

Paul Nicholas Matczuk

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Research Essay

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The Iroquois Confederacy: Witness the Rise and Fall of an Empire;

The Formation of the First Aboriginal Oligarchy. Hybrid warfare, Economic Dominance, and Ethnocide.

The five nations of the Iroquois Confederacy are the Mohawks, Oneida, Onondagas, Cayugas and the Senecas. A sixth nation, the Tuscaroras, joined the Confederacy in the early 1700s. The author of the Confederacy, Huron Deganonwidah, otherwise known as the prophet “Peacemaker”, brought the nations together sometime between the 12th and 15th centuries. It is noteworthy that the Confederacy was founded before the ‘discovery’ of the ‘new world’ by the French in the early 16th century.

Peacemaker’s message was rejected by his people, the Hurons, and embraced by the Iroquois, located to the south. The geographical importance of the Confederacy, which is what now central New York State will place the Confederacy centre-stage as the bloody drama of colonization unfolds. This is a critical exploration “of ‘casus belli’, or ‘cause for war’ [of the Iroquois]”¹ (or Longhouse, or Handenosauée), their guerilla and hybrid military strategies resulting in subsequent acts of ethnic cleansing. The use of Latin above is by design; ultimately the Iroquois will be held accountable for their cause of war by European standards.

¹ Glover, Jeffrey - “Going to War on the Back of a Turtle” Creation stories and the Laws of War in John Norton’s *Journal - Early American Literature*: Volume 51, Number 3 2015 p.599

The Confederation was “founded on six principles expressed in three terms: peace, righteousness and civil authority. Together, these compromise Gayaneshgowa, or The Great Law of Peace”². The union of the original five nations will put an end to blood-feuds, in-fighting and regional tribal warfare. Once galvanized, the aggression of the five nations will turn outward. History will contradict the source of tribal unity. The Great Peace will usher the dawn of the first aboriginal oligarchy, “the league itself originated in ideals of diplomacy, rather than principles of democratic rule or imperial fiat”³. A pre-contact formation, the source of The Great Peace will launch military campaigns that will eradicate entire tribes from the annals of history. These campaigns will be tantamount to ethnic cleansing, and continuous, “During the seventeenth century the Iroquois were recorded fighting with more than forty-nine different indigenous tribes or Euro-American colonies”⁴. This is the Confederacy demonstrated as warriors.

As deft politicians, the Confederacy shattered the Euro American idea of “the forest primitive; the creature of passion – and abruptly casting off those masks to reveal a politician of formidable awareness”⁵. As cunning diplomats, the Confederacy manipulated European powers, in times of peace and in times of war. Their demonstration of a deep understanding of the self-importance of the Colonials and recognition of colonial dependence on the Confederacy to first survive, then flourish. This gave the Confederacy the advantage of using colonial hubris as a weapon against settling populations.

² Hermann, Rachel B. - “No Useless Mouth”: Iroquoian Food Diplomacy in the American Revolution – *Diplomatic History*, Volume 41, Number 1, 2017 p. 25

³ Ganter, Granville - “Make Your Minds Perfectly Easy” Sagoywatha and the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee – St. John’s University, *Early American Literature*: Volume 44, Number 1, 2012 p. 126

⁴ Keener, Craig S. Professional Archaeological Services Team - “An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Iroquois Assault Tactics Used against Fortified Settlements of the Northeast in the Seventeenth Century” - *Ethnohistory* Volume 46, Number 4, 1999 p.778

⁵ Ganter, Granville - “Make Your Minds Perfectly Easy” p.124

Shifting alliances and loyalties, hybrid warfare (guerilla tactics, European weaponry and siege warfare) won the Confederation absolute supremacy over all surrounding First Nations, with military campaigns recorded at over a thousand kilometers from the center of Confederacy territory. The use of firearms against traditional weaponry of flint and stone, originally seen by the Iroquois in the hands of the Huron, was immediately coveted. The early seventeenth century witnessed sudden changes in Iroquois military tactics, first to establish dominance over trade with the Europeans, then to establish dominance over trade as a whole. The economic advantage that grew from these aspirations came following a huge influx of fire-arms, which were easily accessible to the Mohawks trading pelts for guns with the Dutch. Body armor worn by indigenous warriors made of wooden slats was easily pierced by ball and musket, and arrowheads made of copper or other metals were aimed at the head for kill-shots. Metal hatchets replacing stone axes were able to cut through ramparts and palisades, putting fortifications at risk by compromising then burning protected camps. Metal implements and weaponry were the most coveted items to acquire through trade.

I have chosen the seventeenth century as the chronological focus of the Confederacy, although it was a significant geo-political influence until the late eighteenth century. The seventeenth century and the Confederacy's hybrid military tactics mark the transformation of tribal warfare, although hostilities from the Iroquois was often directed with equal effectiveness against the Colonials. Ethnic cleansing was a tactic developed after 1640, when a shift from guerilla to hybrid warfare became obvious. The European warring practice of mass casualties and scorched earth campaigns became a strategy of the Confederacy. The Confederacy and its clear understanding of the power gained by establishing a trade monopoly inspired tactics that were unprecedented. These tactics were decisively applied towards the formation of, first a trade syndicate, then a trade monopoly. This monopoly resulted in amassed wealth in weapons and influence; hence, the first aboriginal oligarchy. Essentially, they began as a crime syndicate that evolved to use tactics and specialized warfare to win them control by the late

seventeenth century of; the Niagara peninsula to the south of Lake Erie, all of the country between Lakes Huron, Erie and Ontario, the North bank of the St-Lawrence River to the mouth of the Ottawa river near Montreal and the whole of Western New York. This entire area was geographically of the most important zones for conducting trade, and control of this area was equal to control of trade. How strategies were formed and the Confederacy maintained their insular Great Peace is historically debated. This was a hermetically sealed people, and the oral traditions policy making to establish their dominance remain speculative in the early seventeenth century. Much more recorded evidence can be found late seventeenth century when multi-lingual European captives ascended to power within the Confederacy. What is clear is incredible military and social organization among the Confederacy shared a vision, and the tribes worked in concert to achieve their common goal; supremacy.

The fur trade was the most profitable enterprise in 'the New World'. The stakeholders were primarily the French, the English and the Dutch. Their dependency of the Empires on the indigenous is historically down-played. There would be no fur trade if not for the indigenous co-operation. It could not have grown into the industry it became. Species were hunted to near extinction due to this enormously lucrative and competitive enterprise.

Establishing a trade monopoly among the indigenous was not a unique concept. The Algonquians tried to force the Huron away from the French, the Nipising tried to do the same. "Thus we can see that the Iroquois desire to gain sole access to the European market was neither unprecedented nor unique"⁶. The economic motive was universally understood.

The Confederacy, at the dawn of the seventeenth century behaved like a modern-day crime syndicate. They were not significant players until the early roughly 1620. When the Iroquois found

⁶ Blick, Jeffrey P. - "The Iroquois Practice of Genocidal Warfare (1534-1787)" - *Journal of Genocide Research* Volume 3, Number 3, 2001 p.413

themselves economically disadvantaged and out-armed by the Huron and Algonquian tribes who were using European weapons and steel-tipped arrows in battle, they reacted in kind. Guerilla raids were used to 'hijack' shipments of fur and plunder metal goods. "The Iroquois were, in fact, after the fur carried in the Huron, Algonquian and Montagnais canoes... The Iroquois needed the furs to trade powder and guns from the Dutch"⁷. The fur trade served to intensify intertribal hostilities.

To counter the maneuvers of their enemies, the Confederacy modified and constantly reshaped their assault tactics. "The first change in Iroquois tactics as a response to the fur trade involved a shift into what we would call guerilla warfare – raids and ambushes by small war parties of perhaps twenty to thirty members. Iroquois guerilla tactics marked the period circa 1616 – 1640"⁸. The Iroquois could assemble and dispatch a series of parties on a river (trade route) and harass their prey exhaustively in a succession of attacks, "when one goes away, another succeeds it"⁹. The desire to control the fur trade elicited another tactical change. This was a switch to hybrid military tactics, the European-style large-scale attack, (circa 1640 – 1763), involving mass casualties. This tactical change is directly related to the over-exploitation of fur-bearing animals, altering the hunt and geographical changes to accommodate this alteration. The European appetite for fur was insatiable, causing catastrophic environmental consequences.

The Confederacy ultimately met their ultimate monopoly of the fur trade. As their power increased, so did their number of enemies and targets. After 1640, the Iroquois was at war with: "The English, the French, tribes of the Potomac, the Huron, Wenro, Peton, Algonquian, Montagnais, Neutral,

⁷ Blick, Jeffrey P. - "The Iroquois Practice of Genocidal Warfare (1534-1787)" p.411 (Heindrick 1976 p.266)

⁸ *ibid.* p.417

⁹ *ibid.* p.417

Erie, the Abnaki, and the Susquens”¹⁰. In terms of sheer number of casualties resulting from these constant wars can “best be described as the period of genocidal, or ethnocidal warfare”¹¹.

The means of the Iroquois to capture the vast territory comprising the Niagara peninsula, all of the land between the great lakes, the North bank of the St-Lawrence River to the mouth of the Ottawa River and the whole of Western New York, was in truth ethnic cleansing, or ethnocide. Human captivity, or the taking of prisoners was a long-standing indigenous practice. Thus, “The oft repeated stricture that the Iroquois ‘wiped out’ whole nations, when examined closely, is only a partial truth. As nations, the defeated disappeared, but as people, most of them were adopted into one or more member tribes who seemed at times to compete for the right to assimilate the defeated”¹². It is therefore conclusive that the term genocide is inaccurate. Ethnocide is much more accurate vernacular. Mass adoption of prisoners of war eliminates the possibility of total and complete elimination. “Adoption was so frequent during the bloody centuries of the beaver wars and the colonial wars that some Iroquois villages were predominantly composed of formally adopted war captives”¹³.

Adoption was the remaking of a prisoner, usually to formally replace a dead clan member. Prisoners were systematically tortured and brain-washed. “A captive proved that he had become an Iroquois by acting like one... [including] participation in a raid against one’s former people, a declaration of allegiance in which overt behavior was necessary to the survival of the adoptee, non-conforming adoptees were killed”¹⁴. This explains how much of the Confederacy was non-Iroquois, yet very much Iroquois.

¹⁰ Blick, Jeffrey P. - “The Iroquois Practice of Genocidal Warfare (1534-1787)” p.413

¹¹ *ibid.* p.413

¹² *ibid.* p.421

¹³ *ibid.* p.421 (Synderman 1948 p.80)

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.426

The rise of the Iroquois Confederacy, according to archaeologists, is broken down into two schools of thought; traditional and revisionist. The traditional view ascribes the ascendancy as cultural evolution, “Traditional views described the Iroquois as more culturally advanced than neighboring tribes. The Iroquois possessed a superior culture and ideology because they had agriculture, sedentary villages and a confederacy/ league (oligarchy)”¹⁵. The revisionist view of the twentieth century postulates the possibility, “that the fur trade was not a prime mover for war, but rather customs and ideology (adoption, prestige and revenge) and technological advances may have played more significant roles in initiating or intensifying hostilities”¹⁶. The revisionist theory of Iroquois expansion conflicts with much of my argument of Iroquois war for profit, and my research supports the former. The historical outcome of the Iroquois monopoly over the fur trade certainly suggests that the traditional view of the Confederacy is the more likely scenario. Effective and deadly use of military tactics that were organized and dispatched with precision that was equal (and more often superior) to that of their European counterparts, with their military hierarchies; generals, infantry, weapons and fortified settlements. Their success in gaining control of the fur trade created an Iroquois Empire. They were feared as enemies and coveted as allies. The Confederacy was the greatest indigenous threat to the ‘New World’.

THE FALL

The American Revolution (1775-1783) divided the Confederacy. Loyalties became conflicted with propaganda and misinformation. “[George] Washington’s aim of exiling Indians and throwing the “wholly on the British enemy”¹⁷ became a reality. Once divided, the Iroquois Confederacy was used to

¹⁵ Keener, Craig S. Professional Archaeological Services Team - “An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Iroquois Assault Tactics Used against Fortified Settlements of the Northeast in the Seventeenth Century” - *Ethnohistory* Volume 46, Number 4, 1999 p.779

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.780

¹⁷ Hermann, Rachel B. - “No Useless Mouth” p.42

serve the British and American militaries, and ultimately destabilized, abandoned and destroyed. The fractured Six Nation Confederacy, among many legal theorist post-Revolution argued that “Indians were not entitled to recognition under international law because they showed no mercy towards enemies, making the unfit to stand among civilized nations”¹⁸. Consequentially, George Washington initiates the Sullivan Expedition of 1779 to invade the Confederacy territories, and “while the warriors conformed both to Indian and European legal norms, the United States confronts its tribal antagonists not as equal combatants, who would be entitled to protection under the laws of war, but as mindless savages, acting outside the law and thus undeserving of diplomatic recognition”¹⁹. The gavel dropped and the Iroquois stood accused. Having lost their land and power in the midst of colonial clashes, the survivors in the US were branded as war criminals. To clear these accusations a pledge of allegiance the British military was required to resettle north of the US border. The great Iroquois Empire was persecuted, a series of betrayals and bad treaty deals left the few remaining in the US fading into obscurity on tiny reservations. The greatest aboriginal threat to the ‘New World’ found themselves without a people, without a claim to sovereignty, ultimately dissolved. This is of course an extreme over-simplification of the many contributing factors to fall of the Confederacy, like any point in history there is a dynamic praxis that shapes said point in history.

By siding with the traditional view I am aware that I may be perpetuating a long-standing prejudice. Lack of access to primary sources regarding the early period of the Iroquois Confederacy, and typically held European notions of the North American (European)/Indigenous relations regarding the fur trade reveals a historical gap. The perspective of the Iroquois and their ‘casus belli’ is slowly coming

¹⁸ Glover, Jeffrey - “Going to War on the Back of a Turtle” Creation stories and the Laws of War in John Norton’s *Journal - Early American Literature*: Volume 51, Number 3 2015 p.600

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.608

into a more accurate historical account. I do not write this as a disclaimer, I write this to reveal the limitations researching this historical period. I believe that in time, revisionist theory will reveal hidden truths regarding the Confederacy. In my opinion this is healthy skepticism and I am certain that my professor would agree.

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