

**The Great Law of Peace:
Did It Influence the Formation of the United States Government?
By Jo Olson**

Psychologists say that human beings learn and develop from their environment. A parent or guardian models how to live and survive. The thirteen original colonies are often likened to the development of human beings. The first settlements, among them, Jamestown, Boston and Plymouth were very fragile. They were like small children and planned to depend on the Mother country, Britain, for survival. Because the "Mother" was three thousand miles away, they grew, very quickly, to be dependant on their surrounding environment, the Native Americans. The Native Americans taught the infant colonists how to survive. They helped them build homes, find food and eventually taught them how to be self sufficient. They even taught the colonists methods of warfare that proved to be quite useful, as we know from the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. Why, then, would not the colonists learn how to govern their people from their surrounding environment, the Native Americans, too? This is the primary question with several related secondary questions. When the early governmental documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and finally the United States Constitution, were written, were the developers influenced by the Native Americans who lived among them and dealt with them? What group of Native Americans influenced the early British Colonists the most? In what ways were our forefathers influenced in forming the

United States government? And finally, do historians and political philosophers agree that the formation of the United States government was influenced by the Native Americans?

The first Europeans to come to North America landed on the Atlantic coast in the early seventeenth century. Native American groups living in that area were known as the Woodland Indians. The most powerful group in the Northeast was called the Haudenosaunee or the "People of the Longhouse." They were probably the most powerful group on the whole continent of North America.¹ This organization was ruled by a government known as the Iroquois League. It stretched from eastern New York to northeastern Ohio and from southern Ontario to northern Pennsylvania. Sometimes they moved as far west as the Mississippi River, as far south as Tennessee and as far north as the Hudson Bay. Five nations made up the League. They were the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca. The British Colonists called them the Five Nations, the French called them the Iroquois and they called themselves the Haudenosaunee, the "People of the Longhouse."² Later, in 1714, a sixth group, the Tuscaroras, moved up from the Carolinas and joined the group.³ They were then called the Six Nations.

Some believe that the League started as early as the 1400s. Before then, these five nations were always fighting and warring with each other causing much death and destruction. Then, according to their religion, Deganawidah, a man born of a virgin mother,⁴ came from the North and was adopted by the Mohawk. He called for peace, saying that if they would stop fighting among

themselves and work together they would become strong. To convince the people, an arrow was taken and broken in half. Then, a bundle of five arrows was taken and because there were more, they were stronger and unable to be broken. The Nations needed to unite, become stronger and thus, make the people safe. This idea was called the Great Law of Peace.

The first person to accept his message of peace was a woman by the name of Jigonsasee.⁵ She lived in a small house along the trail, where she fed hunters who passed by.⁶ Because Jigonsasee was the first to accept this idea of peace, she became the symbol of the maternal role which plays an important role in the Great Law. Later, another leading person who joined Deganawidah was a sachem or priest by the name of Hiawatha. He supposedly had been mourning the deaths of his wife and three daughters which had been caused by the very conflicts that Deganawidah was trying to stop.⁷ The philosophy of Deganawidah and Hiawatha was to teach the people that to guarantee peace among themselves they needed to learn to solve disputes through discussion rather than violence. Eventually, the five groups agreed to become allies with each other, believing that combining their strength would help them conquer their enemies. They wanted to base this peace on equality and brotherhood guaranteeing the people their basic natural rights.⁸ Thus, they became the most powerful and influential indigenous group east of the Mississippi River.

Together, these five groups became known as the “People of the Longhouse” or Haudenosaunee . The bark-covered longhouse was the Iroquois home to their extended family. Each group of families lived in the one

longhouse, keeping open a central aisle, and tending their own fires and their own area. The “Great Longhouse” became the metaphorical symbol of the Iroquois Confederacy. Each Nation kept its own fire which means it remained separated, yet they all lived under one roof or one system of law or one government.⁹ In other words, each Nation had its own government but also operated under the Great Law of Peace. This allowed different states to coexist under one rule of law. This, of course, is a concept of democracy. The Hodenosaunee Trail, the actual path that connected the tribes, was considered the central aisle, or the principal route of communication between the different members. The eastern door was guarded by the Mohawks because they lived in the eastern part of the domain. They were declared the Keepers of the Eastern Door. The Senecas were the Keepers of the Western Door and the Onondagas, who lived in the middle of the groups, were called the Keepers of the Fire.¹⁰ The tribal chiefs or sachems were the metaphoric symbol of the posts that would support a longhouse, but they supported the “Great Longhouse” or the Iroquois Confederacy. Above all soared the Tree of Peace or the Great White Pine which was the symbol of humanity. Its branches sheltered the People of the Five Nations, and its roots spread in the four directions inviting others to take refuge under the tree.¹¹ Above the tree soared the eagle and its duty was to be the lookout for enemies who might disturb the peace.¹²

The government of the Iroquois became known as the Great Law of Peace or Kaianerekawa. Of course it was unwritten because Native Americans passed their history in the oral tradition and, therefore it was not actually written

in words until 1880.¹³ However, the Great Law of Peace was recorded through the use of symbols and pictographs on the wampum belt.¹⁴

The Iroquois form of government set down rules of the freedoms and duties of the people. The purpose of the government was to peacefully resolve differences among the nations. The people wanted to keep peace based on their common cultural values, customs and traditions. They believed in unity, a balance of power and the natural rights of the people.¹⁵ Each Nation sent chiefs to the Grand Council meetings. There were to be fifty seats on the council. These chiefs were men who were considered servants of the people rather than their masters.¹⁶ They were chosen and advised by prominent women of their clan.¹⁷ Anything that concerned the Nations was discussed at these meetings. Each speaker was granted his say without interruption. The Grand Council meetings granted freedom of expression in political and religious matters. No one chief or nation was more powerful than the other. No military leaders could be a part of these meetings. When decisions were made, everyone had to agree unanimously. Because of this, debates often continued for days, requiring patience and diplomacy of the members.¹⁸

The wampum belt was a beaded system of coded information employed in reciting the Great Law.¹⁹ It was referred to whenever disputes arose over procedure and such. It was also used to record important events. Sometimes wampum served as a medium of exchange. It was a source of value among the Native Americans, and later the British and French had to learn how wampum was used in order to perform diplomatic business with the Iroquois.²⁰

The first wampum belt is sometimes known as the Hiawatha belt. It represents the unity of the five Nations. It is read from right to left with the first square representing the Mohawk Nation and the second representing the Oneida Nation. In the center is a tree which represents the Onondaga Nation. From there, the square to the left of the tree represents the Cayuga Nation and the farthest square to the left represents the Seneca Nation. The small white lines represent paths that welcome others to join the Confederacy. White is the emblem of peace, love charity and equity and surrounds and guards the Five Nations.²¹

Women in the League held positions of great honor and respect. In each nation, the women selected a clan mother and she, in turn, had the very important task of appointing the chiefs who would represent the clans at the Great Council.²² Because they gave birth and raised and cared for the children, it was believed that women were more sensitive to the needs of the children, of the people. Women maintained balance and harmony.²³ Women were given this responsibility because it was a woman who first accepted the Great Law of Peace.

There were fifty chiefs or sachems in the League and they were appointed for life, unless they did not properly perform their job. If this occurred a woman was responsible for warning the chief and making sure he was removed from office. Chiefs' positions were eternal, but the occupant was temporal and thus a replacement chief took on the name of one of the original sachems. Chiefs were expected to serve the people, not rule them. They were respected because of

their wisdom, not because they were powerful or put fear into the people. The people were given religious freedom and slavery was not allowed. The Great Pine Tree was their symbol.

People become involved with another government when they are interwoven with the people of that government. When the colonists and the Native Americans came together in the early seventeenth century, they immediately began to influence each other. This became even more evident as the groups began to trade and deal with each other. Peace with the Native Americans was important to Britain and the colonies, and this brought leaders of both cultures together for treaty councils.²⁴ As treaties developed governmental issues became more evident. It was difficult for the Native Americans to deal with colonists because the colonies saw themselves as individual groups or peoples and thus, the Native Americans had to deal with each individually. At the 1744 Treaty Council, Canassatego, an Onondaga chief, suggested that the colonies unite. He said, "Our wise forefathers established union and amity between the Five Nations. This has made us formidable. This has given us great weight and authority with our neighboring Nations. 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."²⁵ He was disgusted with the inefficient manner in which the Natives had to deal with the colonies because each colony had to be dealt with separately because each had its own policy, administration and way of

doing things. He suggested to them that they unite, following the example of their Great Law of Peace.²⁶ He felt that they would be more powerful if they did.

Benjamin Franklin is known as one of the forerunners in observing and understanding the government of the Iroquois. Using this knowledge, Franklin developed several plans for uniting the colonies. He had always been drawn to the diplomatic ways and ideals of the Native Americans. Franklin was an acquaintance of Conrad Weiser, who attended treaty council meetings. Weiser was greatly respected by the Haudenosaunee and kept accurate records of who attended as well as what took place during these meetings.²⁷ He gave his notes to Franklin, the official Pennsylvania colony printer,²⁸ and Franklin printed and read many of these treaties that had been adopted between the colonies and the Native Americans.²⁹ He became quite knowledgeable in the Great Law of Peace and had a keen interest in the Native peoples as he participated in Native customs.

One foremost plan of Benjamin Franklin's is known as the Albany Plan of Union.³⁰ It is considered one of America's founding documents. In the early to mid- eighteenth century Britain and France were in conflict over the lands in North America, specifically the lands on the western slopes of the Appalachian Mountains. In June 1754, Britain realized a need to form an alliance with the Iroquois.³¹

Parliament decided to send delegates or Colonial envoys from most northern colonies and representatives from six Iroquois nations to Albany, New York, to discuss the uniting of the colonies and stopping the French from trying to

take control of North America.³² This plan stated that, “ It is proposed that humble application be made for an act of Parliament of Great Britain, by virtue of which one general government may be formed in America, including all the said colonies, within and under which government each colony may retain its present constitution.”³³ It explained how the government would operate that authority directly on behalf of its citizens.

This new idea to the European people became known as federalism or a government that retains certain controlling powers or sovereignty while being united under a central government. Later that same year, Franklin wrote to William Shirley stating that he hoped the colonies “would learn to consider themselves as not belonging to a different community with different interests but to one community with one interest, which I imagine would contribute to strengthen the whole and greatly lessen the danger of future separations.”³⁴ His plan more closely resembled that of the Iroquoian model than a European one.

This may have been new to the European peoples, but this idea had been in practice for many many years in the Iroquois Confederacy. Some felt that Franklin developed this idea from his relations with the Iroquois. The plan was adopted by the attendees at the Albany Conference, but rejected by the individual colonies and Britain.

Later, in 1781, the same idea was introduced again to the American colonies under the title of Articles of Confederation. The Articles, described as a “League of Friendship” between the thirteen colonies, provided for their common defense, the securities of their liberties and for their mutual and general

welfare.³⁵ Again, it seemed more like a government that cared about the people, something not familiar in European governments but very much so in the Confederacy.

It is known that the United States Constitution, which grew out of the Articles of Confederation, was based on the Virginia Plan that was presented at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The Virginia Plan was written by James Madison, who was one of the main proponents of the convention itself. In preparation for the convention, Madison studied different governments and wrote two papers dealing with this matter. Was Madison influenced by the Great Law? When he attended Princeton, then known as the College of New Jersey, he studied John Locke, so he had to have been. Locke, along with David Humes and Montesquieu, were leading thinkers of Europe and leaders of the movement known as the Enlightenment. Where were the true origins of Locke's ideas? Were they rooted in the peoples of America, particularly the Native Americans? He helped draft the Constitution for Carolina in 1673-1675 while he was on the Board of Trade and Plantations. He had also read Gabriel Sagard's book *Histoire Du Canada of 1636*. This is known because he quotes the book later in one of his own writings.³⁶ How could Locke not have been influenced by the Great Law of Peace? This influence, then, affected James Madison's writings as well as many other leaders of this time.

In comparing the Great Law of Peace and the United States Constitution there are several differences and similarities. First of all, the Great Law of Peace is much older than the Constitution. Through oral tradition and wampum, its

origin dates between 1000 and 1400 AD. Based on written accounts, it dates at about 1450 AD.³⁷ The Constitution was written in 1787 making it 230 years old. Both are forms of democracy, meaning that they are governments that deal directly with the people or their elected representatives. Both are federal governments, meaning that each state or nation has its own controlling powers but are united under a central authority.

Both believe in freedom of religion. The Great Law of Peace states that “the rites and festivals of each nation shall remain undisturbed and shall continue as before”³⁸ while the United States Constitution states that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” In discussing the passage of laws, Article 11 of the Great Law states that, “when the Mohawk and Seneca Lords have unanimously agreed upon a question, they shall report their decision to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords who shall deliberate upon the question and report a unanimous decision to the Mohawk Lords.”³⁹ Article 1, Section 7 of the Constitution states that “Every Bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it becomes a Law, be presented to the President of the United States.” Another interesting parallel is Amendment Three of the United States Constitution which reads, “No soldier, shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner.” Americans have always been taught this was the result of colonists being forced to quarter the British soldiers after the French and Indian War. Yet, Article 107 of the Great Law states that a sign known to all will be placed outside the home denoting the “owner or occupant of a house is absent” and “every person not entitled to enter

the house by right of living within it upon seeing the sign shall not approach the house either by day or by night but shall keep as far away as his business will permit.”⁴⁰ There are many more comparisons that show the relationship of the two documents. Both Constitutions prevent the government from entering its peoples’ personal lives, and both attempt to secure their liberties. Both work very hard for checks and balance in their governments, to insure one group does not become more powerful than another.

Other government documents also demonstrate the influence of the Great Law of Peace. Article 57 of the Great Law states that “Five Arrows shall be bound together very strong and each arrow shall represent one nation.” The United States Great Seal has thirteen arrows in the right talon of the eagle representing the thirteen original colonies. Charles Thompson was the creator of the seal and his original version had five or six arrows.⁴¹ The arrows symbolize that America is militarily prepared and will fight and be strong when necessary. Of course, we know that the Declaration of Independence states that we have certain inalienable natural rights. The Iroquois philosophy was rooted in the concept that all life was unified in the natural environment. During the Boston Tea Party, the Sons of Liberty dressed as “Mohawks” when they threw the tea overboard in Boston Harbor. Was there another message, one to the colonists, as well as one to Britain, in that choice of attire?

One very distinct difference between the two Constitutions was about women. The women played a very important role in politics under the Great Law,

but they were not considered equal to a white male under the original United States Constitution.

Another was the Iroquois belief in the fair distribution of wealth. This is considered a belief of Communism. Still another difference was the belief in unanimous decisions. The United States Constitution is based on majority rules, while the Great Law of Peace believed that it was important for all to agree. This belief might have marked the fall of the Iroquois Confederacy. As we know from the Greeks, that unanimous agreement is why democracy did not work for them. It took too long to make decisions. Quickness to agree was necessary at the beginning of the French and Indian War, and it was not happening. Some of the League felt they should side with the French, and others felt they should side with the British. This was the beginning of the break up of the League.

Although there are strong arguments that the Europeans were influenced, some scholars question the theory that the Iroquois Confederacy had a real and significant influence on the development and formation of the United States Constitution, known as the Influence Thesis. Some feel there is no hard and fast historical documentation, and that it is more of a “feel good” theory. Some will not accept the oral histories and wampum as primary resources necessary to prove such facts. In fact, *Forgotten Founders*, a resource used to write this paper was banned from shelves at Independence Hall at one time.⁴² Some feel that references that were made towards the Confederacy and the use of Iroquoian terminology in the Albany Conference and other historical writings were done by our fore fathers because they realized the importance of

keeping peace with the Iroquois people at that time. Historians say that Madison made reference to other confederacies, but not the Iroquoian when he wrote about the forming of the Constitution.

Both cultures influenced each other in many ways. They traded with each other, they dealt with each other about land issues and they came to depend on each other for survival. Through all of this, their governments intertwined with each other and again they influenced each other. Human beings are influenced by environment. The colonists were looking for a government that cared about the well-being of the people; a government that felt the people had certain unalienable rights. Colonists were looking for an alternative to European tyranny and class stratification. They wanted a government that was not ruled by the military, but a government that cared about the balance of power. Colonists wanted a government that was based on the performance of the leader, not the family he was born into. This is the government we have today. This is also the government of the Haudenosaunee known as the Great Law of Peace. Are the colonies so much like human nature that as they grew they forgot to give credit to the ones who nurtured them?

One of the greater arguments for the influence is that colonies were not and, for a long time, did not want to unite. Colonists were afraid of a strong central government. During the Revolutionary War and again at the Constitutional Convention they realized the importance of being united. They were thirteen distinct groups that were spread over a vast area, according to European standards, and they needed something to hold them together. A great

example for them would have been the Confederacy. Some may believe this was not seen through the example of the Iroquois, but more by the example of how ineffective the Articles of Confederation were.

The Great Law of Peace is not powerful any more, but it did have a lasting affect on developing our American government. How much, we may never know. It may not have set the standards, but it did have influence. It was a model of government by consensus, under natural rights, and with relative equality of property. The Great Law of Peace was the first true, lasting democracy. It was an example of what the young United States wanted for its people. Today the Iroquois government exists not only in Iroquoian communities, but also, one has to believe, in some parts of the United States government.

The ideas of a federal union with democratic thought are in both the Iroquois Confederation and the United States Constitution. That belief in public opinion being involved in government, political liberties and especially a government whose role is to guarantee the citizens' well-being. The colonists saw a freedom in the Native Americans that they only knew in theory.

On September 16, 1987, the United States Senate passed a resolution officially stating that the United States Constitution was modeled after the Iroquois Constitution, the Great Law of Peace.⁴³ This theory needs to be studied by American children, historians and philosophers. Maybe it needs to be placed in American history as just that, a theory.

END NOTES

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