

Iroquois Great Law of Peace

by Steve Simon
January 2017

Thy mind is made straight; thy head is now combed;
the seven crooks have been taken from thy body.
Now thou, too, hast a New Mind.
—Deganawidah (The Great Peacemaker)



The Iroquois story of the Great Peacemaker is an extraordinary epic packed with powerful symbolism and profound national and international influence. The Great Peacemaker and the Great Law of Peace, as we shall see, had a rich impact upon

the foundations of the United States. Like the strength of the white pine central to the story, the Great Law has sprouted its roots across the globe. Just as roots grow deep and far, hidden from sight, so, too, seemingly has the story escaped the attention of most historians.

Centuries ago, probably in the mid-fifteenth century, the Great Peacemaker Deganawidah was born into the Huron tribe in modern-day eastern Ontario. As Deganawidah matured, he exhibited visionary qualities and grew quite handsome. His leadership qualities were, however, hampered by a stammering speech problem. One day he received a vision of great peace. In the vision he saw a large white pine tree in which humanity was peacefully protected in the shade of the tree's branches. Its powerful roots sprouted in all directions while above the tree a great eagle stood guard. Deganawidah explained his vision and the wisdom he had gleaned to his native people but his words did not resonate with them in any meaningful way. He, thus, chose to leave his people and look elsewhere to "stop the shedding of blood among human beings."

He headed east toward modern-day New York State where he found the territories of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca. These were not peaceful times. There were frequent clashes between and within nations. Tribal codes of honor mandated that a life must be paid for by another life and so one murder beget another in a spiral of perpetual violence. Any proposal for peace would have, at best, put proponents of such ideas at odds with the code. At worst, such opinions could have been viewed as evidence of cowardice among proud warriors. Such were the dynamics that kept peace from being inculcated from within and so the killing continued unabated. A strong and righteous force from the outside was needed—one with no tribal loyalty.

In this foreign territory, Deganawidah met a special woman who lived at a well-traveled crossroads. She played no favorites among people. It was simply her ambition to feed travelers as they passed through. Deganawidah checked in for a meal and explained to the woman that he had come to provide a certain legal system to serve as the antidote to the spiral of violence created by the bravado of the code of honor. "Thinking shall replace killing, and there shall be one commonwealth," stated the Great Peacemaker.

It is telling that Deganawidah sought out a non-judgmental woman to initiate his campaign. She chose no sides between embattled forces. Just as Lady Justice of the future America would be depicted in art as a blindfolded woman, the lady at the crossroads was depicted as “blind” to whoever crosses her threshold seeking food. The woman fully embraced this New Mind and was given the name Jigonhsasee, New Face. The warriors passing through would get a glimpse of her and be moved by her. She represents the passive aspect but that alone, of course, is not enough. The spiritual whole is completed by the feminine-passive combined with the masculine-active. Thus, the Great Peacemaker would need to journey deeper into his active quest—deeper into the wilderness of men’s hearts and deeper into the forest where he would need to confront his first demon.

Deganawidah thus ventured into the forest looking for a certain beast of a man who feasted on human flesh. One evening as the beast returned home with a body, Deganawidah climbed the roof of the beast’s home. He positioned himself near the smoke hole above the stewing kettle, facing down upon it. The beast approached the kettle with his kill and for a moment looked into the reflection of the water. In that brief moment the beast mistook the reflection of the Great Peacemaker for his own and became convinced that he possessed the wisdom, righteousness, and strength of the image he believed he reflected and resolved to change his ways.

Seizing the opportunity, Deganawidah entered. He listened to the beast recount his experience, and then offered counsel. Deganawidah explained that the New Mind had come to the man who wishes to change his ways. Boldly, the Great Peacemaker suggested they work together. Deganawidah, upon meeting the reformed man, immediately noticed how eloquent and articulate he was. This valuable oratorical skill was the one thing Deganawidah lacked and sorely required for his great vision to be universally understood and accepted. Together they would form a perfectly complementary alliance for peace.

The reformed man was also of the nation from which the greatest obstacle to peace stood. Not far from the reformed man’s home there lived an evil chief of the Onondaga Nation. Legend states he possessed supernatural powers and the human flesh he preyed and feasted upon nourished his twisted mind and body. So evil was he that his hair crawled of snakes and birds fell from the sky through the waving of his arms. His body was crooked in seven places. His name was Atotarho, “The

Entangled.” Deganawidah challenged his new friend to go and articulate the vision of peace to the evil Atotarho, “Thou shalt be called Hiawatha, He Who Combs, for thou shalt comb the snakes out of Atotarho’s hair.”

Meanwhile, as the newly christened Hiawatha prepared for his harrowing mission, Deganawidah visited the Mohawks who received his vision with cautious approval. They set before him a challenge. He would need to climb a tall tree next to the Lower Falls of the Mohawk River after which the tree would be cut down. If he survived the test, the trustworthiness of his words would be clear. The Great Peacemaker accepted the challenge and survived the amazing feat as the Mohawks, thus, became the first nation to accept the Great Peace.

Meanwhile, Hiawatha went to Atotarho, but fared far worse. The wicked chief forcefully rebuffed him with sinister powers. After the encounter, Atotarho worked evil magic on Hiawatha. His three daughters fell ill and died. Soon thereafter his wife died, too. Distraught with deep grief, Hiawatha wandered the woodlands stripped of even the remotest hope of personal peace and wholly incapable of articulating the Great Peace any longer, especially to such a wicked man as Atotarho. Deganawidah, however, was perseverant. He found Hiawatha and, performing a condolence ritual with strings of wampum, asked Hiawatha to gaze at the sky to find peace. Hiawatha, thus, overcame his grief and returned to the New Mind.

The duo, renewed in conviction and with the Mohawks to support them, were able to bring the Oneida into the fold. Soon thereafter the Cayugas and Senecas agreed to join the League as well. The Onondagas, the last remaining hold out, were the key. Their chiefs supported the vision, but without Atotarho’s blessing, they would be powerless to endorse it and without the Onondagas’ participation, the strength of the League would be undermined and ineffectual.

Deganawidah and Hiawatha, sensing the opportunity to be rife, returned to Atotarho with men from the five nations in moral support. Deganawidah sang the Peace Song as Hiawatha, with his brilliant oration, recited the Great Law of Peace. The peace, they told Atotarho, would be crowned by the planting of the Great White Pine, which shall spread in all directions and eventually shelter all mankind. Moved but unconvinced, Atotarho questioned what was in it for him. In a stroke of

brilliant diplomacy, Deganawidah and Hiawatha offered Atotarho the opportunity to preside over the Great Council that would represent the League of Five Nations — a power greater than even his current one. The offer was indeed one Atotarho could not refuse. The Great Peacemaker then laid his hands on Atotarho's body and straightened the seven crooked places as Hiawatha combed the snakes from the once wicked chief's hair. The painting depicts this climactic scene of the epic.

The seven crooks include Atotarho's menacing hair, the unjust deeds done by his hands, the crooked paths traveled by his feet, the dark visions beheld by his eyes, the unkind words uttered through his throat, the twisted interpretations of his hearing, the unclean urges of his sexuality, and the wicked thoughts of his mind. The golden spiral is once again employed in this composition. Its eye is in the center of the snake tattoo on Atotarho's arm. It follows the curve of the rock upon which he lays and is then picked up by his arching back. The spiral points to the Achilles heel of Atotarho, suggesting the vulnerable point for defeating the unconquerable warrior. Hiawatha wears a wampum belt draped from his shoulder across his torso. The Hiawatha belt, as it has since become known, symbolizes the Five Nations. The Great Peacemaker sings as he gazes upward. For, as he taught, we do our best thinking of peace when we gaze upon the sky. There are five onlookers, symbolic of the Five Nations. They lean and sit on a fallen tree, representing the toppling of the old war-faring paradigm and the venture into the new peace-seeking league.

After the vision of the league had, thus, been consummated, Deganawidah set to establish the Great Law. A white pine, as beheld in his vision as a child, was uprooted. All the weapons of war were buried where the tree had stood. The tree was then replanted atop the interred instruments of violence and the tree's roots spread in all directions. Deganawidah then recited the Great Law, arguably the first constitution of a democratic confederation.

The Great Law of Peace preserved and protected the independence and liberties of each individual, each clan, and each nation while uniting the five nations into a confederacy, committed to inward well-being and outward strength. Raw materials and hunting grounds were to be shared. All religions were to be accepted. Unauthorized search was prohibited. Immigration into a nation within the League

was welcomed regardless of ethnicity, but predicated upon acceptance of the Great Law.

The Iroquois lived in longhouses of some twenty or more matrilineal families. All the children of a given clan were related through uterine lines. Iroquois society was also matrifocal, meaning husbands married into the wife's family. The Clan Matron nominated male candidates for leadership positions based on their perceived wisdom and capacity to maintain high standards. They also reserved the right to "knock the antlers off," or impeach, any leader for misconduct. It was also the women who would generally approve decisions to go to war. Though property, as we shall see, was not an emphasis of Iroquois life, women owned nearly everything besides men's weapons. Wives could also kick husband's out of the longhouse, maintaining ownership to whatever might be left behind. As such the Great Peacemaker built checks and balances into genders. Interestingly, the example of Iroquois women would have a powerful influence on the Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States. The fact that the Seneca Falls Convention (the first significant women's suffrage event) took place in Iroquois country is not a coincidence.

Checks and balances were also built into branches of the Great Law through a bicameral legislature and executive body. The Mohawks and Senecas constituted the "elder brothers" and the Oneidas and Cayugas the "younger brothers." The Onondagas filled the role of executive power, including calling the councils to order and maintaining the privilege of veto. An Onondaga chief with the title of Atotarho would remain forever as Head Chief of the Great Council.

One significantly notable aspect of Iroquois democratic decision-making was that it relied not on majority, but rather consensus. The Iroquois believed profoundly in the inter-connectedness of everything. Therein, they believed, could be found the universal truth to any situation. Debate was, therefore, less about a competition of ideas and the battle to be right, but rather more about the inclusion of public opinion and the search for truth. Deliberations, thus, were slow, orderly, and well mannered. Brilliant oratory was particularly prized.

The Great Law instituted a system of federalism with limited power. Each longhouse resided territorially within one of the five nations. Each nation was to

maintain its own council and manage its own internal affairs. The *Kanonsionni*, meaning Longhouse, was the given name of the League—the one roof over all. Deganawidah used the symbolism of five arrows to illustrate the fortitude of the Confederacy. He bound them together and showed no man could break them.

The house was meant to be adaptable and infinitely expansive. As new laws amended the Great Law, “new beams were to be added to the rafters.” As the Great White Pine’s roots grew further and further, additional nations would be added to the Longhouse and “new braces would be added.” Deganawidah, thus, envisioned the expansion of peace and abolition of war altogether. Indeed in 1715, the Tuscaroras were brought into the fold and the League became known as the Six Nations.

The New Mind of the Great Law would replace the bravado of vengeance. The Condolence Ceremony would replace “an eye for an eye” in the same manner that Deganawidah had returned Hiawatha to the New Mind after tragedy had befallen him. Violence would no longer spiral. Deganawidah admonished all who would interpret and apply the Law to do so with the selfless foresight of “skins seven thumbs thick.” Expounding on the reference, he closed his recitation of the Great Law by saying:

This is to be of strong mind, O chiefs: carry no anger and hold no grudges. Think not forever of yourselves, O chiefs nor of your own generation. Think of the continuing generations of our families, think of our grandchildren and of those yet unborn, whose faces are coming from beneath the ground.”

The contribution of Deganawidah and Hiawatha would be substantial enough if historically it only meant peace to the Iroquois. The influence, however, is much more vast and profound. In reading the Great Law of Peace many similarities between it and the U.S. Constitution become glaringly evident. As it turns out, this is no coincidence. Generations later, Europeans began arriving on Turtle Island, as the Iroquois called the land that would become known as America. Eager to put repressive forms of government behind them and vulnerable to life in a strange land, the early colonists interacted with the natives of the New World.

We are all familiar with the clashes between these civilizations, but the reality is that there was far more cooperative sharing of ideas than our war-focused history would lead us to believe. This was particularly true of the relationship with the Iroquois due primarily to a happenstance of geography. In the 18th Century, about 15,000 Iroquois populated a federation within the woodlands of the northeast that butted up against French and British colonies. Whoever maintained friendly alliance with the Iroquois held the key to a distinct existential advantage.

So began the celebrated diplomatic career of Benjamin Franklin and his immensely important impact on the birth of a nation. Franklin published Indian treaty accounts from 1736 to 1760 and attended Iroquois council meetings. He became intimately familiar with their culture and affairs. Franklin understood the strength of the Six Nations, particularly in contrast to the feeble disunity of the colonies.

As claim to primacy on the continent between France and Britain came to a head, British interest for an Iroquois alliance grew increasingly pertinent. In 1742, a charismatic Onondaga chief by the name of Canassatego (perhaps the Atotarho) pledged the Six Nations' friendship to the British. In 1744, Canassatego attended the Treaty of Lancaster. In part because he wanted to deal with one authorized federal power rather than multiple disagreeing colonies and in part because he wanted the colonies to be strengthened through unity, he urged them to form a confederation of colonies:

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 such Strength and power. Therefore whatever befalls you, never fall out with one another.

Unfortunately, the colonists demurred as little progress was made towards unity. Confounded, Franklin took up the cause. Seven years after Canassatego's speech a frustrated Franklin lobbied the reluctant colonists to grasp the virtues of unity. He expressed how strange it would be if the Six Nations:

should be capable of forming such an union and be able to execute it in such a manner that it has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble, and yet that a like union should be impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be

more advantageous, and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their interest.

Persisting on the theme in May 1754, he published the famous “Join, or Die” cartoon in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The cartoon became the first pictorial representation of colonial union produced by a British colonist in America. It featured a segmented snake with a colony initialed on each segment. The cartoon appeared two months before the Albany Congress would convene to once again take up the premise of creating a unified government. Again the Iroquois played a pivotal role in convening the meeting. This time, in place of Canassatego’s bundle of arrows, they used the imagery of the Covenant Chain with a link for each colony. Franklin called the deliberating members of the Plan the “Grand Council,” again a reference to the Iroquois. Franklin was commissioned to author the Albany Plan. It was accepted by the Congress attendees, but eventually struck down by the colonies.

Still Franklin would not relent. He often referenced the Covenant Chain, even including it on the two-thirds dollar currency he designed in 1776. In that same year Franklin participated in authoring the Articles of Confederation, which again aimed to achieve a constitution for union, at the Second Continental Congress. The following year the Congress approved the Articles, but they would not be fully ratified until March 1, 1781. It had been thirty-nine years since Franklin heard Canassatego’s speech. Franklin was now 75-years old. Nevertheless, at long last, he had lived to see the colonies choose unity.

Why then, in our bigger picture, is this important in “bending the arc” towards peace? Well, quite simply we take the idea of peaceful confederation supported by the rule of law completely for granted in our day. As we have seen, it took nearly forty years for the first such bold example to take hold in the “civilized” world. The Iroquois provided a living example that such a thing was possible. Theirs is the example by which the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and others brought dissimilar peoples together under the rule of law for the express purpose of improved well being and peace.

It was also the living example of the Iroquois that gave the Enlightenment Age thinkers a tangible touchstone for their lofty ideas of natural law that ultimately

brought republicanism to America and France by way of revolution. The Enlightenment movement led by Voltaire and Rousseau sought to organize societies based on reason, science, and natural law. Enlightenment thinkers in America such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine among many others began to see first-hand how “natural law” and “natural rights” flowed logically from the “natural state” of the Iroquois.

Europe had no such laboratories of observation, but well imagined their own ancestors lived in just such a natural state prior to monarchical rule. John Locke wrote, “We must consider what state all men are naturally in...born to the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another.” This thinking, rooted in the natural world, gave rise to Locke’s famous philosophy that government existed for the sake of protecting life, liberty, and property. Thomas Jefferson adopted Locke’s list, but adapted it. To Thomas Jefferson mankind’s natural rights, or unalienable rights, included life, liberty, and *the pursuit of happiness*. To Jefferson property was a civil right, protected by government, but not a natural one. The pursuit of happiness, as Jefferson had witnessed among the Iroquois, was natural and deservedly unalienable.

In making this claim, Jefferson was tap dancing around a nettlesome issue, an issue that continues to dog mankind in its quest for peace. Our competitive striving for property in its various material manifestations and abstract forms is ironically and arguably our biggest impediment to shared freedom from need, or peace.

Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, and others recognized that the “primitive state” of Iroquois culture was rooted in collaborative behavior and the sharing of all things. In 1795, Paine wrote, “Poverty is a thing created by what is called civilization.” That is not to say the Iroquois were rich. Iroquois men owned no property whatsoever, save their clothes and weapons, and whatever women owned was mostly practical and modest. When chiefs were given gifts, they were shared communally. Slavery and all forms of servitude were completely non-existent in Iroquois culture. The Iroquois were so sociologically independent from personal gain that they would not work for compensation. To do so would be tantamount to servitude and surrendering one’s freedom.

Yes, these were a people deeply rooted in true liberty and honest republicanism. The roots tapped deeper, however, than the European colonists were likely to dig. At least that is the conclusion Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine came to. Yes, America would cast off the monarchial oppression of Europe, but it would need to settle on a happy middle ground, or a “happy mediocrity” as Franklin called it, between what laid east across the physical ocean and what laid west across a metaphorical ocean of cultural difference.

So, the Founding Fathers who authored the nation’s founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, did so with a radical heart and a practical mind—their radical heart beating with the “savage” freedoms of the natural state and the practical mind thinking with the “civilized” order of European culture.

As the years after the nation’s founding passed on, so, too, did the historical understanding of the Iroquois’ influence on the nation’s founding principles. A new, more Euro-centric narrative became more culturally palatable. The Founding Fathers, it was supposed, tapped the wellsprings of their collective genius, infused with the knowledge of ancient democracies of Greece and Rome, and brought forth on this continent a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. This New Order of Ages would be ushered in and blazoned on the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States. The front side of the seal would feature the bald eagle, the imagery of which originated with Deganawidah’s vision. The eagle holds an olive branch in his right talon. The Latin language and peaceful olive branch hark back to the perceived majesty of ancient Rome and its suggested foundational democratic ethos on the nation. In the left talon, the eagle grips thirteen arrows. Those arrows come not from Greece or Rome. They come straight from Iroquois imagery. Just as Deganawidah and Canassatego used five arrows to illustrate the strength of the Iroquois League and urged the colonies to likewise unite, the thirteen arrows represent the eventual uniting of the thirteen colonies.

It would take two centuries for the Iroquois to receive proper credit, but in 1988 the U.S. Congress formally recognized the contributions of the Iroquois Confederacy. That year marked the bicentennial of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. House Concurrent Resolution 331 acknowledged the profound Iroquois influence:

Whereas the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself;

Deganawidah, Hiawatha, and the Iroquois League, whether recognized or not, have certainly exerted an enormously positive influence on the lives of generations of Americans and by extension the world. Deganawidah would be proud to know the impact The Great Law has had and continues to have on our, as he put it, “grandchildren and of those yet unborn, whose faces are coming from beneath the ground.”

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