

Primary Source

# Secretary of War Lewis Cass on Indian Removal

*During this period, the War Department was responsible for administering the federal government's relations with Indians. It was Jackson's Secretary of War, Lewis Cass (1782-1866), therefore, who was responsible for overseeing the relocation of tribes that had signed removal treaties to their new lands west of the Mississippi. In his 1831 "Annual Report," Cass set forth his reasons for believing that removal was in the Indians' best interest. In the excerpt below, Cass argues that Native Americans were doomed to extinction unless they seized the opportunity to relocate away from white settlements.*

The work has been aided by Governments and communities, by public opinion, by the obligations of the law, and by the sanction of religion. But its history furnishes abundant evidence of entire failure, and every thing around us upon the frontiers confirms its truth. The Indians have either receded as our settlements advanced, and united their fragments with some kindred tribe, or they have attempted to establish themselves upon reservations, in the vain hope of resisting the pressure upon them, and of preserving their peculiar institutions. Those, who are nearest to us, have generally suffered most severely by the debasing effects of ardent spirits, and by the loss of their own principles of restraint, few as these are, without the acquisition of ours; and almost all of them have disappeared, crushed by the onward course of events, or driven before them. Not one instance can be produced in the whole history of the intercourse between the Indians and the white men, where the former have been able, in districts surrounded by the latter, to withstand successfully the progress of those causes, which have elevated one of these races, and depressed the other. Such a monument of former successful exertion does not exist.

. . . . Indolent in his habits, the Indian is opposed to labor; improvident in his mode of life, he has little foresight in providing, or care in preserving. Taught from infancy to reverence his own traditions and institutions, he is satisfied of their value, and dreads the anger of the Great Spirit, if he should depart from the customs of his fathers. Devoted to

the use of ardent spirits, he abandons himself to its indulgence without restraint. War and hunting are his only occupations. He can endure, without complaining, the extremity of human suffering; and if he cannot overcome the evils of his situation, he submits to them without repining. He attributes all the misfortunes of his race to the white man, and looks with suspicion upon the offers of assistance that are made to him. These traits of character, though not universal, are yet general; and the practical difficulty they present, in changing the condition of such a people, is to satisfy them of our sincerity and the value of the aid we offer; to hold out to them motives for exertion; to call into action some powerful feeling, which shall counteract the tendency of previous impressions. It is under such circumstances, and with these difficulties in view, that the Government has been called upon to determine what arrangements shall be made for the permanent establishment of the Indians. Shall they be advised to remain or remove? If the former, their fate is written in the annals of their race; if the latter, we may yet hope to see them renovated in character and condition by our example and instruction, and by their exertions.

**Source:** Lewis Cass, "Report of the Secretary of War," November 21, 1831, *House Document 2/2*, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., Serial 216, pp. 31-32.