

Joseph Sherman (M164.1, f 8) August 1825

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Is it the duty of the United States to attempt the civilization of the Aborigines of this country?

The utter extinction of some tribes of the Aborigines and the gradual diminution of all of them since the first settlement of Europeans in this country has excited the sympathy of the Christian community and called forth its energies to devise and put into execution some plan to ameliorate the condition of the unhappy survivors, and to prevent their total annihilation. But in their benevolent exertions to benefit one part of the human species equal care has not been taken to guard against unjustly censuring others. The spirit of commiseration which has been excited by the situation of the natives of this country has led many candid persons into an error respecting the causes which have reduced them to this present pitiable state. An opinion is now extensively prevalent that the native Indians have been greatly injured and oppressed by their prosperous successors in consequence of which we are now under obligation to exert every possible means to recompense them for the wrongs they have suffered. The truth of this opinion is far from being obvious. It is generally admitted that savages have but a partial and imperfect right in the soil; that they cannot claim by right of prior occupancy forests and plains which they do not in any civilized sense, improve. Companies of civilized immigrants then have a right to take possession of and improve such tracts at least they have this right if as in most cases in this country, they make treaties with the savages and stipulate with them for their imperfect right. Admitting the truth of these premises the conclusion is justly drawn that our ancestors were fairly settled in this country. But here I apprehend was the commencement of the injury in question. The forest must disappear before the face of civilized man, and with them cities and thriving villages the abodes of peace and plenty to the civilized must supplant the thickets of the forest which protect the game of the Indian. The interests of the savage are utterly incompatible with the progress of civilization. The introduction of the comforts and luxury of civilized life among the Indians has been productive of many evils.

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Ardent spirit, which when used with discretion is a cordial, has among these savages whose appetite is ungovernable, produced not only those consequences which are peculiar to itself, but by the contagious nature of vice, has led to other vices and quarrels and these have terminated in wars, punishments, retaliation, and self defence. They likewise obtain our implements of warfare, by which they render their wars more bloody and destructive. They take our diseases, particularly the small pox which with its unrelenting ravages hastens their destruction. These are the causes which have thinned our country of its Indian population, and not those acts of injustice and oppression which have commonly been urged. They have indeed been injured

in some instances, but they have likewise committed many depredations, and perpetrated many cruelties on our defenceless inhabitants, and on the whole the score of cruelty and injury is pretty equally balanced – But we might prove the validity of our title to a fair settlement in this country, by a still stronger argument. The tribes who inhabited America at the time of its discovery were the ferocious conquerors of a still more oppressed and injured race. The traditions of their bloody wars which had terminated one tribe after another at that time was quite distinct and those whom our fathers ~~have driven~~ out from this land had only taken possession of the hunting grounds of their feebler adversaries by the right of the strongest. Consequently we should have had an equal right, with them had our ancestors taken possession by force of arms. The argument then, that we are indebted to the Indians, in consequence of an injury done must be given up as incapable of being supported. Our government in all its transactions has dealt with fairness and observed the strictest rules of justice in all of its official proceedings with regard to the Indians. Laws have been enacted to prevent individuals from defrauding them it has been made penal to furnish them with ardent spirit, their lands have been secured to them by inalienable rights. Some few tribes have been taken under the immediate care of the government, but still they droop and dwindle away. Their extinction seems to be the result of the operation of causes necessarily connected with the vicinity of civilized men. The contemporary prosperity of the Indian tribes and of a civilized community in their vicinity seems utterly incompatible with each other.

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The state of things implied in the prosperity of the two bodies are ^ widely different as the native elements of the fish and bird.

But perhaps these remarks are superfluous.

Admitting that we are indebted to the Indians, it does not necessarily follow that we are under obligation to attempt their civilization. To make an action obligatory as a duty, it must be practicable. The problem whether the Aborigines are capable of made

civilization remains yet to be solved. The attempts which have hitherto been ^ warrant a strong presumption, that they not susceptible of civilization. Individuals from different tribes, educated from infancy in civilized society have afterwards returned to savage state. There is a charm in savage life, which has enticed away the descendants of families civilized from time immemorial. It is then a matter of surprise

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that the Indian whose earliest associations are connected with the pursuits of ^ ~~savage~~ inhabitants of the forest, should be inviolably attached to that mode of life, which besides its own allurements, combines with it the pride and the glory of his fathers.

If we have had a fair specimen of Indian ability, in those who, for a time have adopted our manners, I should not hesitate to pronounce the civilization of the Aborigines an impossibility. Notwithstanding the exertions which have been made

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to induce the tribes in Massachusetts to adopt our mode of life, there is ^ a single family

that now use our dress or adopt our manners. the Catalogues of Dartmouth and Cambridge colleges show that some of them have received a liberal education; but history has no one on her record who has ever risen to any considerable degree of eminence.

Of those who have mixed with the whites, I know of but one instance, the descendants
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of Pochontes, in which ^ are disposed to boast of their Indian blood. In general

the ^ are inviolably attached to their superstitions, their prejudices against civilization are almost insufferable. They have associated our vices, with their ideas of civilized life, and their haughty chiefs, from a high sense of national pride, disdain to learn from their father's enemies.

But were the Indians capable of civilization, still motives of self interest, forbid that the United States should adopt

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any measures to perpetuate an inveterate foe, which if left to the operation of natural causes would soon cease to exist. Could any method be devised turn back the ebbing tide of their ebbing population and cause it again to spread over the uninhabited regions of our country, would they not like the viper when warmed in the bosom of the husbandman, immediately sting their benefactors?

Joseph Sherman

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