

THE CHEROKEE NATION vs. THE STATE OF GEORGIA.

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

5 Peters, 1

March 18, 1831, Decided

MARSHALL, C. J. This bill is brought by the Cherokee nation, praying an injunction to restrain the state of Georgia from the execution of certain laws of that state, which, as is alleged, go directly to annihilate the Cherokee as a political society, and to seize for the use of Georgia, the lands of the nation which have been assured to them by the United States, in
5 solemn treaties repeatedly made and still in force.

If courts were permitted to indulge their sympathies, a case better calculated to excite them can scarcely be imagined. A people, once numerous, powerful, and truly independent, found by our ancestors in the quiet and uncontrolled possession of an ample domain, gradually sinking beneath our superior policy, our arts and our arms, have yielded their lands, by
10 successive treaties, each of which contains a solemn guarantee of the residue, until they retain no more of their formerly extensive territory than is deemed necessary to their comfortable subsistence. To preserve this remnant, the present application is made.

Before we can look into the merits of the case, a preliminary inquiry presents itself. Has this court jurisdiction of the cause? The third article of the constitution describes the extent of the
15 judicial power. The second section closes an enumeration of the cases to which it is extended, with "controversies between a state or citizens thereof, and foreign states, citizens or subjects." A subsequent clause of the same section gives the supreme court original jurisdiction, in all cases in which a state shall be a party. The party defendant may then unquestionably be sued in this court. May the plaintiff sue in it? Is the Cherokee nation a
20 foreign state, in the sense in which that term is used in the constitution? The counsel for the plaintiffs have maintained the affirmative of this proposition with great earnestness and ability. So much of the argument as was intended to prove the character of the Cherokees as a state, as a distinct political society, separated from others, capable of managing its own affairs and governing itself, has in the opinion of a majority of the judges, been completely
25 successful. They have been uniformly treated as a state, from the settlement of our country. The numerous treaties made with them by the United States, recognise them as a people capable of maintaining the relations of peace and war, of being responsible in their political character for any violation of their engagements, or for any aggression committed on the citizens of the United States, by any individual of their community. Laws have been enacted
30 in the spirit of these treaties. The acts of our government plainly recognise the Cherokee nation as a state, and the courts are bound by those acts.

A question of much more difficulty remains. Do the Cherokees constitute a foreign state in the sense of the constitution? The counsel have shown conclusively, that they are not a state of the Union, and have insisted that, individually, they are aliens, not owing allegiance to the
35 United States. An aggregate of aliens composing a state must, they say, be a foreign state; each individual being foreign, the whole must be foreign.

This argument is imposing, but we must examine it more closely, before we yield to it. The condition of the Indians in relation to the United States is, perhaps, unlike that of any other

40 two people in existence. In general, nations not owing a common allegiance, are foreign to
each other. The term foreign nation is, with strict propriety, applicable by either to the other.
But the relation of the Indians to the United States is marked by peculiar and cardinal
distinctions which exist nowhere else. The Indian territory is admitted to compose a part of
the United States. In all our maps, geographical treaties, histories and laws, it is so
45 considered. In all our intercourse with foreign nations, in our commercial regulations, in any
attempt at intercourse between Indians and foreign nations, they are considered as within the
jurisdictional limits of the United States, subject to many of those restraints which are
imposed upon our own citizens. They acknowledge themselves, in their treaties, to be under
the protection of the United States; they admit, that the United States shall have the sole and
50 exclusive right of regulating the trade with them, and managing all their affairs as they think
proper; and the Cherokees in particular were allowed by the treaty of Hopewell, which
preceded the constitution, "to send a deputy of their choice, whenever they think fit, to
congress." Treaties were made with some tribes, by the state of New York, under a then
unsettled construction of the confederation, by which they ceded all their lands to that state,
55 taking back a limited grant to themselves, in which they admit their dependence. Though the
Indians are acknowledged to have an unquestionable, and heretofore unquestioned, right to
the lands they occupy, until that right shall be extinguished by a voluntary cession to our
government; yet it may well be doubted, whether those tribes which reside within the
acknowledged boundaries of the United States can, with accuracy, be denominated foreign
60 nations. They may, more correctly, perhaps, be denominated domestic dependent nations.
They occupy a territory to which we assert a title independent of their will, which must take
effect in point of possession, when their right of possession ceases. Meanwhile, they are in a
state of pupilage; their relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian.
They look to our government for protection: rely upon its kindness and its power; appeal to it
for relief to their wants; and address the president as their great father. They and their country
65 are considered by foreign nations, as well as by ourselves, as being so completely under the
sovereignty and dominion of the United States, that any attempt to acquire their lands, or to
form a political connection with them would be considered by all as an invasion of our
territory and an act of hostility. These considerations go far to support the opinion, that the
framers of our constitution had not the Indian tribes in view, when they opened the courts of
70 the Union to controversies between a state or the citizens thereof and foreign states.

In considering this subject, the habits and usages of the Indians, in their intercourse with their
white neighbors, ought not to be entirely disregarded. At the time the constitution was
framed, the idea of appealing to an American court of justice for an assertion of right or a
redress of wrong, had perhaps never entered the mind of an Indian or of his tribe. Their
75 appeal was to the tomahawk, or to the government. This was well understood by the
statesmen who framed the constitution of the United States, and might furnish some reason
for omitting to enumerate them among the parties who might sue in the courts of the Union.
Be this as it may, the peculiar relations between the United States and the Indians occupying
our territory are such, that we should feel much difficulty in considering them as designated
80 by the term foreign state, were there no other part of the constitution which might shed light
on the meaning of these words. But we think that in construing them, considerable aid is
furnished by that clause in the eighth section of the third article, which empowers congress to
"regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian
tribes." In this clause, they are as clearly contradistinguished, by a name appropriate to
85 themselves, from foreign nations, as from the several states composing the Union. They are
designated by a distinct appellation; and as this appellation can be applied to neither of the
others, neither can the application distinguishing either of the others be, in fair construction,

applied to them. The objects to which the power of regulating commerce might be directed, are divided into three distinct classes-foreign nations, the several states, and Indian tribes. 90 When forming this article, the convention considered them as entirely distinct. We cannot assume that the distinction was lost, in framing a subsequent article, unless there be something in its language to authorize the assumption.

The counsel for the plaintiffs contend, that the words "Indian tribes" were introduced into the article, empowering congress to regulate commerce, for the purpose of removing those 95 doubts in which the management of Indian affairs was involveed by the language of the ninth article of the confederation. Intending to give the whole of managing those affairs to the government about to be instituted, the convention conferred it explicitly; and omitted those qualifications which embarrassed the exercise of it, as granted in the confederation. This may be admitted, without weakening the construction which has been intimated. Had the Indian 100 tribes been foreign nations, in the view of the convention, this exclusive power of regulating intercourse with them might have been, and most probably, would have been, specifically given, in language indicating that idea, not in language contradistinguishing them from foreign nations. Congress might have been empowered "to regulate commerce with foreign nations, including the Indian tribes, and among the several states." This language would have 105 suggested itself to statesmen who considered the Indian tribes as foreign nations, and were yet desirous of mentioning them particularly.

It has been also said, that the same words have not necessarily the same meaning attached to them, when found in different parts of the same instrument; their meaning is controlled by the context. This is undoubtedly true. In common language, the same word has various meanings, 110 and the peculiar sense in which it is used in any sentence, is to be determined by the context. This may not be equally true with respect to proper names. "Foreign nations" is a general term, the application of which to Indian tribes, when used in the American constitution, is, at best, extremely questionable. In one article, in which a power is given to be exercised in regard to foreign nations generally, and to the Indian tribes particularly, they are mentioned 115 as separate, in terms clearly contradistinguishing them from each other. We perceive plainly, that the constitution, in this article, does not comprehend Indian tribes in the general term "foreign nations;" not, we presume, because a tribe may not be a nation, but because it is not foreign to the United States. When, afterwards, the term "foreign state" is introduced, we cannot impute to the convention, the intention to desert its former meaning, and to 120 comprehend Indian tribes within it, unless the context force that construction on us. We find nothing in the context, and nothing in the subject of the article, which leads to it.

The court has bestowed its best attention on this question, and, after mature deliberation, the majority is of opinion, that an Indian tribe or nation within the United States is not a foreign state, in the sense of the constitution, and cannot maintain an action in the courts of the 125 United States.

A serious additional objection exists to the jurisdiction of the court. Is the matter of the bill the proper subject for judicial inquiry and decision? It seeks to restrain a state from the forcible exercise of legislative power over a neighboring people, asserting their independence; their right to which the state denies. On several of the matters alleged in the 130 bill, for example, on the laws making it criminal to exercise the usual powers of self-government in their own country, by the Cherokee nation, this court cannot interpose; at least, in the form in which those matters are presented.

135 That part of the bill which respects the land occupied by the Indians, and prays the aid of the court to protect their possession, may be more doubtful. The mere question of right might, perhaps, be decided by this court, in a proper case, with proper parties. But the court is asked to do more than decide on the title. The bill requires us to control the legislature of Georgia, and to restrain the exertion of its physical force. The propriety of such an interposition by the court may be well questioned; it savors too much of the exercise of political power, to be within the proper province of the judicial department. But the opinion on the point respecting parties makes it unnecessary to decide this question.

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If it be true, that the Cherokee nation have rights, this is not the tribunal in which those rights are to be asserted. If it be true, that wrongs have been inflicted, and that still greater are to be apprehended, this is not the tribunal which can redress the past or prevent the future. The motion for an injunction is denied.