By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER | Posted: Sunday, July 26, 2015 12:00 am

In 1819, two years after Gen. Andrew Jackson forced the Cherokees to sign a treaty that included incentives for the tribes to leave their ancestral lands and move west, John Ross, a leader of the Cherokee Nation, expressed the hope (in a letter to President James Monroe) that “the Government will now strictly protect us from the intrusions of her bad citizens and not solicit us for more land — as we positively believe the comfort and convenience of our nation requires us to retain our present limits.”

In the ensuing years, Ross, who became principal chief of the Cherokees, tried to use America’s democratic ideals and its legal system to fend off a land grab by the state of Georgia — and found himself locked in combat with then President Andrew Jackson.

In “Jacksonland, President Andrew Jackson, Cherokee Chief John Ross, and A Great American Land Grab,” Steve Inskeep, the host of NPR’s “Morning Edition,” provides a narrative of the struggle that ended in the removal of thousands of Cherokees along “The Trail of Tears.”

The contours of this troubling chapter in American history are rather well-known, but Inskeep is a talented storyteller. He provides illuminating accounts of his two protagonists, and of several secondary players, including Jeremiah Evarts and Catharine Beecher — who called on the U.S. government to protect the “absolutely unencumbered” title to the land possessed by the Cherokees — as well as Maj. John Ridge and Elias Boudinot (the editor of the Cherokee Pioneer), who broke with Ross and signed a treaty committing their people to move to “Indian Territory” in the southwest.
In the 1820s and ’30s, Inskeep reminds us, many of the 13,000 Cherokees were law-abiding, prosperous and willing to adopt (or co-exist with) the norms and values of the surrounding white population. And when gold was discovered on their land in 1829, the Indians looked forward to an even brighter future. They would soon learn, Inskeep indicates, that Jackson’s first priority, his “signature domestic policy” as president, was to remove the tribes and resettle them beyond the Mississippi River. Even if Jackson wanted to avoid a confrontation, and he clearly did not, Inskeep argues that Georgia laws forbidding Cherokees from establishing their own government and extending state authority over Indian territories, “effectively erasing the Indian map,” forced him to choose sides.

Already embroiled in a dispute with South Carolina, which threatened to nullify the tariff, Jackson did not want a fight with another southern state. He left the Cherokees “freedom to choose,” Inskeep writes, “but set the conditions so that they would have only one choice.”

When push came to shove, and shove came to cocked rifles, Ross had it right. He told a War Department official as the deportations were about to begin in May 1838, “You can compel us by force, but you cannot make us call it fairness.” Even after Ross agreed to lead the emigration, Inskeep tells us, some Cherokees defied the decision and melted into the mountains of North Carolina.

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