

# Tecumseh

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Tecumseh was born in present-day Ohio in 1768. He grew up in a time of violent conflict between encroaching white settlers and Native Americans. When Tecumseh was six, his father was killed in combat with settlers. One year later, his mother left for Missouri, leaving Tecumseh under the care of his older sister. Tecumseh's sister taught him the Shawnee code of honesty, while his older brother taught him how to hunt. Throughout Tecumseh's childhood, he witnessed the destruction of his people's land and the massacre of Native Americans who fought back. This instilled in him a deep disdain toward white settlers and their Manifest Destiny approach to westward expansion.

As a young warrior, Tecumseh quickly rose up the ranks. His skill in battle coupled with his charisma as a speaker earned him a position of leadership. Although Tecumseh held a deep-seated hatred of the settlers he fought, he held an even deeper sense of honor. Tecumseh criticized excessive violence and torture carried out by Shawnee warriors, even if it took place in the heat of battle.

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2. As American settlers continued to move west at the turn of the 19th century, Native American tribes were pressured to sell their land to the American government. Tecumseh was deeply opposed to these transactions. He believed that no chief or tribe could own land in the first place, and therefore had no right to sell it. He thought Native Americans were too divided and the continued sale of shared land would only increase division between tribes. Around this time, Tecumseh's younger brother, Tenskwatawa, began having visions. Nicknamed "The Prophet," he gained a religious following. He preached Native American values and the importance of rejecting white norms. Tecumseh saw this as an opportunity to begin building a confederacy of Native Americans. With his leadership skill and his brother's following, Tecumseh believed he could unite Native Americans to resist westward expansion. In 1808, Tecumseh and The Prophet established Prophetstown in present-day Indiana as the capital of their confederacy. Tecumseh recruited tribes from as far as New York, Iowa and Florida to join the confederacy. Tecumseh aimed to transcend tribal affiliation with a message of unity for all Native American people.

3. As Tecumseh built his confederacy, his primary adversary was William Henry Harrison, an eventual president of the United States. As governor of the Indiana Territory, Harrison purchased a large amount of land from a number of tribes including the Miami, Delaware and Potawatomi. He used treaties like the 1809 Treaty of Fort Wayne to purchase the land on behalf of the American government. Harrison's methods angered Tecumseh, who believed these purchases were illegitimate. The following year, Tecumseh and members of his confederacy confronted Harrison at his home to explain their objections. Tecumseh is thought to have said the following:

- "The way, the only way to stop this evil, is for the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be now—for it was never divided, but belongs to us all.
- No tribe has the right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers...
- Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth? Did not the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?"

4. Tecumseh was steadfast in his refusal to acknowledge Harrison's treaties. Frustrated with Tecumseh's resistance, Harrison prepared his army to descend upon Prophetstown in November 1811. With Tecumseh away recruiting, Harrison's army camped near the confederacy's settlement. Left in charge, The Prophet became nervous and ordered his men to strike first. The ensuing battle became known as the Battle of Tippecanoe. Both sides suffered serious damage, but Harrison's army ultimately won. The next day, Harrison's army burned Prophetstown to the ground.

With the War of 1812 looming and Prophetstown in ruins, Tecumseh decided to join forces with the British army to defend the Great Lakes region and Canada against American invasion. With a common enemy and few other options left, Tecumseh believed a British victory would allow Native Americans to keep the land the Americans had purchased.

5. Early in the War of 1812, Tecumseh partnered with British General Isaac Brock. Brock's aggressive approach to leadership matched well with Tecumseh's. Their combined power proved successful as they captured Fort Detroit and defended the Canadian border. Things were going well until Brock was killed. After a failed attack on Fort Maumee, Tecumseh and his men retreated into Canada along the Thames River. With none other than William Henry Harrison's army in pursuit, the Battle of the Thames erupted. British defenses were quickly dismantled, causing most British soldiers to retreat farther. This left Tecumseh and his men to take on Harrison's army alone. Outnumbered, they were easily defeated and Tecumseh was killed.

After Tecumseh's death, his confederacy and mission of unification crumbled. Over the coming decades, westward expansion wiped out the vast majority of Native American settlements. Many believe the final opportunity for Native Americans to retain power in North America died with Tecumseh. No one can know for sure if Native American unification could have slowed westward expansion, but Tecumseh was correct in his belief that a divided population would be defeated.

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6. Over time, Tecumseh has become a respected figure in American military history. After Tecumseh's death, William Henry Harrison praised him as a worthy adversary. Harrison even used his victory over Tecumseh to propel his successful presidential campaign in 1840. "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" served as his slogan, reminding voters of his military success. Today, Tecumseh's reputation as a skilled warrior is commemorated in a bronze statue at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Tecumseh holds a unique position in the American imagination. While he was alive, he was considered a dangerous threat to American expansion. After he was killed, he became known as a worthy adversary with a commitment to a noble cause.

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