



World History

The Iroquois Confederacy

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"(The Iroquois League) was a model social order in many ways superior to the white man's culture of the day—its democratic form of government more nearly approached perfection than any that has been tried to date." -- Elmore Reaman 1967

Because historians tend to focus on military engagements and changes in national boundaries, our population has little understanding of cultural and social interactions. In an interesting twist of interpretation, Felix Cohen proposed, in a 1952 article called "Americanizing the White Man," that "(historians) have seen America only as an imitation of Europe," but that "the real epic of America is the yet unfinished story of the Americanization of the white man."

He defines Americanism as largely a product of the influence of Indian culture on the white European settlers. In an equally bold statement, Francis Jennings in *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism and The Cant of Conquest* (1975) states that "What white (American) society owes to Indian society, as much as to any other source, is the mere fact of its existence."

Early Euro-Americans voluntarily adopted methods, lifestyles, artifacts, and ideas from the indigenous people, often in order to survive. Indians in America provided half the modern world's domesticated food crops, numerous herbal medicines, clothing, transportation pathways and modes, crafts and artifacts, hygiene methods, and thousands of words including place names and ideas of governance that blended ideals of rugged individuality with concern for the common welfare.

The Iroquois republic had continuously existed since the 14th or 15th century. In 1930, Arthur Pound's Johnson of the Mohawk states, wrote "with the possible exception of the also unwritten British Constitution, deriving from the Magna Carta, the Iroquois Constitution is the longest-existing international constitution in the world." Known as "The Great Law of Peace," this orally transmitted constitution describes a federal union of five (later six) Indian nations: Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga and the Tscarora, adopted in 1715. It was only put in writing in 1915 by Arthur C. Parker, archeologist for the State Museum of New York.

The Europeans and Iroquois of the mid-18th century were on more friendly terms. Many English nobles adopted the lifestyle of Indians and joined their nations. The Treaty Councils brought cultural exchanges in which leaders and statesmen met as equals to diplomatically solve problems and alleviate strained relations. The trade of Great Britain and the peace and prosperity of the colonies was dependent upon this alliance.

During the era, Benjamin Franklin published twenty-six treaty accounts and represented the state of Pennsylvania as an Indian commissioner. In the pre-Revolutionary period, when he and his friends were advocating a federal union of the colonies, no European model was found to be suitable. Franklin's contact with the Iroquois influenced many key ideas for a new form of government—federalism, equality, natural rights, freedom of religion, property rights, etc. At the 1744 treaty council, by Franklin's account, Canassatego, speaker for the great council at Onondaga, recommended that the colonies form a union in common defense under a federal government: "We are a powerful Confederacy, and by your observing the same methods our wise forefathers have taken, you will acquire much strength and power; therefore, whatever befalls you, do not fall out with one another."

In arguing for such a plan, Franklin stressed the fact that the individual nations of the confederacy managed their own internal affairs without interference from the Grand Council.

Twenty years after Franklin's plan was defeated at the Albany congress, it reappeared in the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation. Franklin, Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington were all familiar with the Iroquois polity. There is also strong scholarly evidence that European philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, More, and Hobbes were familiar with the societies of the American Indians. The integration of this knowledge into their theories of utopias and natural societies further inspired the U.S. founding fathers.

Even Marx and Engels drew on Iroquois models to support their theories and designs. Engels, like the American revolutionaries a century earlier, was impressed with the Iroquois' ability to achieve economic equality without coercion and to maintain social consensus without a large state apparatus. It is interesting to note that the roots of American democratic government and communism came from similar ideologies, one emphasizing individualism and the other communal holdings, both key elements held in balance by the Iroquois. Other scholars see a prototype for the 20th century United Nations in Iroquois thought and constitution.

Each of the Iroquois nations was represented to the Confederate Council by a lord of the confederacy and one war chief. Their league included a system of checks and balances, and no action could be taken without the approval of all five Indian nations. Their notions of equality and liberty extended to women as well as men. In war, they never enslaved captives but offered to adopt those willing to accept the Great Law. Their own members could be alienated or expelled by not following the Great Law, and a non-member could be adopted by proposal or invitation with approval from the lords.

In their constitution, the lords of the confederacy are described as mentors and spiritual guides of the people; their hearts are to be full of peace and goodwill, and their minds full of yearning for the welfare of the people, including those of future generations, their words and actions are to be marked by calm deliberation. They must be honest and have no self-interest; if they become wayward they receive warnings first from the clan women then from the men. If they persist in negative behaviors, they ultimately lose their position and possibly their life. The lords are poorer than the common people. They own few material possessions, and give away presents or plunder acquired by treaty or war. They are above pettiness and corruption, and show no signs of selfishness.

Those who recognized the wisdom and long history of the Iroquois government did not consider the Indians as mere "savages." Like the Iroquois, Thomas Jefferson believed that public opinion and popular consent were key in maintaining freedom and good government. He held that the power of public opinion was an important reason for the Iroquois' lack of oppressive government and class differences, and for the power to impeach officials who offended governing principles. Like the Iroquois, he also believed that the best government is the least government.

In oratory, the Europeans compared the Iroquois with the Greeks and Romans. Both emphasized ethical proof in their arguments. The Indians ended their orations with the words *hiro* and *kone*. *Hiro* means "I have said," and *kone* was spoken as an exclamation of joy or sorrow, depending on the occasion and circumstances. The French pronunciation of these words together became "Iroquois."

Unlike Europe, the Iroquois society was matri-lineal. Women owned the land and the status of their lineage. They owned all possessions of their husbands after marriage except their horse and rifle; they took charge of the money, and were the tribe's educators and communicators of tradition. The female heirs of the lords of the confederacy were called *royaneh* (noble). The lord of the confederacy was nominated by women =96 selected for qualities of trustworthiness, good character, honesty, faithfulness to the people and the nation, support of the family, and good management of personal affairs. There was no state religion, and the religious rites and festivals of each nation were safeguarded against being disturbed or interrupted. Civil duties were separated from those of the religious leaders, and festivals were held in the longhouses.

In examining the vision of our forefathers and the many hundreds of years of the Iroquois confederacy's success, we see how far we have strayed in just over two hundred years. More and more a nation of law and order, with vast class and economic distinctions and political favoritism, we would do well to reeducate ourselves in the values of the Iroquois =96 honesty, good character, honor, the power of the spoken word and public opinion, and the high status of women.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That, when any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it."

From the Declaration of Independence.

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