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Unity Through Division: A Revision of the Haudenosaunee's Policy of Neutrality

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Abstract: The Haudenosaunee people, otherwise known as the Five Nations of Iroquois, negotiated separate treaties with the English and French in 1701. Scholars asserted Haudenosaunee desires to “sit on their mats and smoke in peace,” was to maintain their political sovereignty, repress internal factionalism, and “play off” the European powers for their own economic gain. Nonetheless, their implicit assumptions of the cultural and political structures of the Great League of Peace and Power and Iroquois Confederacy, particularly that all Five Nations were centralized under one “policy of neutrality,” is inconsistent with the reciprocal and decentralized posture of the Haudenosaunee. By understanding the specific consequences of the Beaver Wars for each of the Five Nations, this essay argues that the Grand Settlement in Montreal and Albany was not a policy of neutrality, but rather a case of unity through division.
When the Haudenosaunee, otherwise known as the Five Nations of Iroquois, decided to negotiate separate treaties with the English and French in 1701, many historians framed these two sentimental events as exemplars of the Haudenosaunee’s move to neutrality. Scholars asserted Haudenosaunee desires to “sit on their mats and smoke in peace,” was to maintain their political sovereignty, repress internal factionalism, and “play off” the European powers for their own economic gain. Nonetheless, their implicit assumptions of the cultural and political structures of the Great League of Peace and Power and Iroquois Confederacy, particularly that all Five Nations were centralized under one “policy of neutrality,” is inconsistent with the reciprocal and decentralized posture of the Haudenosaunee. By understanding the specific consequences of the Beaver Wars for each of the Five Nations, this essay will argue that the Grand Settlement in Montreal and Albany was not a policy of neutrality, but rather a case of unity through division.

Haudenosaunee, geographically west to east, consisted of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk until 1722 when the Grand Council admitted the nation of the Tuscarora into the Haudenosaunee. Located along the south side of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, Haudenosaunee roughly translates to “The People of the Longhouse” with the Seneca on its “Western Door,” the Mohawk on its “Eastern Door,” and the Onondaga in the middle tending to the immemorial fire in the Grand Council. Seneca scholar Arthur Parker described the Seneca and Mohawks as the “older brothers,” the Cayuga and Oneida as the “younger brothers,” and the Onondaga as the “fire-keepers,” with all five nations organizing their families, clans, and longhouses according to matrilineal kinship. According to works of Haudenosaunee scholars and elders, Haudenosaunee history consists of three main epochs: Creation, in the First Epoch; the Great Law of Peace, in the Second Epoch; and Handsome Lake, in the Third and Present Epoch. The history of the Beaver Wars and subsequent Grand Settlement occurs during the Second Epoch, which began with the founding of the Great League of Peace. While one may view the Epochs in chronological order, the continuity and reciprocity between the three Epochs should de-stabilize a Eurocentric periodization of Haudenosaunee history. Although the exact origins of the League have been a source of debate, Mann and Fields’ scholarly article, “A Sign in the Sky,” used oral keepings, archaeology, history, and astronomy to date the League to August 31, 1142.

In order to help explain Great League and its Grand Council, one must review the Deganawida epic. The main figures of this tradition were Deganawida, a Wyandot and later Mohawk man known as the Peacemaker; Hiawatha, a Mohawk messenger who invented the condolence wampum; and Adoraroh (Tadodaho), a sachem and leader of an opposing faction within Onondaga. Although the keeping of tradition has conflicting contents, most versions contain both the struggles of the founders to create the League and the creation of the Great Law. Briefly, the epic described a period of perpetual blood feuding amongst the Five Nations consisting largely of the “mourning wars” in retaliation for loss of a loved one. Some traditions focus on the fragmentation of the people engaged in the hostilities and their forgotten unified identity, while others focus on the peoples’
differing hunting and farming cultures as the source of war.vi The turmoil of kidnapping, raids, and death subsided when Hiawatha heard from Peacemaker Deganawida the Good News of Peace, Power, and Civil Authority. Deganawida, who importantly was the reincarnation of the Sky Holder,vii showed Hiawatha the rituals of gift giving as a means of diplomacy. Soon after the Good News redeemed League founder Adoraroh, fifty sachems formed the Grand Council beneath the Tree of Great Peace at Onondaga, which henceforth became the spiritual and diplomatic capital of the Haudenosaunee.viii According to Parker, Hiawatha, in his grief over the loss of his family, created a wampum belt with the rushes and shells by the lakeshore, which he would offer to another person in grief as a means of condolence. Hiawatha is thus credited as the inventor of wampum belts and the Haudenosaunee writing system.ix

When analyzing the Deganawida epic, its traditions of mourning, reciprocity, and internal peace remained congruous to the decentralized and compromising consensus-based structure of the League of Peace and Power. Of particular importance were the condolence rituals, which were created following Peacemaker’s blessing of Hiawatha’s wampum belt.x These rituals required that the death of a sachem must be followed by a roll call of the fifty founding sachems and an act of requickening the living in the name of the dead.xi These rituals exemplified Haudenosaunee traditions of reincarnation, collective commiseration, and continuity. Furthermore, following under the precept of Deganawida’s Good News of Peace, Power, and Civil Authority, reciprocity and gift giving became a matter of diplomacy in both trade and war. The mourning rituals of adopting foreigners within their own respective clans and longhouse reflected their unity through diversity, the same concept that maintained the internal peace amongst the Five Nations.xii These fundamental principles within all levels of Haudenosaunee society were crucial in order to understand the governing functions of the Great League of Peace and its Confederacy, which changed in response to European colonialism.

Within the context of the late seventeenth century, the exact governing functions of the Great League of Peace and its Confederacy have been a subject of debate. While William Fenton defines the League as a “symbolic system” and the Confederacy as “the operating instrument of the government,” scholar Fred Anderson described the League as “a ritual and cultural association that loosely united the original Five Nations,” while the Confederacy served the “diplomatic, military, and political functions” of the Longhouse.xiii This essay follows Anderson’s interpretation that the cultural and ethnological significance of the League should not devalue its capacity to maintain internal peace amongst the Five Nations. If anything, its ritual significance makes the League the foundation to the diplomatic and political actions of the Confederacy. As such, the Haudenosaunee’s foreign diplomacy was an extension of the same principles that governed each family, longhouse, clan, and nation of the League.

The League’s principles through the Confederacy gave the Haudenosaunee a reputation for military prowess, particularly during the Beaver Wars of the mid-seventeenth century. With the name in mind, the causes of the war have been traditionally
linked to the economics of the fur trade. As George Hunt famously argued, the abundance of furs provided a unique theatre of “interracial contacts” and the “universality of the economic basis in intertribal relations” convinced the Iroquois to engage in warfare.\textsuperscript{ix} Hunt concluded the Haudenosaunee sought to control the waterways from Montreal to Albany in order to act as the middleman for the entire fur trade. Recent scholarship has moved away from the economics of the fur trade as the central motivation behind the Beaver Wars. Scholar José Antônio Brandão even goes so far as to say the economics of the fur trade were minute in comparison to the objective of obtaining captives to replenish their declining population from European diseases, namely smallpox.\textsuperscript{x} Importantly, Hunt’s hypothesis contradicted the Haudenosaunee methods of reciprocity that demanded a direct correlation between trade and peace. Hunt also ignored how the Haudenosaunee mourning practice of adoption gave unity and not animosity to a polyglot of peoples. The mourning institutions as well as the traditions of reciprocity were both acts of renewal and restoration of life and friendship. Still, the economics were not as insignificant as Brandão claimed.

Upon analysis and recognition of the intersections of trade and warfare within Haudenosaunee diplomacy, the origins of the Beaver Wars were to establish primacy in the fur trade and to replenish their populations from war, disease, and famine. In other words, trade and peace were not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. Population replenishment, for example, was not established merely from warfare, but also by the open and fluid nature of migration within the Great Lakes. The affective and material connection to the Haudenosaunee’s respective alliances and friendships meant diplomacy required constant and consistent participation from all parties.\textsuperscript{xi} With respect to war, many Haudenosaunee men saw warfare as a rite of passage and clan matrons saw warfare as central to fulfillment of condolence and mourning rituals.\textsuperscript{xii} Thus historians’ tendency to periodize the later seventeenth century as a war in itself quite arguably delineates the natural occurrence of war amongst the Haudenosaunee for centuries. Regardless, the particulars of the economic or political motives were dependent on each respective nation and clan of the Haudenosaunee. Neither Hunt nor Brandão expounded on the diversity of interests within the Longhouse and their varying means and objectives of warfare.

Given the local and decentralized nature of the Great League, it should not be surprising that the constituent clans and nations of the League seldom acted in concert during the Beaver Wars. With the Seneca at the western door of the Longhouse and the Mohawk at the steps to Albany, the goals and needs of each clan or nation were dependent largely on their geography. As such, the economic and military “policies” of Haudenosaunee reflected interpersonal relations more so than strategic advantage. For the Mohawk in particular, the establishment of the French in the St. Lawrence Valley and the Dutch at Fort Orange (Albany) meant they became reliant on trade goods by the early seventeenth century. With the Dutch willing to trade furs and pelts for not only iron, kettles, knives, and beads, but also for arms and ammunition, Mohawk weaponry
changed rapidly in comparison to the other Nations of the League. In turn, the spiritual and cultural bond between the Dutch and Mohawk, exemplified by addition of glass beads to the traditional wampum belts, relied heavily on reciprocity. Along with this exchange of goods, however, came the exchange of disease: by the 1630s the Mohawks suffered a loss of 75 percent of their population, while the Seneca fared better than the other Five Nations.

Still, throughout the 1640s, the Mohawk’s geographic position and heavy supply of ammunition enabled them to fight as an independent nation in the east against the Mahicans and in the north against the Algonquins and Montagnais. By 1645, they even made a separate treaty from the Five Nations with the French at Trois Rivières while the Seneca continued to wage campaigns against the Huron-Wendat. Since the objective was largely to establish complete access to the Dutch at Albany, these war engagements would not be as beneficial to the western nations of the Seneca and Cayuga.

By the late seventeenth century, the stalemates of raids by the Cayuga, Seneca, and Onondaga against the Susquehannocks and other nations in the western Great Lakes became ineffective and extensive in casualties. As further evidence to the decentralized nature of the Haudenosaunee, these joint campaigns and each nation’s determination to adopt all the captives resulted in the shedding of blood amongst the Five Nations. As recounted in the Jesuit Relations, missionary Paul Le Jeune noted these campaigns “cause almost as much loss to them as to their enemies, and they have depopulated their own Villages to such an extent, that they now contain more Foreigners than natives of the country,” with many accounts by the 1660s stating more than two-thirds of the Haudenosaunee populations were adoptees.

As the prospects of New Netherland dissolved and the Haudenosaunee supply of firepower dwindled, the increase in French firepower forced the League to consider a case for accommodation in 1661. Yet the general resolution was not binding and subsequently the Mohawks, Onondagas and Oneida continued to attack the French until New France Governor General Daniel de Remy de Courcelle instigated successful attacks against the Mohawk in July 1665. In turn, the Onondaga superseded the Mohawk’s special status among the Five Nations; not only due its tradition as the Longhouse’s centre, but also due to a shift of allegiance from the Dutch to the French. Thus, while some historians regarded this moment as a height of “intense factionalism” amongst the Haudenosaunee, it would be more appropriate to regard this shift to the Onondaga as change in Mohawk’s practices of reciprocity from the Dutch to the French. By the end of that year, the Mohawk finalized a peace agreement with New France. Within two years, however, the fighting resumed, and within a decade the Mohawks established the Covenant Chain with the English.

Unlike European epistemologies of alliance in its relation to a common foe, the Haudenosaunee did not see their newly formed alliance with the English as exclusive. When the partnership of the Mohawk and Governor Andros of New York solidified in 1674, albeit under the English ideals of the Mohawks as “subjects” and not “allies,”
the Covenant Chain would be largely credited for the defeat of the Susquehanna in the 1780s. Moreover, the entire League did not share the Mohawk’s natural hostility towards New France.\textsuperscript{xvi} It was not until New France expanded into larger trade networks along the \textit{Pays d’en Haut} territory and began to arm the Ottawas, Ojibwas, and Illinois that the western Haudenosaunee felt their means of reciprocity were not fulfilled.\textsuperscript{xxvii} By 1680, with New France’s trade with midwestern nations, the encroachment on Haudenosaunee hunting grounds, the rise of epidemics, and the subsequent calls for mourning rituals, both the Seneca and Onondaga engaged in warfare against the midwestern nations and French allies of Illinois, Miamis, Ottawas, and Huron-Wendat.

For seven years, the Haudenosaunee remained relatively successful in their campaigns in the west. In spite of such warfare against the French, relations with the English during this period crumbled: New York Governor Thomas Dongan replaced Arnos in 1783 and he aggressively asserted English sovereignty over the Five Nations and reinforced their positions as subjects of the Crown.\textsuperscript{xxviii} As such Dongan promised no direct aid yet mandated no negotiations with the French without New York’s approval. Naturally, as these requests are fundamentally against the principles and foundations of Haudenosaunee diplomacy, the Onondagas, Senecas, and Cayugas rejected his assertions. When Dongan provided no assistance against the 1787 attack by New France Governor General Jacques Rene de Brisay de Denonville, the Senecas deserted from their villages and formed a growing resentment towards the English.\textsuperscript{xxix}

By late 1787, the Haudenosaunee continued to engage against the French alone, establishing blockades around Fort Frontenac and Niagara; casualties still surmounted however. When Louis de Buade de Frontenac returned as Governor General of New France, he instigated raids along the New York frontier in February 1790. Even when the English finally joined forces with the Haudenosaunee on two separate campaigns in the summer of 1790 and early 1791, their subsequent failures only left greater resentment between New York and western Iroquoia. With the primary villages of four of the five nations destroyed and two thousand lives lost, it had been a supremely costly war.\textsuperscript{x} As Richter wrote, “as the century closed, the peoples of the Longhouse faced the greatest political and cultural crisis since the founding of the League.”\textsuperscript{xxxi}

Nonetheless, the long peace negotiations, which began in 1693, did not end the war between the French and the Haudenosaunee. Tensions erupted throughout the 1690s, with the French terminating the peace process in 1696, citing the Haudenosaunee’s indecisiveness and their objection to Frontenac’s plans to build a fort at Cataracaui.\textsuperscript{xxxii} Even when the Haudenosaunee and the French signed the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick, attacks from the Miamis and other midwestern nations continued to plague the lives of the Seneca. Worse still, the formal end of King William’s War also meant the end of the English support.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} Thereby, many historians such as Richard Aquila attributed the delay of a peace treaty to internal factionalism within the Five Nations. Under this logic, given that the experiences of the Seneca during the Beaver Wars were incomparable to the Mohawk, naturally their perspectives on the French and English would be difficult “to
reconcile.” Yet, the argument of “internal factionalism” again ignores the decentralized approach of the Haudenosaunee and the multiple occasions where these nations had separate treaties with the Dutch, French, and English. As such, the treaty delays were more of a by-product of their tumultuous alliances with the European settlers rather than reconciliation within the League. It would then be logical to regard the Grand Settlement as a re-establishment of their respective alliances, not a rejection of the diplomatic system altogether.

When such re-establishment was not possible throughout the 1690s, the Haudenosaunee’s lack of allies did not equate to neutrality nor did it mean the Haudenosaunee desired to be insular from European settler affairs. When expounding on the Haudenosaunee “policy of neutrality” and their consensus-based Grand Council, scholars often cited the neutralist sachem Teganissorens’ declaration to the English envoys and the French ambassadors in spring 1701: “Five delegates are about to set out for Montreal, two others will go to Albany; I myself will remain on my mat, to show all the world that I take no side, and wish to preserve strict neutrality.”

While Aquila argued Teganissorens was the “spokesperson” for the Council, a term that was not used within this primary source, Teganissorens’ use of first-person pronouns indicates the message could be interpreted inversely: given the division amongst the Council, Teganissorens alone will adhere to strict neutrality. Even if the former was true, given the Mohawk’s conscious absence from the meeting, this Council could not be characterized as “consensus based” as understood by western epistemologies.

As mentioned, the purpose of the Grand Council was mostly ceremonial and did not necessarily give the sachem’s influence over the daily politics of their respective communities. Indeed, the objective of the Grand Council was not to govern people, nor was it intended to act as a European-styled democratic institution. Rather, it was an exemplar of the Deganawida and the binding kinship of diverse Haudenosaunee nations. While the Council was “consensus based,” it accommodated local differences to maintain shared kinship and reciprocity. The Reverend Asher Wright, who lived with the Seneca for decades, noted that discussions at the Grand Council would “continue till all opposition was reasoned down, or the proposed measure abandoned.” Thus, although actions required unanimity, this did not necessarily mean opposition was not tolerated.

Notably, Charlevoix, following Teganissorens’ declaration, stated both Bruyas and de Maricourt thought he was “ground for all hope,” meaning they unlikely interpreted the message as one of neutrality. Given Charlevoix’s clear pro-French leanings, his account that the French Ambassadors had “heightened confidence” suggests the possibility of allyship with the Cayuga, Seneca, and Onondaga. If the Haudenosaunee were all neutral as understood by western epistemologies, it would be expected that these French Ambassadors would be disappointed at the loss of an ally.

The prospects of having two separate treaties meant Haudenosaunee’s economic ties to the English acted as leverage with French. In turn, when the 1701 Grand Settlement was signed, with the three western nations (Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga) going to
Montreal and the two eastern nations (Oneida and Mohawk) going to Albany, it was not out of the desire to remain insular from European affairs. Rather, the independent interests of each of the Five Nations meant it was signed out of the necessity to rebuild alliances with both the English and French.

Upon evaluation, the Grand Settlement of 1701 was the “reasoned down” of opposition. With the League’s cultural foundations reliant on unity through division, this settlement was above all an expression of the Haudenosaunee’s practice of reciprocity, one that allowed for multiple non-exclusive alliances with European settlers. It was not a compromise among Pro-French, neutral, and Pro-English “factions” so much as it was allowing for each nation to maximize their trade by working with the settlers in their proximity. By focusing on the autonomy and security of the Longhouse, the Settlement allowed for each nation to regain their alliances according to the distinct and local impact of the Beaver Wars on the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and Mohawk. Such division derived its legitimacy from the unifying principles of reciprocity, condolence, internal peace, and civil authority. The different objectives of the various families, clans, longhouses, and nations of the Haudenosaunee were all in pursuit of the continual fulfillment of Deganawida’s message of Peace, Power, and Civil Authority.

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7 Deganawida’s previous spiritual form, which is known as both Sky Holder and Sapling, was one of the creators of Turtle Island. Alongside his twin Flint, Sapling was the Sky woman’s grandson. See Bruce Elliot Johansen and Barbara Alice Mann, eds., “The Second Epoch of Time,” in Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy), 269.

8 William Fenton, The Great Law and the Longhouse (Norman: University of Oklahoma


George Hunt, *The Wars Of The Iroquois: A Study In Intertribal Trade Relations* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1940), 5, 65, 115.


To note, wampum belts have historically been used as a material reflection of an alliance or diplomatic exchange. See Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 52, and Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 224-240.


Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 92, 95.


Ibid, 52.

Barr, *Unconquered*, 78.
Ibid, 79.

Aquila, The Iroquois Restoration, 62-64.

Shannon, Iroquois Diplomacy on the Early Frontier.

Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse, 167-68.

Ibid, 189-190.

Barr, Unconquered, 92-93.

Ibid.

Quoted in Aquila, The Iroquois Restoration, 59. To note, the French Jesuit Pierre Charlevoix’s writings was the source of this quote.


Quoted in Fenton, The Great Law and the Longhouse, 30.


Ibid.

Aquila, The Iroquois Restoration, 64-69.


