“I MUST DO WHAT THEIR HEARTS SAY”: REASSESSING THE ROLE OF CAPTAIN JACK IN THE MODOC WAR

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Between 1872 and 1873, the U.S. Government fought a war with a tribe of Native Americans in Northern California known as the Modoc. The Modoc War was the only Native American war where an army general was killed and is considered the most costly war America ever fought compared to the number of people involved. On July 1, 1873, Chief Kientpoos, named Captain Jack by the Americans, was on trial for his role in the Modoc War. He claimed, “They [Modoc warriors] wanted to fight. I told them not to fight. I wanted to talk and make peace and live right, but my men would not listen to me…” While the historiography has barely been updated since the 1960’s, historians such as Keith Murray, whose book The Modoc and Their War is the most comprehensive history of the Modoc War, claim that Captain Jack’s declaration was insincere. Murray compared Captain Jack to a child who, during his trial, was simply trying to redirect the blame from himself. By depicting the Modoc chief as a war-hungry leader, American colonizers were able to present themselves as victims of the savage Modoc, creating a narrative that justified the genocidal acts of the Indian Wars.

The majority of historians have relied too heavily upon government sources when researching the Modoc war. The U.S. Government did not understand how Modoc leadership functioned and envisioned Captain Jack’s position of chief functioned similar to that of a king, where he made all the decisions for the tribe, rather than as a part of a democratic system. However, upon close examination of the primary sources of Wi-Ne-Ma and Wigwam and War-Path—Modoc eyewitness accounts of the war—it appears that Captain Jack’s desire for peace may have been sincere. The Modoc made decisions democratically, and when the Modoc voted, Captain Jack did not advocate for war, but for peace. It was the Modoc shaman Cho-ocks, called Curley Headed Doctor by the US Government, who rallied the Modoc warriors to war using the discursive power of the Ghost Dance to buttress the morale of the Modoc warriors and assure them victory. This paper will begin by outlining the historiographic narrative, contextualizing the rhetorical power of the Ghost Dance, and finally, by using eyewitness accounts to help illuminate Captain Jack’s actions both before and during the war, allowing us to see that his testimony was true.

The Modocs’ ancestral homeland was on the shores of Tule Lake and Lost River, but American settlers wanted that land for grazing and fishing. The American Government ordered the Modoc to move to a reservation in Oregon. They were forced to share the reservation with an enemy tribe, the Klamath. After continual harassment at the hands of the Klamath, and being forced to live in indigent conditions on the reservation, Captain Jack made the decision to return home, and moved back to his ancestral homeland. Many Modoc decided to follow him. The settlers who now occupied the Modoc’s ancestral land were not happy about their return and asked the army to force the Modoc back to the reservation. Several peace talks took place between Captain Jack and various U.S. government officials. During all of the peace negotiations, Captain Jack was adamant about not using violence and not leaving Tule Lake. The U.S. government decided to arrest Captain Jack and the other Modoc leaders such as Hooker Jim, Schonchin John, and Curley Headed Doctor, assuming that the Modoc would accept relocation more readily if separated from their leadership. However, during the process the army murdered an infant child and burned a sick mother alive in what is known as the massacre at Tule Lake. Instead of returning to the reservation, the Modoc retreated to nearby lava beds that provided protection against the incoming American forces due to their natural trench-like formations. The U.S. government came to the lava beds and asked the Modoc to surrender, but the Modoc refused, and a firefight ensued. The Modoc War had begun.

During the war, a new ritual, the Ghost Dance was performed as

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4 Alfred B. Meachem. Wi-Ne-Ma (The Woman Chief) and Her People (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1876), 152.
a source of spiritual empowerment for the Modoc. The Ghost Dance was believed to raise the ancestors, and with their guidance and empowerment the Modoc could drive the “white man” out of the Americas. Once completed, life in the Americas would return to a state similar to that of the Pre-Columbian Era. The empowering message of the Ghost Dance made the Modoc warriors free of fear, and when battle began with the American Army, the warriors believed they could not be defeated. The Ghost Dance was done around a large fire, with drumming, dancing, and, most importantly, a large medicine flag hoisted up in order to channel the power of the ancestors. Curley Headed Doctor was the ceremonial leader of the Ghost Dance and preached the message that the Modoc had a divine right to drive out the “white man”, which resonated with the beleaguered Modoc people, who wanted nothing more than to get rid of the Americans.5

During their time in the lava beds, sixty Modoc warriors fought approximately six-hundred U.S. soldiers. The U.S. Army suffered heavy casualties while the Modoc suffered none.6 This humiliated the US Government, who decided to send a commission led by General Canby, to negotiate peace and put an end to the US Army’s humiliation. During the peace negotiations, Captain Jack requested the rights to their ancestral homeland, which Gen. Canby refused. In retaliation, the Modoc ambushed the peace commission and killed Gen. Canby. The American Government retaliated by cutting off the Modoc’s water supply to the lava beds in an attempt to force them to a less strategically advantaged position, and, ultimately, back to the reservation. The tactic was successful, and soon after that, the medicine flag was abandoned, and the Modoc fled the lava beds where they had been residing for over a year. Shortly after, Captain Jack gave himself up, too tired from the fighting and running. The U.S. Army took him and the other Modoc leaders prisoner.7 Captain Jack was court-martialed and hanged on October 3, 1873 after fighting four major battles and several small skirmishes over thirteen months of fighting. However, this simple narrative, repeated throughout the historiography, neglects to fully recognize that the power that the Ghost Dance that inspired the Modoc warriors to battle was not wielded by Captain Jack, but by their shaman. In order to assess the sincerity of Captain Jack's testimony, a re-examination of the Ghost Dance’s role in creating a pro-war sentiment is required.

The primary advocate for war, Curly Headed Doctor, used to put on elaborate shows to convince his fellow Modoc to believe in the power of the Ghost Dance. He told them he cast his magic over them to protect them, and that no one in the lava beds would die.8 According to a Modoc who witnessed the shaman’s power, he gave convincing performances when he cast his magic; he twitched, and jerked about, and bled from his mouth.9 He even cast a spell, telling his warriors, “I want war. I am not tired. The white men cannot fight; they shoot in the air. I will make a medicine that will turn the white man’s bullets away from the Modoc. We will not give up. We can kill all that come.”10 To prove the legitimacy of his power, he shot a Modoc warrior who appeared untouched by the bullet.11 This display reinforced the people’s belief in the Ghost Dance and Curley Headed Doctor, and, most importantly, their divine right to their ancestral homelands. He told them they were empowered by his magic and as far as the Modoc knew, it was working. No one had died during the initial skirmishes with the US Army. Curley Headed Doctor encouraged the Modoc belief that they were unstoppable and had no reason to fear war, because his magic gave them courage to stand up to an enemy that outnumbered them over ten to one. Protected in their lava beds by the magic of the Ghost Dance and their shaman Curley Headed Doctor, the Modoc had proven themselves more than a match for the U.S. military.

Every assault came with the inherent risk of the shaman’s magic failing the Modoc, and as the war raged on, the promise of a casualty-free war came to naught. Not long after the US Army cut off the water supply to the lava beds, the first Modoc death occurred. A mortar shell fired into the

5 Alfred B. Wigwam and War-Path; or, the Royal Chief in Chains (Boston: John P. Dale and Company, 1875), 375-376.
8 Meachem, Wigwam and War-Path, 375-376.
10 Meachem, Wigwam and Warpath, 397.
lava bed stronghold took the life of a single Modoc warrior. The Modoc’s faith that they would be protected by the Ghost Dance’s magic was no longer absolute. The protection promised by the Ghost Dance was the source of all Curley Headed Doctor’s legitimacy and momentum. His control over the Modoc’s hearts was lost and with it the certainty that war was a better option than the peace that Captain Jack’s had argued for so often. This uncertainty regarding how to proceed with the war, now that they realized they were no longer invincible, yet still outnumbered ten to one, caused the Modoc to debate whether they really had a divine right to reclaim their homeland. The Modoc began to quarrel with each other about how to proceed with the war. They split up into several small groups and fled the lava beds. The Modoc War ended shortly after that. When Captain Jack surrendered he was surrounded by young warriors who were no longer consumed by the charisma of Curley Headed Doctor and the Ghost Dance which fed their passion for war.

Evidence of Captain Jack’s desire for a peaceful resolution began before the vote to go to war was taken. He encouraged the tribe to use passive resistance in order to obtain their ancestral homeland. He believed they had to accept that the settlers were there to stay and that they must learn to live with them. The Modoc tribe decided to vote on whether or not to go to war. A Modoc described the tension that took place during the vote:

Hold your breath while each man elects for himself. The chief, Captain Jack, walks boldly out on the side of peace, but O my god, few dare follow him. The majority vote for blood and gather around Schonchin John and Curley Headed Doctor. Captain Jack’s call for peace was falling on deaf ears; Curley Headed Doctor held his people’s hearts.

When members of the tribe began to agitate for retribution for the woman and child who were killed during the attempt to arrest him, Captain Jack remained adamant that peace was more important than revenge. Captain Jack repeatedly encouraged the young warriors towards passive resistance. However, his warriors did not want to adapt to the presence of the settlers. As they became increasingly consumed by the charisma of Curley Headed Doctor and the promises inherent in the power of the Ghost Dance, they were convinced that not only could they fight back to gain retribution, but that their success in driving the settlers out was guaranteed. The Modoc had no fear. Without Captain Jack’s permission, Hooker Jim and some other warriors defied their chief and attacked the settlers. The young warriors’ desire for retribution outweighed the wishes of their chief.

Captain Jack’s desire for peace was further demonstrated when his wishes were ignored and the tribe decided to kill General Canby. The Modoc believed that once the General Canby was killed the rest of the U.S. Army would cease to fight. When the tribe met to discuss and vote on the murder of General Canby, Captain Jack warned against killing him. However, his fellow warriors responded by calling Captain Jack a woman and placed a woman’s hat and shawl on him, accusing him of having his heart stolen by the white man. Aware that he was losing control of his tribe, Captain Jack declared “I am a Modoc. I am your chief. It shall be done if it costs every drop of blood in my heart. But hear me, all my people, this day’s work will cost the life of every Modoc brave; we will not live to see it ended.”

Captain Jack’s warning meant nothing to his warriors, who were now under the protection of the Ghost Dance, and were promised by Curly Headed Doctor that none of the consequences Captain Jack had put forth for consideration would come to pass. Once again, Captain Jack found himself in the minority, going along with the aspirations of the tribe, albeit with a reluctant heart and trepidation over the outcome an attempt on Gen. Canby’s life would provoke. His fears were not unfound-

12 Murray, The Modoc and Their War, 214-216.
13 National Park Service, “A Brief History of the Modoc War.”
14 Murray, The Modoc and Their War, 58-59; Meachem, Wigwam and Warpath, 396.
15 Meachem, Wigwam and Warpath, 376.
16 Alfred B. Meachem Wi-Ne-Ma, 152.
17 Meachem Wi-Ne-Ma, 80-82.
19 Murray, The Modoc and Their War, 178.
20 Alfred B. Meachem, Wigwam and War-Path, 462-466.
ed, and soon Captain Jack found himself once again in opposition with his tribe, whose success in assassinating Gen. Canby had come with a price.

Captain Jack was not a war-hungry leader that forced his people to war, he was a democratic leader whose words and position regarding peace in the Modoc War have been omitted in the historiography. Captain Jack explained his position, “this is the last of my people; I must do what their hearts say; I am Modoc, and I am not afraid to die.” On the other hand, Curley Headed Doctor and his advocating for war have also been omitted in the historiography. This is because historians have relied on the depictions of the Modoc found within the government reports more heavily than those of the Modoc people. Modoc sources grant historians the ability to better understand the motives and reactions of a people who are under-represented in accounts of their own history. The prioritization of Government sources has resulted in an advocate of war to be forgotten and the blame shifted over to an advocate of peace, turning a man challenged with balancing the wishes of his people and his own, into an aggressor. Captain Jack’s testimony of being against the war is true, as is the fact that he led his people to war. One does not negate the other, but without contextualizing the narrative with eye witness accounts from the Modoc as well as the US Army, we cannot understand why.

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