

# Iroquois showed way for United States

OHSWEKEN — Those brilliant autumn leaves aren't the only beautiful things to come out of the forests. Some pretty sophisticated human ideals have come out of there, too.

As the 10th generation of Americans celebrates the bicentennial signing of their constitution, scholars and historians debate the impact that the Iroquois Confederacy had on it. A significant trail of evidence suggests that without the Indian concept that human rights were a gift of nature, not of a state's political or religious leaders, North America might well be quite different today.

When the English were struggling over the Magna Carta, the Hotinosoni, or Iroquois, were already living under their constitution, the Great Law of Peace. Beginning in 1736 and continuing for 26 years, Benjamin Franklin became involved in colonial politics, a pursuit which included Indian affairs. In 1744, he published treaty accounts in which the Hotinosoni advised the colonists to form a union similar to their confederation.

By 1751, Franklin devoted considerable time to the pursuit of such a union and sarcastically wrote, "It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of ignorant savages should be capable of forming a scheme for such a Union and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted ages, and appears dissoluble, and

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yet a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies."

It should be remembered that in those days the word ignorant merely meant unschooled; savage could be used for both negative and positive expression. Franklin was called "a savage as philosopher" and Thomas Jefferson called himself a "savage from the mountains of America."

In 1754, Franklin, now Pennsylvania's diplomatic envoy to the Iroquois, and other colonial leaders who had close contact with Indian societies introduced their plans for union at the Albany Congress.

Among Franklin's party, the Iroquois sachem Canassatego advised that, "Our wise forefathers established union and amity between the Five Nations. This has made us formidable. . . by your observing the same me-

thods. . . you will acquire much strength and power."

Between the Albany Congress and the Revolutionary War, Iroquois ideas of a union of independent states, governmental checks and balances, freedom of speech and individual liberty, all appealed to American leaders who sought an alternative to the feudal ideologies of their European ancestors.

Some historians say the Albany plan of Union was directly copied from the Iroquois. An official thank you to the Iroquois stated, "Our forefathers rejoiced to hear Canassatego speak those words. They have sunk deep into our hearts. . . Provinces have lighted a great council fire at Philadelphia and sent sixty-five counsellors to speak and act in the name of the whole."

In early November congressional hearings will be held in Washington, to evaluate formally the contribution of the Iroquois Great Law of Peace to the U.S. constitution. After 200 years, recognition that the principles of democracy came from the forests of North America will finally be realized.

*Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the district. Richard G. Green is a freelance writer who was born and lives on the Six Nations Reserve.*