strong medicine, but it was too late. The defeat at Tippecanoe had taken the ardor for war out of too many of his followers.

Those that remained faithful followed Tecumseh into the British service in the War of 1812, which broke out immediately. But Tecumseh, commissioned as a major-general, was doomed to continued disaster. The English commander, General Henry Procter, was incompetent, and in all the qualities of real manhood, the inferior to his Indian ally. After the Battle of Put-in-Bay, on Lake Erie, he started to retreat. Tecumseh protested and was induced to go on only by the promise that winter supplies would be delivered a few miles up the Thames. It was on this stream that Procter finally determined to make a stand, but at the onset of the action he retreated with his red coats, leaving the Indians to bear the brunt of the battle. On October 5, 1813, as he had predicted before the battle, Tecumseh was killed. Only one person at the site of the battle could identify the Shawnee chief and that was the Kentucky frontiersman, Simon Kenton. While at least four Americans claimed the honor of having killed Tecumseh, as far as is known Kenton never identified his body.

But there on the banks of a quiet Canadian stream, thirty-five miles from Detroit, the great Tecumseh, statesman, diplomat, a man devoted to the cause of his people and yet a humble and modest intellectual, found an unmarked grave. The Indians lost their greatest leader, the whites won the West.