

Black Seminoles

YOU ARE BLACK and you are Indian, members of the Seminole people in Florida. You are descended from enslaved Africans who ran away from British plantations in Georgia over a hundred years ago and came to settle with Indians who left their lands farther north. This was before the United States was even a country. You are a free person. Some of the black people who live in Seminole communities ran away from slavery in the last few years. Others were bought from white slaveowners by Seminoles. These people are still called slaves, but are not treated as slaves. They can marry anyone, can't be sold away from their families, can travel where they want, have their own land, and carry guns. But every year they must pay part of their crops to other Seminoles as a kind of tax.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 is now being considered by the U.S. Congress. It calls for all Indians east of the Mississippi River to be forced off their lands and moved to a place called "Indian Territory" west of the Mississippi River. Full-blooded Seminoles would be moved. But for you, a *black* Seminole, they would make you a slave and sell you in one of the Southern slave markets. You would be forever separated from your community, your friends, your family. You will never allow this to happen.

The white plantation owners in Georgia and throughout the South are threatened by the Indians, free blacks, and escaped slaves living

peacefully side by side. They know that their slaves hear about these Seminole communities and want to run away to join them. The Seminole communities are a kind of symbol of freedom to enslaved black people throughout the South. In the past, your people have attacked plantations and freed the slaves on those plantations, and brought them to Florida to live with you and become Seminoles. The whites also want to steal your land so they can grow their cotton with slave labor.

President Andrew Jackson is one of the biggest slaveholders in Tennessee. Some years ago, when he was a general in the army, he ordered his troops to attack your people and destroy your farms and homes. You know that in this debate about Indian removal he is not on your side.

He also wants to move the other Indian nations in the Southeast, especially the Cherokee. You don't have much to do with the Cherokee. You know that they own large numbers of black slaves, though they say they treat them better than do the white plantation owners. But if this law passes, they will try to move them too.

The United States government and the white plantation owners call the Seminoles "savages." But you have farms and raise horses, cattle, hogs, and chickens. And unlike white plantation owners, you know what freedom means. What is "civilized;" what is "savage"? ■