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Removal Reading

Read the following passage about removal from “From Ohio to Oklahoma and Beyond: The Long Removal of the Lewistown Shawnees” in *The Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma: Resilience through Adversity*. Underline or highlight key words and ideas as you are reading.

Briefly, the aim of the removal policy was to transplant all Native peoples from the organized U.S. states and territories in the eastern part of the continent to the “Indian Territory” west of the Mississippi River. This was a massive program of forced relocation. During the 1830s and 1840s the federal government pushed approximately 80,000 Indians from their homes in the eastern United States to new reservations in what is now Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. In theory, removal was voluntary; in practice, the government was prepared to use arms to force the Indians to the West. For the Indian nations, the consequences of the removal program were horrendous. Thousands of Native Americans perished on the exhausting and often ill-prepared journeys, while millions of acres of Indian land were incorporated into the United States to benefit the federal government, American farmers, and businessmen. Indeed, “Removal” is a euphemism for the immense physical pain, emotional suffering, violence, and territorial theft these events entailed (...)

An ethnic cleansing had not always been on the agenda of the U.S. government. In the 1790s some federal authorities hoped that teaching Christianity and other Euroamerican



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cultural practices to the Indians would gradually assimilate them into the republic. However, even during the heyday of this so-called “civilization program” many U.S. officials asserted that those Natives unwilling or unable to adopt American culture would have to move west to make room for White settlers. Such arguments grew louder after the War of 1812. As the population of the United States grew rapidly, increasing numbers of citizens coveted the Indian homelands across the East. Many Americans now began to question the feasibility of the civilization program. Some suggested that the trans-Mississippi West would offer a safer setting for the Natives to learn the “civilized” lifestyle than the East where they were allegedly “depraved” by “the wasting influence” of alcohol and other vices taught by the Americans. Others insisted that the Indians were an inferior race incapable of ever attaining the cultural level of the Whites; therefore they had to be segregated beyond the Mississippi. In the 1820s, the advocates of states’ rights joined their voices in the pro-removal chorus. For them, Indian nations living on their own lands within state boundaries but outside state jurisdiction defied the states’ constitutional right to sovereignty. Motivated by such complex agendas, American officials began pressuring and persuading the eastern Indian nations to move beyond the Mississippi in the late 1810s. Their efforts received a major boost in 1828, when the strongly pro-removal Andrew Jackson was elected president. Less than two years later, in May 1830, Congress passed



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the Indian Removal Act that made the relocation of the eastern Native nations a priority of the federal government and provided funding for it.