

Iroquois Confederacy: Seed for the U.S. Constitution

When the Europeans first came to North America, they brought with them many prejudices, including the idea that they were the only advanced people on earth. Because of this belief, they felt it was their responsibility to bring “civilization” to the native “savages.” The Europeans, however, soon learned many things from the native people. First, they were shown many plant foods they had never seen before, such as corn, beans, squashes, and tomatoes. The people who introduced these plants to the newcomers probably saved their lives during the early, bitterly cold months. But the new residents learned much more from the native people than new foods to eat.

When the newcomers first came, they said that the Indians had no government and no laws, but they were wrong. The Indians governed themselves by a system of family relationships and obligations. From babyhood every member of the group learned the rules which were to be followed. Their leaders did not rule. They advised, resolved disputes, and tried to satisfy the wishes of their people. Everyone had the opportunity to speak out on an issue, and everyone came to agreement before any action was taken.



The European newcomers learned about a new system of governing a large group of people which in many ways was more civilized than the systems from which they had fled. This system was the Iroquois Confederacy, and many of the ideas in the U.S. *Constitution*, the oldest working constitution in the world, came from this confederation of different Indian tribes into one cooperative group.

The Iroquois Confederacy had its birth long ago in the northeastern part of what is now the United States. At the time, there was a great deal of warfare among the different tribes, and it seemed that all the warriors did was go to war to avenge actions taken against them in an endless cycle of warfare and killing. It is said that two men, a Huron named Deganawidah and an Mohawk named Hayenwatha (or Hiawatha) first proposed forming an alliance of tribes that would agree to live side by side in peace.

Deganawidah, a holy man, had a vision of Five Nations being united under a symbolic Tree of Peace. He said that the tribes must stop fighting and live in harmony by forming a government of law. He said that the people should consider courage, patience, and honesty as the most important human characteristics and that they should always put the future welfare of their people ahead of anything else. He said, “Carry no anger and hold no grudges. Think of continuing generations of our families. Think of our grandchildren and of those yet unborn.”

Hayenwatha heard what Deganawidah said and became very moved by it. He began to travel from one tribe to another over the area which is now New York state, spreading the idea of a confederation. One by one, the leaders of five large tribes agreed to observe the Great Law of Peace.

The Mohawk first accepted the idea. They sent messengers to the Oneida, who agreed to make peace. Soon the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca of the Northeast Woodlands joined with the others, and later the Tuscarora, who had fled their former homes in the Carolinas, also became members. This League of Six Nations agreed to stop fighting among themselves and cooperate with each other for a common defense. Each tribe kept control of its own tribal affairs, but the tribes united together in matters that had to do with other tribes and later with foreign countries.

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The Mohawk, who lived on the eastern borders of the area, were called the Keepers of the Eastern Door. The Seneca, who lived in the western part of the territory, were called the Keepers of the Western Door. The Onondagas were the Firekeepers, and confederacy meetings were held in Onondaga territory in what is now Syracuse, New York, which was near the center of Iroquois country. Every year, usually in the late summer or fall, each tribe sent a delegation of chiefs to the great council. Fifty chiefs would meet together, although other people were free to attend the council meetings. All decisions were reached after lengthy deliberation by the chiefs, and decisions were made by consensus. That is, everyone had to agree. Each tribe had one vote equal to each of the others.

The chiefs who came together each year had usually been chosen by his or her people because of courage, hunting skills, and speaking ability. Some were chosen for other reasons such as being able to heal the sick or being considered to have a very high spiritual position. Each chief was expected to serve as an example, and one who acted unwisely or rashly soon lost prestige with the people. There were no police, no jails, and everyone was expected to act in ways which benefitted the whole tribe.

The members of the confederation spoke of each other as brothers. They symbolized their league as a bundle of arrows which become stronger by being united. The idea was that it was easy to break one arrow, but if a group of them were held together, they were much harder to break. The confederacy worked together for many years.

Activities

1. In small groups, brainstorm the similarities between what you have learned about the Iroquois Confederacy and what you know about the U.S. *Constitution*, then put those similarities into a list. Use this list to write one or two paragraphs beginning with the sentence, “The founding fathers of the United States drew on what they knew about the Iroquois Confederacy when they wrote the U.S. *Constitution*.”
2. Research one of the following people and write a short biography of that person.

- General George Rogers Clark
- Metacomet (“King Philip”)
- General John Sullivan
- Ely S. Parker
- Tecumseh
- Joseph Brant
- Squanto
- Pocahontas
- John Eliot
- Pontiac

