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INDIAN WARFARE ON THE TENNESSEE FRONTIER,
1776-1794: STRATEGY AND TACTICS

By THOMAS LAWRENCE CONNELLY

A map of present-day Tennessee reveals many names such as Fort Loudoun, Echota, Tellico, Long Island, and Defeated Creek which verify one writer's claim that every cabin, fence, or forest trail was a battlefield on the frontier during the Indian war, from the Cherokee offensive in 1776 till the defeat of the Chickamauga in 1794. The interest in Indian warfare in that state has been accelerated by two recent publications, John K. Mahon's "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare, 1676-1794," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, and Harriette Arnow's *Seedtime on the Cumberland*. Although neither is chiefly concerned with Tennessee Indian warfare, both attempt to draw some conclusions on the subject. Unfortunately, as will be mentioned, Mr. Mahon's article is too general to be completely accurate with regard to Tennessee warfare and Mrs. Arnow's book, although an excellent treatment of Middle Tennessee whites, does not give their Indian opponents a fair hearing.¹

Perhaps both exhibit what have become standard weaknesses in discussing early warfare in Tennessee. Writers have failed to consider the Southern Indian as a fighting man. Moreover, those studies which have been made of border warfare have not treated the subject in the context of contemporary international strategy, tactics, and weapons, and have shown a lack of consideration of the problems facing both belligerents.

The persistent colonial approach to early Tennessee history has compelled historians to lump the Indians into the general category of "savages," without bothering to consider the various Indian tribes and their peculiar problems. Between 1776 and 1794, four main tribes or divisions were at war with the Tennessee whites: the Overhill Cherokee, the Lower Cherokee, the Upper Creek, and the Chickasaw. After the Overhill group was taken out of the war by the Long Island Treaty in

¹ See John K. Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare, 1676-1794," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLV (September 1958), 254-75; Harriette Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (New York, 1960). For brevity and clarity, the term "Tennessee" refers to the area comprising the present state, although during the period discussed it was actually part of North Carolina and later was the Southwest Territory.

1777, the brunt of the war was carried by the Chickamauga, an aggregation of Upper Creek, Lower Cherokee, white renegades, and a few Shawnee. These tribes entered the war with inherent disadvantages, due to their social customs. For them war was a means of social advancement, and the scalp was a greater goal than plunder or territorial occupation. Thus they seldom attacked a white force unless they believed they could win a sudden and decisive victory. They also retired easily under fire, not from cowardice, but because it was not necessary to their code of honor to fight to the last man.²

Religious ceremonies constantly hindered their warriors from achieving their potential. Southern Indians believed their warriors became impure by shedding blood and compelled them to undergo rigorous ceremonies prior to battle. Before a march against the whites, the Indians underwent periods of fasting, and while they were on a march there were scarcely any rest periods. The warriors could not rest over a day before beginning an attack, and rules against hunting prevented their being properly nourished before the hostilities. As they believed strongly that an almighty power directed their success or failure, the Indians allowed small things to throw an entire war party off balance. A meaningful dream or a small bird singing over the war camp could cause the abandonment of the whole expedition.³

A third problem was a lack of tribal organization, which hampered effective combat. War parties in Tennessee were strictly voluntary and were often merely the result of one family's seeking revenge for an injury inflicted upon it. If a town decided on war, that did not indicate that the entire town would cooperate, much less the whole nation. War chiefs led only those warriors who chose to go; others felt free to remain at home without any qualms. Seldom did the entire Chickamauga force at the Five Lower Towns unanimously declare war, and the Creek nation never went to war with more than half its forces in arms.⁴

² John R. Swanton, *Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy*, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Forty-second Annual Report* (Washington, 1928), 424, 428-29.

³ Samuel Cole Williams (ed.), *Adair's History of the American Indians* (Johnson City, Tennessee, 1930), 67-68, 408-10.

⁴ Swanton, "Social Organization," 428-29; "The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake," in S. G. Heiskell, *Andrew Jackson and Early Tennessee History*, 3 vols. (Nashville, 1920), I, 282-93; William Blount to Secretary Knox, November 8, 1792, *American State Papers*, 38 vols. (Washington, 1832-1861), *Indian Affairs*, 2 vols., I, 325-26.

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It was for these reasons as well as being outnumbered that the Indians seldom fought when the odds appeared fairly even, and not from cowardice. Romanticists have pictured the lone Tennessee pioneer fighting the engulfing red tide, but in truth the Indian warriors were usually outnumbered with few reinforcements from which to draw. Even before Middle Tennessee was settled, the Indian forces could have put scarcely more than 1,500 warriors into the field, while by 1796 the military population of free white males, sixteen years and up, alone totaled almost 22,000.⁵

Plagued by such handicaps, the Cherokee and Creek were forced to devise suitable tactics and strategy which have been greatly underrated. Mahon stated that American Indians did not have the social organization needed to plan and execute such operations as group maneuvers or frontal assaults, and based his evidence on a sociological study of primitive tribes and their warfare. Perhaps the Tennessee Indians did not read sociological studies, for group maneuvers and frontal assaults were used extensively by them, as will be shown. In the great 1776 invasion of East Tennessee, the division of the Cherokee commanded by Dragging Canoe almost defeated the militiamen at Long Island Flats by using a crude but effective combination of a frontal assault and an oblique flank attack. In the 1781 battle of the Bluffs, a flank move coupled with a frontal ambush and attack almost wiped out Middle Tennessee. In 1788 the Chickamauga attacked and defeated General Joseph Martin's force at Lookout Mountain to refute again the myth that the Indians could use no formation except an ambush.⁶

Nor is it correct to charge the Indians with cowardice or a lack of perseverance because they sometimes gave up easily. In doing so, one

⁵ The Cherokee population in 1761 boasted only about 3,000 warriors for the Lower, Middle, and Upper (or Overhills) combined; in 1775 there were only 15,000 people in the entire nation, of which the Tennesseans faced only a part. See James Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokee," Bureau of American Ethnology, *Nineteenth Annual Report* (Washington, 1900), 56, 61; John R. Swanton, "Indian Tribes of North America," Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 145 (Washington, 1952), 179, 167, 224; Robert S. Cotterill, *The Southern Indians: The Story of the Civilized Tribes before Removal* (Norman, Okla., 1954), 5, 8-9. The Lower and Middle Cherokee of 1761 resided in South Carolina and North Carolina, respectively. The Lower Cherokee referred to throughout this paper were the faction of the Overhills led by Dragging Canoe which seceded after that group made peace with the Americans in 1776-1777. The seceders founded the Five Lower Towns along the Tennessee near Chattanooga and formed the nucleus of the Chickamauga Indians.

⁶ Daniel Smith to Secretary of War Henry Knox, June 22, July 19, July 27, 1793, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 460-64; James Seagrove to Knox, October 31, 1793, *ibid.*, 468-69; Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare," 259.

does not take into account the logistical problems of conducting an Indian expedition. Between 1776 and 1794 the Indians could muster food and arms for only five major expeditions against the whites. Since hunting was considered a sacred ceremony not generally performed while on the warpath, the invaders either carried their food or relied upon plunder, thus making long sieges almost impossible. The most substantial and favorite crop which fed Indian armies was corn, but the Cherokee corn supply was almost wiped out by the 1776 punitive expeditions conducted by Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, in which Colonel William Christian's Virginians alone destroyed almost 50,000 bushels of the Overhill supply. Since each family supplied its own food, and this usually scanty, war parties were rarely able to enlist large numbers or to take them far afield. Even when they did so, such as in the 1781 invasion of Middle Tennessee, they were unable, because of lack of supplies, to sustain a battle very long or to bring it to a quick and successful conclusion.⁷

The problem of weapons was even more acute. By 1781 the advance of white settlement had forced a revision of Indian armament, which had consisted of five foot bows, barbed arrows, blow guns, knives, and war clubs (combination knives and hatchets). The hand combat weapons remained the same, but British traders replaced the bow with the "Brown Bess" musket, a smooth barrelled weapon of about .75 calibre which had been introduced by the Duke of Marlborough and which served the British army with few modifications for well over one hundred years. But still the Tennessee Indians were at a disadvantage, for they were not usually skillful users of the musket nor did they have the proper equipment or knowledge to care for the weapon and to repair it. There was always a shortage of accouterments such as cartridge boxes, powder flasks and horns, and especially spare parts, and dampness or rain could put the untrained Indian's musket out of commission. Even if they had known how to use them skillfully, there was always a shortage of arms. The Cherokee and Creek muskets came from the British at Detroit or from Panton and Leslie in Florida, but white expeditions often diminished the supply on hand, as did Evan

⁷ Samuel C. Williams, "Col. Joseph Williams' Battalion on Christian's Campaign," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, IX (July, 1925), 106-13.

Shelby's in 1779, when vast stores of Brown Bess muskets were captured at Dragging Canoe's Chickamauga villages.⁸

It is somewhat ironic that the British, in their desire to aid the Indians in Tennessee, provided them with a weapon which actually handicapped the aborigines. The musket had been designed for British linear tactics which relied upon massed formations that set up a field of fire. The weapon could be reloaded three or four times a minute but had an effective range of only about 125 yards. While it was perfect for British tactics, which stressed rapidity of fire and not accuracy, it was not effective when used by the Indians, who depended upon independent firing at moderately long ranges. This gave the Tennessee whites, who were usually armed with rifled weapons, a fire superiority over the Indians, because they could force the Indians to fight at long range where the musket would be less effective. The only times when the musket had an advantage were in such close operations and night attacks upon forts as at Nashborough or Buchanan's Station, and even then the Indians ran into improvised grapeshot from artillery pieces or from the wide-mouthed blunderbusses. During the entire period under discussion, the Indians never really had a weapons superiority; the closest time to it would have been the decade of the 1790's when international problems forced the frontier to adopt a strictly defensive strategy, and the war became mainly a defense of stations and blockhouses.⁹

Despite their handicaps, the Tennessee Indians did very well in moulding themselves into fighting units which utilized crude formations. The Chickamauga armies were divided into several divisions of infantry and one of cavalry such as in the 1781 campaign against the Cumberland settlements and in the 1793 expedition against Knoxville. The Creek element in the Chickamauga armies had an elaborate ranking system which included seven classes, from the chief who declared war down to a warrior who was designated head of the commissary department. The Cherokee were less elaborate and ranked their sol-

⁸ M. K. Harrington, *Cherokee and Earlier Remains on the Upper Tennessee River*, in F. W. Hodge (ed.), *Indian Notes and Monographs*, No. 24 (New York, 1922), 207-15; Carl P. Russell, *Guns on the Early Frontiers; A History of Firearms from Colonial Times Through the Years of the Western Fur Trade* (Berkeley, 1957), 50-52, 302; Harold L. Peterson, *Arms and Armor in Colonial America, 1526-1783* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1956), 56-68.

⁹ John W. Wright, "Some Notes on the Continental Army," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, Second Series, XI (April, July, 1931), 87-91; Williams, *Adair's History*, 456-57; Russell, *Guns on the Early Frontiers*, 50-52; Swanton, "Social Organization," 406.

diers as either warriors or the less distinguished plebeians who were known as "fighting men." These loose units moved swiftly across country by using the innumerable Indian military paths, and traveled single file to disguise their numbers. While their number might vary from the usual twenty to forty members to one thousand warriors as in the 1793 Knoxville campaign, their objective remained the same—to strike swiftly and against a smaller party if possible. Great numbers of scouts were used in advance of the main body, and very effective field signals (the imitation of turkeys by day and wolves or owls by night) enabled large parties to collect swiftly and silently when scattered. Upon reaching the objective, the Indians either attacked in columns or if the party were small, broke up and crawled in animal fashion. Then the war signal was passed from one to another, and the wings which were usually more extended towards the front were drawn towards the center so that the whites were encircled. At the point of contact a shrill war cry was the signal for every man to cover himself behind a tree or in some cavity, from which position the Indians fought as individuals. When a retreat was ordered, a signal from the leader reformed the group, and the war party retired as silently and swiftly as it had come. Rarely did the whites ever intercept an Indian force in retreat. Although this was the usual procedure, the Indians could perform more intricate maneuvers that show their fighting ability has been underrated. They could march abreast in lines of more than a mile long and still keep in close communication by hand signals from right to left. Circular formations could surround small parties of whites, and semicircle groupings were used to drive an enemy back into a river, as was attempted at the battle of Long Island Flats. When on the march, the Tennessee Indians could form large hollow squares to prevent being surrounded, but this formation was more popular on the northern frontier.¹⁰

But the Indians were not the only participants who were forced to devise their own tactics, for the military history of Tennessee Indian wars is one of adaptation on both sides. Both white and Indian needed to change their style of warfare if they were to be successful; the settlers

¹⁰ James Smith, *A Treatise on the Mode and Manner of Indian War* (Chicago, 1948), 4. This is a reprint of the 1812 edition. See also Joseph Doddridge, "Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania for the Year 1783 Inclusive," in Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia* 4th ed. (Strasburg, Va., 1925), 277; Swanton, "Social Organization," 433-37; Williams, *Adair's History*, 412-15.

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did and succeeded, the Indians continued in their old way and lost the war. The men of Cumberland and Holston, having failed bitterly with contemporary methods, called upon century-old strategy from the New England frontier and the Carolinas, and developed their own tactics.

The Tennesseans found themselves without suitable tactics. The European system, as mentioned, was based upon deep and close linear formations to secure a maximum fire effect. It was logical for the weapons used and for fighting similar opponents in open country. But the emphasis on fire alone fell apart when Braddock's army was defeated by the French and Indians in 1755. The closely packed English lines made excellent targets for the backwoodsmen in the broken country and taught the British that something must be added to the principle of firepower. Colonel Henry Bouquet of the new colonial corps supplied the answer in developing tactical formations that supplemented the old line formation with flankers, sallying parties and light troops, so that fire was now combined with movement.¹¹

The new tactics of fire and movement were excellent for trained British regulars, but were no good for the part-time militiamen of Washington and Davidson counties. These men had neither the discipline nor the weapons to use either the old linear tactics or Bouquet's innovations. Faced with this problem, the Tennessee militiamen devised a third type of tactics that has been largely ignored in American military history. Most of the Tennessee settlers were armed with rifles, which were more accurate than muskets but were also much slower to load and thus unsuited to laying down a pattern or area of fire. Powder and ball were always scarce, so firing in volleys was replaced by firing at will only when a target was in sight. In short, the settlers borrowed their tactics from the Indians, and became armies of individuals who marched together but fought separately. Trained to march as silently as the Indians and even to use the tomahawk as did the Indians, the militia, when their objective was reached, broke up into small groups which were capable of superb maneuvers, as evidenced by Sevier's flanking operations when fording the river crossing at the battle of Etowah in 1793. Only one time between 1776 and 1794 did the Tennesseans attempt to use anything resembling the linear tactics being

¹¹ Wright, "Notes on the Continental Army," 201-04; Oliver Spaulding, Hoffman Nickerson, and John Wright, *Warfare; A Study of Military Methods from the Earliest Times* (New York, 1925), 559-60.

used by the continental line under George Washington, and that was in their first real battle at Long Island Flats in 1776. The formations were clumsy and too difficult for the three-months militia to execute, and they were almost defeated by their own tactics. Even if the Tennesseans had been armed with muskets during the long Indian wars, the lack of discipline and training would have prevented their use of regular army tactics. The system they devised suited their weapons, their training, and even their individualistic personalities, and it is somewhat ironic that they borrowed their enemy's tactics to hold the frontier.¹²

Strategy on the Tennessee frontier has also been largely overlooked. In all justice it must be said that strategically the white settlers were clearly on the defensive. The two areas of white settlement in East and Middle Tennessee were separated by the formidable Cumberland Plateau as well as by Walden Ridge and numerous rivers. Until North Carolina authorized in 1787 the construction of a road across the Cumberland Plateau, the only land passage connecting them was the Wilderness Road through Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, and then by trail through the desolate Barrens back into Tennessee—a difficult and circuitous route. The only other means of connection was the Tennessee River which flowed straight through the Overhill Cherokee country, and past the Five Lower Towns near Chattanooga and the dangerous Coldwater settlement near Muscle Shoals. The Cherokee and Chickamauga groups not only built their towns on the tributaries of the Tennessee such as the Tellico or Hiwassee, but also developed an extensive water communication system which will be mentioned later; it was the desire to control this communication system that helped determine their strategy. After the Overhills were forced out of the war in 1777, the center of resistance was slowly shifted down the Tennessee to the Five Lower Towns which were established in 1782 by Dragging Canoe because of constant harassment from John Sevier's militia. Besides the

¹² James Ripley Jacobs, *The Beginning of the U. S. Army, 1783-1812* (Princeton, 1947), 4-8; Spaulding, *et al.*, *Warfare*, 559-60; Peterson, *Arms and Armor*, 200-203. Available evidence shows the Tennessee settlers to have been armed with an aggregation of rifles, muskets, and blunderbusses, but the crack militia companies, such as Sevier's mounted troopers, were riflemen. See "King's Mountain—By Col. Isaac Shelby," in Lyman C. Draper, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes* (New York, 1929), 541-43. Draper, on page 175, shows a large number of Deckard rifles in Tennessee. John Haywood, *Civil and Political History of the State of Tennessee from Its Earliest Settlement up to the Year 1796, including the Boundaries of the State* (Nashville, 1891), 316, calls a Knox County patrol in 1794 "as experienced riflemen as any in the world." Wills of deceased Cumberland settlers show a large number of rifles present, according to Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland*, *passim*.

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advantage of continued water communication upstream with the Overhills and with the Creek nation downstream, the Five Lower Towns provided an almost impregnable position. Situated on the western slopes of Lookout Mountain and fronted by the Tennessee River, the towns resisted all white invasions by the narrow land passageways along the river. It took an amphibious invasion from across the river to wipe them out in 1794.¹³

John Sevier's expeditions which forced the Chickamauga back into the Five Towns have been highly praised by historians, but it must be pointed out that Sevier's failure to outflank the Indians and his merely pushing them back into the mountain bastion made matters worse. For not only were the Five Towns the heart of water communications among the Indians, but they were also located at the junction of the most important Indian military paths in the Southeast. The Great Indian Warpath ran northeast from the Creek country through the Chattanooga area to western Pennsylvania, connecting Dragging Canoe with the powerful allies to the north. The Tennessee River, Ohio, and Great Lakes Trail connected the Chickamauga with allies in north Georgia as well as those at Detroit. Even more serious, the Nickajack Trail furnished a direct route to the Cumberland settlements, and the Chickamauga path went from the Five Towns almost due north through present-day Warren, White, and Cumberland counties, and enabled the Chickamauga to strike on the flank any reinforcements that might be sent from one settlement to the other.¹⁴

This overwhelming advantage in location determined the strategy of the Chickamauga. Situated at the southern tip of the Cumberland Plateau and Walden Ridge, the Indians could easily march into Middle or East Tennessee with little fear of interference from the other settlement. So from 1780 until 1794 the Cherokee and Creek strategy remained the same: first to isolate Middle Tennessee settlements, and then to turn the flank of the East Tennessee settlers and gain a beach-

¹³ John Sevier to William Blount, September 13, 1792, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 277-78; Blount to Henry Knox, March 20, 1792, *ibid.*, 263; James Carey to Blount, March 20, 1793, *ibid.*, 437-38; Arthur Campbell to Thomas Jefferson, January 15, 1781, in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts*, 11 vols. (Richmond, 1875-1893), I, 434-35. The Five Lower Towns were Running Water, Nickajack, Long Island, Lookout Mountain Town, Crow Town. See John P. Brown, *Old Frontiers: The Story of the Cherokee Indians from Earliest Times to the Date of Their Removal to the West*, 1838 (Kingsport, 1938), 175, 203, frontispiece map.

¹⁴ William E. Myer, "Indian Trails of the Southeast," Bureau of American Ethnology, *Forty-Second Annual Report* (Washington, 1928), 749-51, 839-44, 846-50.

head at the mouth of the Clinch River on the Tennessee, near present-day Kingston. The Clinch River mouth was a vital position to seize, for a force of white troops there would cut off all water communication between Overhill Cherokee and Chickamauga and would be in a good position to repel Indian invasions from further down the Tennessee Valley. The five invasions between 1776 and 1794 had one or both of these strategic points as their objective. But as will be shown, the Indians perhaps tried too much, never coordinated their objectives, and wasted their resources in piece-meal assaults.¹⁵

The points of operational strategy by which the Indians hoped to obtain their overall objectives can best be illustrated by their campaigns against the whites. In 1776 the Overhills hurled three divisions against East Tennessee with the purpose of rolling up the whites' flank and driving the remnants into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It was a lightning move and had the whites not been warned in advance, they would have been completely unprepared, as very few forts had been constructed. Dragging Canoe's division was defeated at Long Island Flats by the Eaton's Station militia. The other two divisions struck elsewhere, utilizing the Indian strategy of preventing one settlement from reinforcing another, but Old Abraham's (or Abram's) division was repulsed at Watauga, and the Raven was unsuccessful in trying to ambush Carter's Valley. The defeated Indians retreated back down the Tennessee Valley, but their operational strategy of swift marches, outflanking maneuvers, and dispersal of attack had set the pattern for the ensuing campaigns.¹⁶

In 1780 the Chickamauga shifted their offensive strategy and concentrated on wiping out the infant Cumberland settlements. This probably explains the collapse of resistance to the punitive expeditions of Sevier and others between 1779 and 1782 which has previously been attributed to Indian cowardice. The Indians were merely occupied in another theater of war. The Chickamauga received unexpected help when the Chickasaw briefly entered the war in 1780 because Virginia

¹⁵ Joseph Martin to Governor Caswell, May 11, 1786, *State Records of North Carolina*, 16 vols. (Winston and Goldsboro, 1895-1905), XVIII, 604-06; Col. Anthony Bledsoe to Caswell, May 4, 1787, *ibid.*, XX, 692; William Bount to James Seagrove, January 9, 1794, in "Correspondence of James Robertson," *American Historical Magazine*, III (July, 1898), 274-75; Blount to Henry Knox, November 8, 1792, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 325-27.

¹⁶ J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (reprinted, Chattanooga, 1926), 152-59; Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokee," 47-48.

ennessee, near present-day position to seize, water communication and would be in a line down the Tennessee. In 1794 had one or two as will be shown, and their objectives,

The Indians hoped to win by their campaigns against the divisions against the whites' flank and the Virginia. It was a plan in advance, they had very few forts and were defeated at Long Bottom. Her two divisions were preventing one settlement's (or Abram's) from being as unsuccessful in their plans as they retreated back to their strategy of swift attack had set the

strategy and commitments. This proved to be a problem in expeditions of the kind previously been seen. They were merely occupied in their unexpected help because Virginia

Records of North Carolina, 1704-06; Col. Anthony's letter to James Seagrove, *Historical Magazine*, 1792, *American State*

the Eighteenth Century Cherokee, 47-48.

had erected a fort in territory which was claimed by the Chickasaw. Although not numerous, the Chickasaw had been important allies of the whites, for they provided a buffer zone against the Upper Creeks. One can only surmise what would have been the fate of Middle Tennessee if the Chickamauga had taken full advantage of Chickasaw aid, for the Cumberland settlements probably could not have withstood a combined invasion by both Chickasaw and Chickamauga. However, the Chickasaw wasted themselves fighting alone during the summer and winter of 1780. They drove the settlers on Cumberland back into Nashborough, Freeland's, and Eaton's Station, utilizing the Indian strategy of forcing white settlers into a line of forts so that reinforcements could not be sent from one to the other. In January, 1781, the Chickasaw made their last great effort when they almost carried Freeland's Station. Panic gripped Middle Tennessee during the "starving time" of 1780-1781, as the Chickasaw carried torch and faggot from the Harpeth to the Red River. Renfroe's Station fell, Mansker's was broken up, attacks were made on Eaton's, Bledsoe's, and Donelson's, and the remnant of one half of Middle Tennessee's population streamed over the Kentucky Barrens in defeat.¹⁷

Thus far the Indian strategy had been highly successful. Water communication had been virtually cut off by the Five Towns, and the Chickasaw outflanked the Sumner county settlements and cut off communication with Kentucky via the Dripping Springs trail, while other bands tried to close the Wilderness Road. Livestock and crops were destroyed, the Indian policy of continual siege forced the whites to abandon the idea of raising corn that year, game was scarce, and a lack of horses forced the remaining colonials to give up any idea of retreating into Kentucky. The time was ripe for a combined blow against the reeling white defenses, but before the Chickamauga could put their attack into motion, the Chickasaw had wasted themselves and were withdrawing down the Choctaw Trace. The Chickamauga tried it alone against Nashborough, although the Indians did not have even all of their own forces up. Several hundred of them ambushed the Cumberland defenders outside Fort Nashborough at the battle of the Bluffs in April, 1781, and by using the favorite Chickamauga tactic of

¹⁷ Ramsey, *Annals*, 445-49. The Eaton's Station located across the Cumberland River from Nashborough should not be confused with the Eaton's Station near the Long Island of the Holston in East Tennessee mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

combining a frontal ambush with a flank attack, they almost wiped out Middle Tennessee. As it was, the whites lost heavily, but had the Chickasaw reinforced the attackers, or if the Chickamauga had waited for a party of eighty Cherokee that arrived a day later, they might have carried Nashborough. The problem of coordination continually plagued the Indian armies, as it was very difficult to secure intra-tribal cooperation.¹⁸

The Chickamauga then shifted their attack to East Tennessee to gain a position at the Clinch River mouth. They could well afford to do this, for by 1786 a new Indian settlement on Coldwater Creek near the Muscle Shoals was keeping Cumberland occupied. Manned by renegades, some Chickamauga and a few drifting Creek and Shawnee, the Coldwater Indians could not be located by the Cumberland settlers. In fact, it was not known that their town even existed until a punitive expedition led by James Robertson accidentally came upon it and destroyed it while in pursuit of some marauders. The problem of placing the blame for raids often resulted in the death of friendly Indians and thereby only fomented more trouble. The Overhills constantly threatened to re-enter the war, and could hardly be blamed for doing so, since the whites constantly destroyed their towns and killed friendly chiefs such as Old Tassel, either through ignorance or frustration.¹⁹

Spurred on by the Coldwater successes, the Chickamauga, commanded by an intelligent half-breed, John Watts, swept into the Tennessee Valley in 1788. The opportunity was excellent, for the political struggle between supporters of Franklin and North Carolina had demoralized the people. Thus, as the Indians ravaged the country, the defenses in the Holston, Clinch, and Powell valleys suddenly collapsed as the settlers there prepared to withdraw to safety. Two divisions commanded by Watts, the Glass, and Bloody Fellow swept up the Holston (now called Tennessee) Valley, and extended one flank towards Knoxville and the other across the Clinch Valley towards the

¹⁸ "Ramsey's Notebook," Draper MSS (Wisconsin Historical Society), W30S 522; "Craighead Memoir," *ibid.*, W6XX (50) 12-18; "Colonel Whitley's Narrative," *ibid.*, 9CC35.

¹⁹ Colonel Anthony Bledsoe admitted that the Middle Tennesseans did not know who the attacking forces were. See Bledsoe to Governor Caswell, May 12, 1786, *North Carolina State Records*, XVIII, 607-09; Joseph Martin to Governor Randolph, June 11, 1788, *Virginia State Papers*, IV, 452; Martin to Governor Henry, August 14, 1786, *ibid.*, 164; Colonel Joseph Martin to Governor Caswell, March 25, 1787, *North Carolina State Records*, XX, 653; James Robertson to Caswell, July 2, 1787, in Ramsey, *Annals*, 470-71.

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Virginia line. The Indians carried Gillespie's Fort on the Holston (now Tennessee), at the mouth of Little River, but failed to outflank the whites. Perhaps it was their desire to perfect their strategy that proved their undoing, for they drove too far across the Clinch Valley and invaded Virginia. Virginia had never listened with full interest to North Carolina's pleas for aid, but now the Virginia militia shifted to hold the Wilderness Road to Kentucky and to block an invasion of the Abingdon settlements. The blunder of bringing Virginia into the war was a serious one for the Chickamauga, for not only would it now be more difficult to cut the communication line, but the intervention of the Virginia militia took the pressure off the East Tennesseans to guard the Wilderness Road and enabled them to concentrate on the invaders, who were repeatedly driven back for the next four years.²⁰

By 1792 time and allies were running out for the Indians, since British aid had diminished and the northern Indians were having troubles of their own. Dragging Canoe had died earlier in the year without accomplishing his dream of a giant confederation with the northern tribes. He was replaced by Watts, who was a weak leader but an excellent strategist. The 1792 invasion of Cumberland clearly refutes Mahon's assertion that American Indians were totally incapable of employing strategy. Watts first sent foraging parties into the Cumberland and Tennessee valleys to disguise the real objective, and then obtained supplies in large quantities from the Spanish to replenish his sagging commissary. William Blount, governor of the Southwest Territory, heard of the impending invasion and ordered the Knox County militia into service in East Tennessee and sent dispatches to Robertson to fit out the Mero District militia in Middle Tennessee. Then in a master stroke, Watts' lieutenants, the Glass and Bloody Fellow, sent letters to Blount saying that the war rumors were merely the talk of restless young warriors, and that Watts had stifled their plans and was preserving the peace. Blount rose to the bait, disbanded the Knox County militia and ordered Robertson to do the same in Middle Tennessee.²¹

²⁰ Joseph Martin to Governor Randolph, February 10, 1787, April 17, 1788, *Virginia State Papers*, IV, 235, 428-29.

²¹ Blount to James Robertson, September 6, 1792, "Correspondence of Robertson," II (January, 1897), 67-69; Blount to Glass, September 13, 1792; Blount to Bloody Fellow, September 13, 1792; Blount to Robertson, September 14, 1792, *ibid.*, 72-77; Cotterill, *Southern Indians*, 96. Robertson wisely refused to disband the Mero militia. See Robertson to Blount, September 26, 1792, "Correspondence of Robertson," II, 77-79.

Although the Overhills refused to cooperate because of fear of reprisals and a disagreement over the point of attack, the Chickamauga swept across the Tennessee, determined to wipe out Middle Tennessee. With brilliant strategy, Watts sent two divisions of infantry, his own and the Shawnee Warrior's, and John Taylor's fine cavalry division against Middle Tennessee, while two other divisions under the general command of the Middle Striker moved to cut off the Cumberland and Kentucky roads leading to East Tennessee. The Middle Striker got across the Cumberland road near Crab Orchard on the mountain and routed Handley's militia company which had been sent from East Tennessee, thus insuring no aid from that quarter. But the ghost of the 1781 assault, a lack of unified command, sprang up again, as the Indians lost eight days on the march bickering over the objective. Watts, a weak commander, was persuaded by the Shawnee Warrior to foolishly abandon an attack upon Nashborough until Buchanan's Station was first carried. Watts agreed to this change of plan which eliminated any chance of surprising Nashborough, and also went against his own judgment by allowing a midnight attack instead of wisely attacking at dawn when the men would be leaving Buchanan's Fort to go to their work. On the night of September 30, Watts hurled 600 warriors against the weakly manned outpost, which they failed to carry. Worn by dispute and wastage of supplies, the potentially brilliant campaign became a dismal retreat, for the surprise advantage was lost and the Mero militia would soon be in pursuit. The Indians retreated down the Nickajack trail, leaving the Shawnee Warrior and others of their best officers dead on the battlefield. Watts himself was severely wounded. The Chickamauga would probably never recover from their officer casualties or from the commissary losses. They had again beaten themselves because they could not solve the problem of their lack of unified command. Blount spoke the truth when he later remarked to Secretary of War Knox that "it is a rock on which large parties of Indians have generally split, especially consisting of more than one nation."²²

There was time for only one more offensive thrust. Allies were fading quickly—the Overhills and Chickasaws had long been out of

²² *Cis's Advertiser*, September 2, 1846, Draper MSS, 27CC9; Blount to Henry Knox, October 10, November 5, 1792, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 294, 331; Blount to Robertson, October 17, 1792, "Correspondence of Robertson," II (January, 1897), 80-82.

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the war, a large peace party was building up among the Creeks, and Anthony Wayne was drilling his army in the Ohio country. Still reaching for a foothold at the Clinch River mouth, the Chickamauga exhibited one last piece of good strategy. Watts faked an advance into Middle Tennessee, which forced Blount to detach 180 seasoned militia west of the mountains on a wild goose chase. Watts then sent small parties to the east of Knoxville to Wear's Cove and along the Nolichucky to force John Sevier to send part of the force defending Knoxville in that direction. Sevier did accordingly, and posted his 400 militia on the south bank of the Holston (now Tennessee) about eight miles above its mouth (at the site of Lenoir City) on the Tennessee. The situation was again ideal, for the Chickamauga had forced the whites to divide their forces so widely that the only real opposition remaining on the north bank of the Tennessee that could obstruct an attack on Knoxville was a company of eighty light-horse troopers. Watts' 1000 warriors, marching in files of twenty-eight abreast, got across to the north bank of the Tennessee below the mouth of the Holston, near the site of Loudon, slipped past the light-horse, and after a forced march reached Cavett's Station within eight miles of Knoxville. At daylight on September 25, John Sevier was across the river on the south bank of the Holston (now Tennessee), most of the remaining militia were not in service or had been sent to Middle Tennessee, and Watts' fine cavalry division of a hundred British-armed troopers promised to keep the light-horse occupied as the army marched on a practically undefended Knoxville.²³

Again the Indian command system lost the Chickamauga their last chance to carry their colors to the Clinch River. The command of the army was shared by Watts and Doublehead, another Chickamauga who dallied along the way to plunder every frontier cabin, although a surprise move on Knoxville had been the main objective. Then Doublehead and Joseph Vann, also a Chickamauga commander, lost valuable hours in the early morning in a dispute over whether to take prisoners. By daylight the army should have been at Knoxville instead

²³ Daniel Smith to Henry Knox, September 27, 1793, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 468; Blount to Knox, October 28, 1793, in Clarence Edwin Carter (ed.), *Territorial Papers of the United States*, 25 vols. (Washington, 1934-60), IV, *The Territory South of the River Ohio, 1790-1796*, p. 310. Until about 1880 the section of the Tennessee River between the mouths of the French Broad and the Little Tennessee was called the Holston.

Blount to Henry Knox, *Indian Affairs*, I, 294, 331; Robertson," II (January,

of at Cavett's. Also, a cannon which was customarily fired at Knoxville at sunrise was mistaken for a warning of the Indian advance, and the Indians, confused and discouraged, decided to carry Cavett's Station instead. Even though successful in this, it was small reward for what could have been achieved. An attack on Knoxville was now impossible, for the advantage of surprise was lost and Sevier moved to cut them off at the crossing of the Tennessee. For the second time in two years, splendid planning had stalled in its execution, and an unimportant victory over an outlying station became the proverbial mess of pottage for the Chickamauga. This was to be their last chance indeed, for in the following year Wayne's victory at Fallen Timbers and the destruction of the Five Lower Towns in the Nickajack expedition ended organized resistance in Tennessee.²⁴

It would be unfair to attribute the Indian defeat solely to their own mistakes because one important reason for the white victory was their development of suitable strategy to counter the tactics which have already been mentioned. From 1776 until about 1786, the settlers used offensive strategy, based upon punitive expeditions and defensive-offensive movements. The punitive expedition was a disciplinary measure, while the defensive-offensive was a preventive measure used to stifle planned Indian invasions. The most successful punitive expedition was the 1776 invasion of the Cherokee country by armies from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Following a scorched earth policy, the invaders burned towns and thousands of acres of crops as they rolled over the awed Cherokee who hardly knew which army to oppose. The 1777 surrender of the Overhills is clear evidence of the success of this strategy.²⁵

The defensive-offensive suited the weak defensive line of the whites. Its purposes were to keep the war out of the white settlements,

²⁴ Blount to Knox, October 28, 1793, Carter (ed.), *Territorial Papers*, IV, 310; Ramsey, *Annals*, 583-85; John Sevier to Blount, October 25, 1793, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 469-70. For an account of Sevier's pursuit of the Chickamauga see "Draper Notebooks," Draper MSS, W3OS 388-90; for an account of the Nickajack expedition see James Ore to Blount, September 24, 1794, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 632.

²⁵ North Carolina Council of Safety to Patrick Henry, October 25, 1776, *North Carolina State Records*, X, 860-61; Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokee," 50-51; "Bro. Martin Schneider's Report of His Journey to the Upper Cherokee Towns" (1783-1784), in Samuel Cole Williams (ed.), *Early Travels in the Tennessee Country, 1540-1800* (Johnson City, Tenn., 1928), 256-57.

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to prevent anticipated invasions by striking first, and to force war parties to return home by destroying their commissary stores. The 1779 expedition under Evan Shelby and John Montgomery stifled a planned invasion of the Holston Valley, and caught Dragging Canoe's defenses completely unprepared. It also burned the Chickamauga towns and captured the commissary stores, including the previously mentioned Brown Bess muskets. John Sevier used this strategy five times between 1780 and 1782 to keep the war in the Indian country and to keep the Indians from assembling for an invasion.²⁶

After 1786 the Tennesseans were forced to find a new strategy. International difficulties with Spain moved the Secretary of War to order that all offensive movements into Indian country be suspended, and the militia were ordered to act strictly on the defensive. This was a serious blow to the white defenses, of which the Indians never took full advantage since there were no connecting military roads, few fortified stations, and few garrisoned river crossings. The only available protection was that of militia companies which usually saw service for only three months at a time because Secretary of War Knox frowned upon the expense of keeping standing militia in the field. Only a handful of federal troops were ever sent to Tennessee during this time, and their success against the Indians was anything but outstanding. The problem was particularly acute in the isolated Cumberland area, where the militia were even forbidden to pursue invading Indians farther south than the Duck River ridge.²⁷

The federal policy was somewhat like the leaky roof that did not need repairing when the sun was shining. The frontier was ordered to stand on the defensive and could put militia into service only when trouble arose. Obviously the Chickamauga respected only force—the deterrent of a standing militia. However, this army could only be put into service when the Indians appeared and must be disbanded when

²⁶ Albert Goodpasture, "Indian Wars and Warriors of the Old Southwest, 1730-1807," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, IV (March, 1918), 37-38; Arthur Campbell to Thomas Jefferson, January 15, 1781, *Virginia State Papers*, I, 434-36; Major James Sevier to Lyman C. Draper, August 19, 1839, in "A Memoir of John Sevier," *American Historical Magazine*, VI (January, 1901), 41-42.

²⁷ For statements of the forced defensive policy see Knox to Blount, June 26, 1793, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 430, and Blount to James Robertson, December 2, 1792, "Correspondence of Robertson," II (January, 1897), 85-87. For restrictions on length of service of militia see Blount to Robertson, April 27, 1792, January 18, 1794, *ibid.*, I (October, 1896), 390-91, III (July, 1898), 278-79.

they left. This posed an additional problem of how to anticipate an invasion without being caught with no army whatever in the field.²⁸

Since they were left to solve this problem for themselves, the Tennesseans reverted to a strategy that had been used in early wars on the New England and Carolina frontiers and which was then being used by the Chickamauga. Whether the strategy was rediscovered or was a product of experience based upon the few records of earlier frontier wars still in existence would make interesting conjecture. Nevertheless, the strategy contained four principles: the employment of parties of rangers, the use of spies or scouts, the development of military roads, and a return to dependence on blockhouses. Rangers scoured the frontier in advance of settlements and developed their own "right angle" tactics whereby they embarked from Southwest Point, crossed Cumberland Plateau, and cut across the Indian trails to the Cumberland settlements at right angles. Small war parties were discouraged from entering the patrolled area, and others were ambushed or cut off from their base at Lookout Mountain. Spies and scouts ranged the Nickajack or Choctaw trails to give enough warning for the militia to assemble and the settlers began to see the importance of military roads to move men and supplies between the settlements. Blockhouses, which by that time were somewhat outmoded, once more became important as the style of fighting became chiefly a defense of stations. Even the old blunderbuss again had its day as probably the most effective weapon in close defenses of the forts on the Cumberland River. It is somewhat ironic that the whites helped hold the defense line by borrowing from their ancestors or from their enemies.²⁹

²⁸ Knox admitted that the Indians only respected a show of force. See Knox to George Washington, January 4, 1790, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 60. See also Blount to Robertson, April 14, 1793, *ibid.*, 452, and Blount to Knox, January 14, 1793, *ibid.*, 433.

²⁹ See Knox to Blount, November 26, 1792, Carter (ed.), *Territorial Papers*, IV, 222-24; Blount to Major Beard, April 18, 1793, *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 453; Blount to Robertson, February 13, March 28, 1793, October 27, 1792. "Correspondence of Robertson," II (April, 1897), 176-77, 355-56, 82-84. For examples of the use of this strategy in earlier wars see "Journal of the Virginia Council, October 15, 1711," in *North Carolina State Records*, I, 809-10; Freeman H. Hart, *The Valley of Virginia in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1942), 77. Parties of rangers were used as early as King Philip's War. See Herbert Milton Sylvester, *Indian Wars of New England*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1910), II, 312. Virginia and Maryland used mounted border rangers in the seventeenth century. See Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York, 1949), 46-47.

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What then did win the Tennessee frontier? To an extent the Indians defeated themselves. After 1786, when the whites were on the defensive, the Chickamauga could name their own strategy, and their muskets came close to having fire superiority over the rifles in close combat around forts. But a lack of unified command and tribal cooperation, disadvantages of arms and supplies, and an attempt to do too much in too many places were things which they never overcame. Their own conceptions of warfare and of discipline hampered field operations, and they never seemed to profit from their own bitter experience. The whites faced problems also, such as their geographical disadvantages, a lack of communication, and an absence of buffer zones. Their militia were ill-trained and treated as a political football, while foreign policy sometimes left them almost defenseless. However, they won because they could adapt and revise their strategy and tactics, while the Cherokee and the Creek refused to do so.

Mr. Mahon stresses that it was the regular troops with bayonets who won the frontier. Perhaps this is true in other areas, but not in Tennessee, where few regular troops ever fired a gun. Mrs. Arnow states that it was the superb fighting ability of the individual pioneer who sometimes fought alone which won the frontier. However, she goes too far in her admiration when she compares the brave Tennessean with the Kentuckian, who she says meekly surrendered his station time after time. This is not only grossly unfair but is also incorrect. Only a few Kentucky stations ever surrendered, and these only because the Indians had artillery, something which the Tennesseans never faced. Also, the Shawnee of Kentucky were known to treat prisoners better than did the Chickamauga of Tennessee, which would indicate that a station besieged by the latter group had no choice but to fight. It must be remembered that the surrender of a few stations in Kentucky was no worse than the abandonment of as many or more in Middle Tennessee in 1780, when almost half of the population, including some of the first families of the Cumberland such as the Donelson family, fled to Kentucky. There were times of wavering in both states as well as moments of supreme courage and perseverance, such as the defense of

Bryan's Station and Boonesborough in Kentucky and Nashborough and Buchanan's Fort in Tennessee.³⁰

Both the regular soldier and the lone pioneer contributed to the victory: the one relieved pressure in the Northwest while the other held the Tennessee line and forced the Indians to waste time, men, and supplies. The real victors, however, seem to be the county militiamen from Washington, Davidson, and the other counties. Part-time farmers and candlestick makers and part-time soldiers with sporadic training and improper equipment, they won the war—and the frontier.

³⁰ Mahon, "Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare," 274-75; Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland*, 299. It is obvious that Mrs. Arnow exaggerated the surrender of Kentucky stations; the first and only ones were Martin's and Ruddle's in 1780, which surrendered to Colonel Henry Byrd's expedition of 600 Indians and Canadians armed with several field pieces which they threatened to open on the forts if they did not capitulate. This was the first and last expedition into Kentucky in which the Indians used artillery. For an account see Mann Butler, *A History of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1834), 110-11, and Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 187.

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