



Speech of Onitossitah

As recounted by William Tatham
(Events described: 1777)

Onitossitah, also known to English-speaking contemporaries as Corn Tassel and Old Tassel, was a Cherokee negotiator at a peace settlement with the revolutionary government of North Carolina held in 1777. A year earlier, Cherokee forces had joined other indigenous nations in attacking colonial settlements along the Appalachians, where colonists had encroached on indigenous lands. Colonial militias retaliated with scorched-earth campaigns against indigenous settlements, leading the Cherokees to sue for peace. Despite the objections of Onitossitah, as represented here, colonial governments required the Cherokees to cede land in what is now Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The 1777 peace settlement was rejected by a militant Cherokee minority, who continued to wage war, as allies of the British, against the colonial revolutionaries.

Onitossitah's speech comes to you through three or four filters. When Onitossitah delivered the speech, in Cherokee, an interpreter rendered it into English; how accurately and completely is unknown. At some unknown time then or thereafter, a colonist who attended the peace settlement penned an account of his impressions of the English interpretation. That account was then somehow used (copied? embellished?) by yet another colonial author, William Tatham, to produce the published text that has been excerpted (and edited) here.

It is not a little surprising that when we enter into treaties with our brothers, the whites, their whole cry is: More land! Indeed, formerly it seemed to be a mere matter of formality with them to demand what they knew we durst not refuse. But on the principles of fairness, of which we have received assurances during the conducting of the present treaty, and in the name of free will and equality, I must reject your demand.

Suppose [...] I were to ask one of you, my brother warriors, under what kind of authority—by what law, or on what pretense—he makes this exorbitant demand of nearly all the lands we hold between your settlements and our towns, as the cement and consideration of our peace. [...] Were we to inquire by what law or authority you set up [this] claim, I answer: None! Your laws extend not into our country, nor ever did; you talk of the law of nature and the law of nations, and they are both against you.

Indeed, much has been advanced on the want of what you term “civilization” among the Indians; and many proposals have been made to us to adopt your laws, your religion, your manners, and your customs. But, we confess, we do not yet see the propriety or practicability of such a reformation, and should be better pleased with beholding the good effects of these doctrines on your own practice than with hearing you talk about them or reading your papers to us upon such subjects.

You say, “Why do not the Indians till the ground and live as we do?” May we not, with equal propriety, ask why the white people do not hunt and live as we do? You profess to think it no injustice towards us to kill our deer and other game from the mere love of waste; but it is very criminal in our young men if they chance to kill a cow or hog for their sustenance when they happen to be on your lands. We wish, however, to be at peace with you and to do as we would be

done by. We do not quarrel with you for killing an occasional buffalo, bear, or deer on our lands when you need one to eat. But you go much farther: your people hunt to gain a livelihood by it; they kill all our game; our young men resent the injury, and it is followed by bloodshed and war.

This is not a mere affected injury; it is a grievance which we equitably complain of, and it demands a permanent redress.

The great God of Nature has placed us in different situations. It is true he has endowed you with many superior advantages, but he has not created us to be your slaves. *We are a separate people!* He has given each their lands, under distinct considerations and circumstances: he has stocked yours with the cow, ours with the buffalo; yours with the hog, ours with the bear; yours with the sheep, ours with the deer. He has, indeed, given you an advantage in this: that your cattle are tame and domestic, while ours are wild and demand not only a larger space for range, but art to hunt and kill them. They are, nevertheless, as much our property as other animals are yours, and ought not to be taken away without our consent and for something equivalent.

Source: William Tatham, “Characters Among the North American Indians,” as printed in “Colonel Tatham,” *Annual Biography and Obituary* 4 (1820), 162-164, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014318482>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Quotation marks enclosing Onitossitah’s speech in the source publication omitted. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. Italics omitted here when used in the source to set off quasi-quoted speech, but retained when used in the source for emphasis. The racial label *white*, inconsistently capitalized in the source publication, is consistently presented here in lowercase. The capitalizing of *Nature* replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from Onitossitah’s speech are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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