



## THE FOUNDING INDIAN FATHERS



Every day of the school year, troops of children march across the lawn of the United States Capitol perched atop the District of Columbia's highest elevation. The building dominates the Washington skyline, a model of classical symmetry and precision. Two giant wings of precisely equal proportion reach out from a Roman dome that surveys the city of Washington. If reduced to a ruin, the forest of Greek columns decorating the building would appear to be as much at home in Rome or Naples as in Athens or Corinth. The building revels in its Old World heritage.

Indian schoolchildren walking through the halls of Congress would rarely see a hint that the building sits in America overlooking the Potomac River and not along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The building copies European, primarily classical, styles, and its halls proudly display pictures, friezes, and busts of famous political thinkers from Hammurabi and Solomon to Rousseau and Voltaire. In the hallways stand statues of American politicians posing in Greek tunics and Roman togas as though they were Roman senators or Athenian orators. Greek busts of the vice-presidents of the United States line the halls of the Senate, lending them the aura of a classical cemetery.

The children pass under doorways that bear weighty engravings and quotations from European documents such as the Magna

Carta interspersed with quotes from the United States Declaration of Independence or Constitution. The building and its appointments proudly proclaim their part in the great march of European progress and civilization. They portray the blessed dove of democracy hatching in Athens and then taking wing for a torturous flight of two millennia, pausing only momentarily over Republican Rome, the field of Runnymede, and the desk of Voltaire before finally alighting to rest permanently and securely in the virgin land of America.

A child standing squarely in the middle of the Capitol beneath the great dome sees a painted band circling the upper wall representing the history of America. In that work, the Indians appear as just one more dangerous obstacle, like the wild animals, the Appalachian Mountains, the Mississippi River, and the western deserts, that blocked the progress of European civilization and technology in the white man's march across America. The most peaceful picture with an Indian theme in the rotunda shows the baptism of Pocahontas, daughter of the Indian leader Powhatan. Surrounded by Europeans and dressed in English clothes, she symbolically renounces the savage life of the Indians for the civilization of the British.

The lesson in this august setting presents itself forcefully on every visitor. The United States government derives from European precedents, and the Americans gave civilization to the Indians. Nothing in the Capitol hints that contemporary Americans owe the slightest debt to the Indians for teaching us about democratic institutions.

Despite these civic myths surrounding the creation of American government, America's settlers from Europe knew little of democracy. The English came from a nation ruled by monarchs who claimed that God conferred their right to rule and even allowed them to wage wars of extinction against the Irish. Colonists also fled to America from France, which was wandering aimlessly through history under the extravagances of a succession of kings named Louis, most of whom pursued debauched and extravagant reigns that oppressed, exploited, and at times even starved their subjects.

Despite the ideal government sketched by Plato in *The Republic*, and the different constitutions analyzed by Aristotle in his *Politics*,

the Old World offered America few democratic models for government. Democratic government had no fortress in the Old World. Despite the democratic rhetoric that came into fashion in eighteenth-century Europe, no such systems existed there at that time. The monarchy and the aristocracy of England were engaged in a protracted struggle that would eventually lead to the supremacy of Parliament (and a closely limited electoral franchise until the reforms of the nineteenth century). France had not yet begun its experiments with participatory democracy. The Founding Fathers of the United States judiciously assembled bits and pieces of many different systems to invent a completely new one. In fashioning the new system, they even borrowed some distinctive elements from the American Indians.

The Founding Fathers faced a major problem when it came time to invent the United States. They represented, under the Articles of Confederation, thirteen separate and sovereign states. How could one country be made from all thirteen without each one yielding its own power?

Reportedly, the first person to propose a union of all the colonies and to propose a federal model for it was the Iroquois chief Canassatego, speaking at an Indian-British assembly in Pennsylvania in July 1744. He complained that the Indians found it difficult to deal with so many different colonial administrations, each with its own policy. It would make life easier for everyone involved if the colonists could have a union which allowed them to speak with one voice. He not only proposed that the colonies unify themselves, but told them how they might do it. He suggested that they do as his people had done and form a union like the League of the Iroquois [Johansen, pp. 12, 61].

Hiawatha and Deganwidah founded the League of the Iroquois sometime between A.D. 1000 and 1450 under a constitution they called the *Kaianerekowa* or Great Law of Peace. When the Europeans arrived in America, the league constituted the most extensive and important political unit north of the Aztec civilization. From earliest contact the Iroquois intrigued the Europeans, and they were the subject of many amazed reports. Benjamin Franklin, however, seems to have been the first to take their system as a potentially important model by which the settlers might be able to fashion a new government.

Benjamin Franklin first became acquainted with the operation of Indian political organization in his capacity as official printer for the colony of Pennsylvania. His job included publication of the records and speeches of the various Indian assemblies and treaty negotiations, but following his instinctive curiosity, he broadened this into a study of Indian culture and institutions. Because of his expertise and interest in Indian matters, the colonial government of Pennsylvania offered him his first diplomatic assignment as their Indian commissioner. He held this post during the 1750s and became intimately familiar with the intricacies of Indian political culture and in particular with the League of the Iroquois. After this taste of Indian diplomacy, Franklin became a lifelong champion of the Indian political structure and advocated its use by the Americans. During this time he also refined his political techniques of persuasion, compromise, and slow consensus building that proved so important to his later negotiations as the ambassador to France and as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

Echoing the original proposal of Canassatego, Franklin advocated that the new American government incorporate many of the same features as the government of the Iroquois [Wilson, p. 46]. Speaking to the Albany Congress in 1754, Franklin called on the delegates of the various English colonies to unite and emulate the Iroquois League, a call that was not heeded until the Constitution was written three decades later [Hecht, p. 71]. Even though the Founding Fathers finally adopted some of the essential features of the Iroquois League, they never followed it in quite the detail advocated by Franklin.

The Iroquois League united five principal Indian nations—the Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, Oneida, and Cayuga. Each of these nations had a council composed of delegates called sachems who were elected by the tribes of that nation. The Seneca Nation elected eight sachems to its council, the Mohawk and Oneida nations each had councils of nine sachems, the Cayuga Nation had a council of ten, and the Onondaga Nation had a council of fourteen. Each of these nations governed its own territory, and its own council met to decide the issues of public policy for each one. But these councils exercised jurisdiction over the internal

concerns of that one nation only; in this regard they exercised powers somewhat like the individual governments of the colonies.

In addition to the individual councils of each separate nation, the sachems formed a grand Council of the League in which all fifty sachems of the six nations sat together to discuss issues of common concern. The sachems represented their individual nations, but at the same time they represented the whole League of the Iroquois, thereby making the decisions of the council the law for all five nations. In this council each sachem had equal authority and privileges, with his power dependent on his oratorical power to persuade. The council met in the autumn of at least one year in five in a longhouse in the Onondaga Nation; if needed they could be called into session at other times as well. Their power extended to all matters of common concern among the member nations. In the words of Lewis Henry Morgan, America's first modern anthropologist, the council "declared war and made peace, sent and received embassies, entered into treaties of alliance, regulated the affairs of subjugated nations, received new members into the League, extended its protection over feeble tribes, in a word, took all needful measures to promote their prosperity, and enlarge their dominion" [Morgan, pp. 66-67].

Through this government the nations of the Iroquois controlled territory from New England to the Mississippi River, and they built a league that endured for centuries. Unlike European governments, the league blended the sovereignty of several nations into one government. This model of several sovereign units united into one government presented precisely the solution to the problem confronting the writers of the United States Constitution. Today we call this a "federal" system in which each state retains power over internal affairs and the national government regulates affairs common to all. Henry Steele Commager later wrote of this crucial time that even "if Americans did not actually invent federalism, they were able to take out an historical patent on it" [Commager, p. 207]. The Indians invented it even though the United States patented it.

Another student of the Iroquois political organization was Charles Thomson, the perpetual secretary of the Continental Congress. He spent so much energy studying the Indians and their way of life that the Delaware Nation adopted him as a full member.

Following Thomas Jefferson's request, Thomson wrote at length on Indian social and political institutions for inclusion in an appendix to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. According to his description of Indian political tradition, each Indian town built a council house for making local decisions and for electing delegates to the tribal council. The tribal council in turn elected delegates to the national council [Thomson, p. 203]. Even though Thomson wrote this several years before the Constitutional Convention, this description reads like a blueprint for the United States Constitution, especially when we remember that the Constitution allowed the state legislatures (rather than the general populace) to elect senators. Thomson stresses that the sachems or political leaders do not acquire their positions by heredity but by election, and he adds that because outsiders can be naturalized into the Indian nation, even they can be elected to such offices.

The Americans followed the model of the Iroquois League not only in broad outline but also in many of the specific provisions of their *Kaianerekowa*. According to the *Kaianerekowa*, the sachems were not chiefs, a position frequently associated with leadership in war. As a lawmaker, the sachem could never go to war in his official capacity as a sachem. "If disposed to take the warpath, he laid aside his civil office, for the time being, and became a common warrior" [Morgan, p. 72]. This followed the tradition in many Indian tribes that relied upon separate leaders for peace and for war. The colonists followed this model too in eventually separating civilian authorities from military ones. Members of Congress, judges, and other officials could not also act as military leaders without giving up their elected office; similarly, military leaders could not be elected to political office without first resigning their military position. This contrasted with British traditions; church and military leaders frequently served as members of the House of Lords and frequently played major political roles in the House of Commons as well. Similarly, this inability to separate the civil government and the military has doomed many of the imitators of American democracy, particularly in Africa and Latin America.

If the conduct of any sachem appeared improper to the populace or if he lost the confidence of his electorate, the women of his clan impeached him and expelled him by official action, where-

upon the women then choose a new sachem [Goldenweiser, p. 570]. This concept of impeachment ran counter to European tradition, in which the monarch ruled until death, even if he became insane or incapacitated, as in the case of George III. The Americans followed the Iroquois precedent of always providing for ways to remove leaders when necessary, but the Founding Fathers saw no reason to follow the example of the Iroquois in granting women the right to vote or any other major role in the political structure.

One of the most important characteristics of the Iroquois League permitted it to expand as needed; the council could vote to admit new members. This proved to be an important feature of the system after the Tuscarora Indians of North Carolina faced attack in 1712 by the army of Colonel John Barnwell and again in 1713 by the army of Colonel James Moore. Having thoroughly defeated the Tuscaroras, the Carolina colonists demanded reparations from the Indians to pay the colonists' expenses incurred in the war. Because the Indians had no money to pay, the colonists seized four hundred of them and sold them into slavery at the rate of ten pounds sterling apiece. The surviving Tuscaroras fled North Carolina to seek refuge among the Iroquois. In 1714 the Tuscaroras applied for formal membership in the league, and the Iroquois admitted them in 1722 as the Sixth Nation [Waldman, p. 104]. Similarly the league later incorporated other decimated groups such as the Erie, but the league did not allow for an entity such as a colony, which had played such an important part in European governments since the times of the ancient Greeks.

In a radical break with Old World tradition, the emerging government of the United States emulated this Iroquois tradition of admitting new states as members rather than keeping them as colonies. The west became a series of territories and then states, but the United States treated each new territory as a future partner rather than as a colony. The new government codified this Indian practice into American law through the Congressional Resolution of 1780, the Land Ordinances of 1784 and 1785, and the Northwest Ordinance, together with similar provisions written directly into the Constitution. No direct proof links these laws with the Iroquois, but it seems likely to be more than mere

coincidence that both the Iroquois and the United States governments enacted such similar procedures.

Although the Iroquois recognized no supreme leader in their system analogous to the president of the United States, the framers of the Constitution deliberately or inadvertently imitated the Great Council in establishing the electoral college system to select a president. Each state legislature selected a group of electors equal in number to that state's combined total of senators and representatives. Like the sachems, each elector then had one vote in the electoral college.

In the two centuries since the Constitution went into effect, some aspects of the system have changed. The voters rather than the state legislatures now elect both the electoral college and the senators through popular vote, but the system preserves the general features of the League of the Iroquois.

Upon election to the council, the new sachem "lost" his name and thenceforth other sachems called him by the title of his office. In much the same way, proceedings of the United States Senate do not permit the use of names such as "Senator Kennedy" or "Rudy Boschwitz." Instead the senators must be addressed by their office title as "the Senior Senator from Massachusetts" or "the Junior Senator from Minnesota." Other titles such as "Majority Leader," "Mr. Chairman," or "Mr. President" may be used, but all personal names remain strictly taboo.

Another imitation of the Iroquois came in the simple practice of allowing only one person to speak at a time in political meetings. This contrasts with the British tradition of noisy interruptions of one another as the members of Parliament shout out agreement or disagreement with the speaker. Europeans were accustomed to shouting down any speaker who displeased them; in some cases they might even stone him or inflict worse damage.

The Iroquois permitted no interruptions or shouting. They even imposed a short period of silence at the end of each oration in case the speaker had forgotten some point or wished to elaborate or change something he had said [Johansen, p. 87]. Even though the American Congress and legislatures did not adopt the practice of silence at the end, they did allow speakers "to revise and extend" the written record after speaking.

The purpose of debate in Indian councils was to persuade and educate, not to confront. Unlike European parliaments, where opposing factions battle out an issue in the public arena, the council of the Indians sought to reach an agreement through compromise. This important difference in nuance led Bruce Burton to observe in his study of American law that "American democracy owes its distinctive character of debate and compromise to the principles and structures of American Indian civil government" [Burton, p. 5]. Still today, this difference separates the operation of the United States Congress and the state legislatures from their European counterparts. American legislative bodies are composed primarily of individuals forming shifting factions from one issue to another, whereas the legislative bodies of Europe operate through opposing political parties that control the votes of individual representatives.

In keeping with Iroquois tradition, Franklin proposed that since the sachems did not own land or receive any financial compensation for their work, the officials of the United States should not be paid. They should perform their work as a sacred trust freely given to the communal welfare. Even though the Founding Fathers did not incorporate this, they did work to prevent property qualifications for holding office and for exercising the right to vote. They also tended to limit salaries paid to officeholders to a minimum to cover basic expenses of life rather than making public office a sinecure or a route to wealth.

In his democratic zeal to imitate the system of the Indians, Franklin even proposed that military officers should be elected by the men whom they ordered into battle. The Indians routinely fought this way, and Franklin organized such a militia himself in 1747 to protect Philadelphia from harassment by French and Dutch pirates. Even though the American army did not adopt the practice of electing officers, it gradually abandoned the European practice of allowing the purchase of commissions by the wealthy. The American system did allow for mobility within the ranks and prevented the officer corps of the army from resembling too closely an aristocratic class as in Europe or an oligarchy as in many Latin American nations.

The League of the Iroquois operated with only a single chamber in its council. Franklin became an ardent supporter of this uni-

cameral organization, and he even wanted to use the English translation of the Iroquois term meaning "grand council" rather than the Latinism "congress." The United States government relied on only a single chamber during the years of the Continental Congress, and some states, such as Pennsylvania and Vermont, reduced their state legislatures to unicameral bodies for a while. The unicameral congress and legislature, however, did not endure, and today only Nebraska has a unicameral legislature, instituted to save money and not to emulate the Iroquois.

In addition to Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Charles Thomson, many of the Founding Fathers of American federalism had worked closely with the Indian political institutions. George Washington had extensive contacts with the Indians in his surveying expeditions into the western part of Virginia and fought with Indians and against Indians in the French and Indian War. Washington showed a greater interest in land speculation and making money than in observing the political life of the Indians. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, also lived close to the frontier, and he himself was the son of a pioneer. He studied and wrote numerous articles and essays on the Indians, leading a later historian to call Jefferson "the most enlightened of amateur ethnologists" [Commager, p. 179]. In his recommendations for the University of Virginia, he became the first person to propose a systematic ethnological study of the Indians in order "to collect their traditions, laws, customs, languages and other circumstances" [Jefferson, p. 151].

Because of men such as Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Thomson, and Thomas Jefferson, we today know a great deal about the League of the Iroquois and some of the other Indian groups of the eastern United States. Subsequent years of ethnological research into the political organizations of the New World have shown that the League of the Iroquois seems representative of political institutions throughout all of America north of Mexico and much of Central and South America as well. Councils chosen by the clans, tribes, or villages governed most Indian nations.

From Hollywood films and adventure novels Americans often conclude that strong chiefs usually commanded the Indian tribes. More often, however, as in the case of the Iroquois, a council

ruled, and any person called the "head" of the tribe usually occupied a largely honorary position of respect rather than power. Chiefs mostly played ceremonial and religious roles rather than political or economic ones. Unlike the words "caucus" and "powwow," which are Indian-derived and indicative of Indian political traditions, the word "chief" is an English word of French origin that British officials tried to force onto Indian tribes in order that they might have someone with whom to trade and sign treaties.

In Massachusetts the British tried to make one leader into King Philip. The British imputed monarchy to the Indian system when no such institution existed. Thus while the English settlers learned from the Indians how to speak and act in group councils, they simultaneously pushed the Indians toward a monarchical and thus less democratic system.

We see the same collective system in the early 1500s in the pueblos of the southwest when one of Francisco Coronado's soldiers wrote that the Zuni had no chiefs "but are ruled by a council of the oldest men" whom they called *papas*. The Zuni word *papa* means "elder brother," and each clan probably elected its *papa* the way the Iroquois clans elected their sachems.

Even the Aztecs' government conformed to this pattern. They divided themselves into twenty *calpulli* or corporate clans, each of which owned property in common. Each *calpulli* elected a number of administrative officers to oversee the administration of property and law within its clan, and they elected a *tlatoani*, literally a "speaker," who functioned as the representative of the *calpulli* to the outside world. All the *tlatoani* met together to form the supreme council of the nation, and they elected the supreme speaker, or *huey-tlatoani*, an office with life tenure. By the time the Spanish arrived, this highest office of the nation had been reserved for a single family, but the council decided who within that family would have the office. The Spanish assumed that the Aztec system was like their own system or like that of their neighbors the Moors; they translated *huey-tlatoani* as "emperor" and called the *tlatoani* the "nobles" of the empire. Moctezuma, the Aztec leader captured by Hernando Cortés, held office as the supreme speaker of the Aztec nation, not as its emperor.

This Aztec system was no more of a democracy or a federal union because of these councils than was the Holy Roman Empire, which also had a council to elect its emperor from one family. Still, in the Aztec system we can see the outlines of a political format common throughout the Americas and in many ways closer to our democratic system in the United States today than to the systems of Europe of that time. The difference in the Aztec system and a European monarchy appeared most clearly when the Aztec people removed Moctezuma from office after the Spaniards captured him. The people even stoned him when he tried to persuade them to acquiesce to the Spanish. The Spaniards had expected the people to revere and obey their "emperor" no matter what, but they assumed erroneously that Moctezuma held the same power over the Aztec people that the Spanish king held over themselves.

The depth of democratic roots among North American Indian groups shows clearly in the detailed study of the Yaqui by historian Evelyn Hu-DeHart. Living in the present-day states of Sonora and Sinaloa of northwestern Mexico just south of the Apaches of Arizona, the Yaquis coaxed a livelihood from this desert setting through hunting and simple agriculture. In July 1739 the Yaquis sent two emissaries named Muni and Bernabe to Mexico City for a rare audience with the Spanish viceroy to plead for free elections of their own government administrators in place of the Jesuits appointed over them. After 1740 the government allowed the Yaquis to elect their own captain general as head of their tribe, but the government still sought to exercise control over the Yaquis through clerical and civilian administrators [Hu-DeHart, p. 17]. Thus in the wilds of Mexico a full generation before the Revolution in the English colonies of North America, we see evidence of the Indians demanding the franchise and free elections in order to maintain their traditional political values.

In almost every North American tribe, clan, or nation for which we have detailed political information, the supreme authority rested in a group rather than in an individual. It took many generations of close interaction between colonists and Indians before the principles of group decision-making replaced the European traditions of relying on a single supreme authority. The

importance of these Indian councils and groups shows clearly in the English lack of words to explain such a process.

One of the most important political institutions borrowed from the Indians was the caucus. Even though the word appears to be proper Latin and some law students with a semester of Latin occasionally decline the plural as *cauci*, the word comes from the Algonquian languages. The caucus permits informal discussion of an issue without necessitating a yea or nay vote on any particular question. This agreed with the traditional Indian way of talking through an issue or of making a powwow; it made political decisions less divisive and combative. The caucus became a mainstay of American democracy both in the Congress and in political and community groups all over the country. The caucus evolved into such an important aspect of American politics that the political parties adopted it to nominate their presidential candidates. In time this evolved into the political convention, which still functions as an important part of contemporary American politics but is largely absent from European politics.

Not all the Founding Fathers showed interest in Indian political traditions. They turned instead toward models such as the British Parliament and some of the Greek and Italian city-states. Many of them had been deeply trained in classic literature, in ways that Franklin and Paine had not been trained, and they sought to incorporate the classic notions of democracy and republicanism into the new nation.

Often this proved to be a tricky undertaking, for the ancient Greeks observed democracy far more in the breach than in its enactment. The Greeks who rhapsodized about democracy in their rhetoric rarely created democratic institutions. A few cities such as Athens occasionally attempted a system vaguely akin to democracy for a few years. These cities functioned as slave societies and were certainly not egalitarian or democratic in the Indian sense. Most of the respected political thinkers of Greece despised democracy both theoretically and in practice. The people of Athens executed Socrates during one of their democratic eras because he had conspired with the oligarchs to destroy democracy. On the other hand, Plato favored rule by a philosopher-king and even went to Syracuse to help the tyrant Dionysius rule.

In the United States, the southerners identified much more closely with the ideals of Greek democracy based on massive slavery than with Iroquois democracy, which did not permit slavery. As historian Vernon Parrington wrote, the "dream of a Greek civilization based on black slavery was discovered in the bottom of the cup of southern romanticism" [Parrington, p. 130].

Carolínians, Georgians, and Virginians identified so closely with the so-called democracies of Greece that they considered the south to be a virtual reincarnation or at least renaissance of Greek life. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, southerners had created a virtual Greek cult as an intellectual bulwark to protect their way of life. European romantics such as Lord Byron and John Keats flirted with Greek aesthetics, but the Europeans quickly dropped them in favor of a more personal form of romanticism.

The American south, however, embraced everything Greek. The southern gentleman with his leisurely life of relaxation in the study, friendly conversation in the parlor, fine meals in the dining room, courting in the ballroom, and hunting in the forest identified closely with the good life of Greek literature. At least a passing acquaintance with the Greek and Latin languages became the true mark of a gentleman in the south, and the Greek ideal of a sound mind in a sound body became the creed of the southern leisure class. Southerners wrote poems in mock-Greek style and wrote letters in a classical form. In their excess they even gave their house slaves, horses, and hunting dogs names such as Cicero, Athena, Cato, Pericles, Homer, Apollo, and Nero.

They adorned their plantations with Greek names, and even built their homes in the style of Greek temples. Greek architecture prevailed so widely in the South that today the stereotyped image of a plantation house includes Corinthian columns in Greek Revival style. In their gardens they built gazebos that were styled after Greek shrines, and they set Greek statues out among the magnolia trees and the palms. Even the churches of the south added porticos and rows of columns to their fronts, topped off by very un-Greek steeples.

In making itself over in the Greek image, America neglected a major part of its democratic roots in the long house of the Iroquois and the humble caucus of the Algonquians in favor of the ostentatious props and models looted from the classical Med-

iterranean world. For almost the whole first century of American independence this Greek architecture and Greek oratory helped to disguise the fact that the nation was based on slavery, an institution that could never be compatible with democracy no matter how much that architectural and verbal edifice tried to cover it.

Prior to this Greek cult, most government buildings in America had been built in a very simple style, as in the state capitol of Massachusetts, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, or the government buildings of colonial Williamsburg. But with the rise of the Greek cult in the south, government architects moved away from the simple Federal style to make public buildings appear Greek. At the height of this classical obsession the United States government began work on a new Capitol. The Senate chamber took the form of a small Greek amphitheater covered in excessive classical ornaments, while the House of Representatives crowned itself with a large clock encased in a sculpture of Clio, the muse of history, riding in her winged chariot and recording the historic events below her.

Although the Greek cult spread out of the south, New Englanders never embraced it very fondly. For them mystic philosophies such as Transcendentalism, often accompanied by ideas of liberty and abolition of slavery, seemed far more alluring. For them the existence of slavery at the foundations of democracy bastardized the whole system.

Even in the south the Greek cult did not reign as the only intellectual and social fashion. In stark contrast to this indulgence of the rich, the black population and the poor whites embraced a strict form of Old Testament fundamentalism closely associated with Moses, the liberator of the slaves, and of New Testament salvation focused on a very personal savior and protector.

Meanwhile in the west the process of learning democracy through experience of the frontier and Indians continued without regard to the supposed classical models. Even after the founding of the United States, the Indians continued to play a significant role in the evolution of democracy because of their sustained interactions with Americans on the frontier. The frontiersmen constantly reinvented democracy and channeled it into the eastern establishment of the United States.

Time and again the people of the frontier rebelled against the entrenched and conservative values of an ever more staid coastal elite. As the frontier gradually moved westward, the settlements on the edge sent such rebels as Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, David Crockett, and Abraham Lincoln back to reinvest the spirit of democracy into the political institutions of the east. Some of these men, such as Sam Houston, lived for long periods with Indians. Houston spent so much time with the Cherokee that they adopted him into their nation about 1829. The influence of the Cherokees stayed with him throughout his tenure as president of Texas from 1836 to 1838 and again from 1841 to 1844. Throughout his life he maintained close working relations with a variety of Indian nations and a strong commitment to liberty.

Even Alexis de Tocqueville, who denigrated the achievements of the Indians, noticed that the settlers on the frontier "mix the ideas and customs of savage life with the civilization of their fathers." In general he found this reprehensible, for it made their "passions more intense" and "their religious morality less authoritative" [Tocqueville, Vol. I, p. 334], but these traits certainly may be interpreted by others as among the virtues of a democratic people.

Most democratic and egalitarian reforms of the past two hundred years in America originated on the frontier and not in the settled cities of the east. The frontier states dropped property and religious requirements for voters. They extended the franchise to women, and in 1916 Montana elected Jeannette Rankin as the first woman in Congress four years before the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote. The western states started the public election of senators in place of selection by the legislature. They also pioneered the use of primary elections and electoral recalls of unpopular officers. Even today they have more elective offices, such as judges; such offices in the east are usually filled by appointment by the governor or the legislature. This strong bias toward the electoral process and equal votes for all has been reinforced repeatedly by the people who have had the closest and the longest connections with the Indians on the frontier.

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The final extension of the federal principles used in the Iroquois Nation and later in the formation of the United States came in 1918 with establishment of the League of Nations. The framers of this new league also chose the Iroquois federal system of allowing each member an equal voice no matter how small or large a country he represented. The same principle underlay creation of the General Assembly of the United Nations a generation later. By ironic coincidence, the founders of this international body located it in New York in the very territory that once belonged to the League of the Iroquois. In one respect the United Nations was an international version of that Indian league.

Washington, D.C., has never recognized the role of the Indians in the writing of the United States Constitution or in the creation of political institutions that seem so uniquely American. But an inadvertent memorial does exist. An older woman from Israel pointed this out to me one spring day as I cut across the lawn of the United States Capitol, where I then worked for Senator John Glenn. She stopped me, and in a husky voice asked me who was the Indian woman atop the Capitol dome. Suddenly looking at it through her eyes, I too saw the figure as an Indian even though I knew that it was not.

When the United States government embarked on an expansion of the Capitol in the middle of the nineteenth century, the architects proposed to cap the dome with a symbol of freedom. They chose for this a nineteen-foot bronze statue of a Roman woman who would stand on the pinnacle of the Capitol. Sculptor Thomas Crawford crowned the woman with a Phrygian cap, which in Roman history had been the sign of the freed slave. At that time Jefferson Davis, the future president of the Confederate States of America, still served as the secretary of war for the United States, and he objected strongly to what he interpreted as an antisouthern and antislavery symbol. He compelled Crawford to cap her with something less antagonistic to southern politicians. Crawford designed a helmet covered with a crown of feathers, but in putting this headdress on the figure, her whole appearance changed. Now instead of looking like a classical Greek or Roman, she looked like an Indian.

She still stands today on the pseudoclassical Capitol overlooking the city of Washington. The Washington Monument rises to the same height, but no other building has been allowed to rise higher than she. Even though no one intended her to be an Indian, she now reigns as the nearest thing to a monument that Washington ever built to honor the Indians who contributed to the building of a federal union based on democracy.



## RED STICKS AND REVOLUTION



One warm January afternoon, I was driving a Land Rover with some of my students over a virtually impassable road in Guatemala's northeastern province of Petén. We had just entered Guatemala that day from Carmen Viejo del Benque in Belize, where we had spent the previous night in very commodious huts along the Mopán River just below the fortified Mayan ruins of Xunantunich. We were exploring the ruins but also visiting various contemporary villages of Kekchi and Mopán Maya. Now we were on the way to the unique city called Flores.

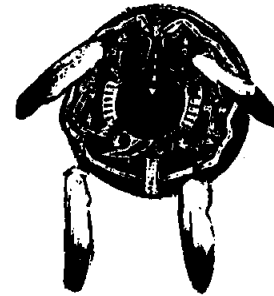
Flores sits on an island in the middle of Lake Petén-Itzá, and its roughly two thousand inhabitants go to the mainland by boat or by a thin causeway about a mile in length. Foreigners sometimes visit the city because it is only an hour's drive from Tikal, the classical Maya site that flourished from A.D. 300 to 900, and which is in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by spider monkeys, parrots, jaguars, oscillated turkeys, and the poisonous fer-de-lance known locally as *barba amarilla*, "yellow beard."

Lake Petén-Itzá had another significance for us, however, because on its shore stood Tayasal, the last American Indian city to fall to the Europeans. Mayan refugees from the Yucatecan city of Chichén Itzá founded Tayasal long after Tikal had been abandoned. Protected by the remote location and the thick jungle of Petén, it did not succumb to the Spanish rule until 1697, when

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Despite some significant achievements by the Incas in road and bridge construction, the Americans had not developed very diverse transportation technology. The Old World systems showed a much wider array of travel techniques using a variety of animals and contraptions as well as oceangoing vehicles. As in the case of architecture, Indian transportation systems offered little to the remainder of the world.

It should be equally clear that every explorer, conquistador, and settler who arrived in America used the existing transportation systems, which proved well suited for their needs and the requirements of the terrain and climate. Despite the many self-serving and self-glorifying accounts of brave adventures written by white explorers and pioneers, America was by no stretch of the imagination an overgrown continent through which the Europeans had to hack their way searching for new settlements. Over tens of thousands of years, Indians had already opened the land, built roads or paths, and developed a system of canoes and small boats to reach every corner and crevice of the Americas from the Bering Straits to Tierra del Fuego.

## WHEN WILL AMERICA BE DISCOVERED?



The old Yuqui woman jerked her head up toward me and stared blindly into my face. As flies crawled across her eyes and drank from the only moist place left on her body, her left hand scratched habitually at the lice and filth encrusted into her hair. No one knew her age, but she was the oldest survivor of a band of Yuquis living in the rain forest of the southern Amazon region. Most of her life she had wandered through the forest with her fellow Yuquis following the same culture as unknown generations had done before them. She had lived most of her life without knowledge of whites or other outsiders except that they lurked on the edges of her forest world. Like the evil spirits of the dead, the whites brought disease and death to the Yuquis, the real people.

Not until 1968 did her band make its first contact with a white, when the Protestant missionaries Bob and Mary Garland arrived in their world. In time the small band settled around the base camp of the missionaries on the Chimore River, and they wandered less and less to hunt. Anthropologist Allyn Stearman raced to record their way of life as it dissolved around her. The missionaries taught them to grow a few crops and helped them to hunt more efficiently and to use canoes. They taught them to make fire so that they would no longer have to raid another band each time their fire was lost, and they helped the women in

childbirth rather than letting them disappear alone into the jungle to bear their babies as had been their tradition.

Had this woman not been contacted by the missionaries she most assuredly would have been dead long before I came across her. If the lumbermen had not captured or killed her in their periodic shootouts with the Yuquis, then perhaps the coca growers or the ranchers would have seized her in a raid and made her a cook and prostitute for the mestizo workers. Even if she had been spared all of these indignities from outsiders and managed to live alone with her band, the group would have deserted her along the trail as soon as she became too ill to travel. As nomads who traveled strictly by foot, they never developed the knowledge of how to deal with the infirm or elderly. Anyone unable to walk through the jungle was left to die alone.

Now she sits deserted all day beneath a mosquito net in her hut wrapped in a filthy rag of a dress. She lost her sight, her hearing deteriorated, and she grew too weak to walk or crawl. Gradually she became deranged and delirious. The missionaries feed her and care for her most basic needs, but her own relatives who live nearby have no idea what to do for her. In their harsh jungle life, they never had to minister to anyone like this.

When I appeared at her net with the missionary, her bony hand reached out, groping for food. She clutched my arm, and her jagged fingernails scratched my hand as her cool but dry skin rubbed against mine with a sound like sandpaper against bark. She mumbled a few words that were incoherent to me, but the missionary said she was just naming foods and uttering the names of relatives, some living and some dead. Finally in defeat, she withdrew her hand, her jaw dropped, oblivious to the gnats crawling in and out of her mouth, and she seemed to return to the stupor and the scratching that occupied most of her dying weeks.

There was nothing heroic about the poor old woman. She was now at the end of her days, and all she sought was another morsel of food, some water, and some relief from the heat and the insects that plagued her now as they had all her life. Like so many Indians today from Canada to Chile, she seemed to be the truly wretched of the earth, the abandoned, the abused, the suffering who merited nothing but pity or charity from outsiders.

She lay dying as a miserable outcast from the contemporary American society that had gradually and persistently consumed her land over the past five hundred years.

This dying woman contrasted painfully with the image of the Indians as the world's greatest farmers and pharmacists, as the noble savage of Rousseau or the practical administrators who inspired Benjamin Franklin. I could not help but wonder why, if these people were really so great, they had fallen so low and been so oppressed. If they could build great cities and roads, why couldn't they defend themselves from the waves of Europeans who washed across their land?

Even though the Indian civilizations surpassed the Old World in a few areas, they lagged behind in others. The Indians developed superior agricultural skills and technology, and they surpassed the Old World in their pharmacology. They had far more sophisticated calendars than the Europeans, and the Indians of Mexico had a mathematical system based on place numbers superior to the numerical systems then in use by the Spaniards.

In their exhaustive attention to agriculture, medicine, mathematics, and religion, the Indians neglected the domestication of animals, which proved so decisive for the Old World civilizations. Because farmers in Europe, Asia, and Africa were so much less efficient in growing crops, they relied extensively on eggs, milk, cheese, and dozens of other animal products as well as on the meat of these animals. This made their Old World diet no better than that of the Americans, but it gave the people who domesticated animals a distinct advantage in that they easily learned to harness animal energy in place of human energy. The Europeans arrived in America with strong horses to help men in battle as well as oxen to pull heavy carts laden with supplies and cows and goats to give protein-rich milk to marching armies of soldiers and later to hordes of settlers.

The Indians built an elaborate civilization on human energy, but the Old World had thoroughly exploited animal energy sources that helped them in their endeavors. Additionally, the people of the Old World had begun tapping inanimate energy sources in ways that foreshadowed the coming industrial revolution. The sophisticated use of ships and sails, of windmills and waterwheels,

and of cannons and gunpowder gave them a decisive advantage over the Indians.

All of these skills made the invaders better soldiers and gave them better instruments of war. Indian metallurgy lacked the variety of the Old World's and was directed mostly toward decoration rather than tools of production or war. The European invaders, however, had learned to make steel into swords and lances and to cast metal cannons, which they mounted on wheels to be pulled by animals. The Indians still fought with arrows and spears tipped with stone, and they had no war machine more sophisticated than a simple atlatl or spear thrower.

Together with their animals and machines, the Europeans brought horrendous epidemic diseases that had been unknown to the New World. These diseases traveled through the Indian population faster than through the European. By the time the Europeans arrived in Tenochtitlán or Cuzco or on the plains of North America, their microbes had preceded them and thoroughly decimated and weakened the native population.

The Indian civilizations crumbled in the face of the Old World not because of any intellectual or cultural inferiority. They simply succumbed in the face of disease and brute strength. While the American Indians had spent millennia becoming the world's greatest farmers and pharmacists, the people of the Old World had spent a similar period amassing the world's greatest arsenal of weapons. The strongest, but not necessarily the most creative or the most intelligent, won the day.

The inevitable defeat of Indian groups such as the Yuqui seemed so overwhelming and so final that in the process we have overlooked the contributions that they made to the world. They mined the gold and silver that made capitalism possible. Working in the mines and mints and in the plantations with the African slaves, they started the industrial revolution that then spread to Europe and on around the world. They supplied the cotton, rubber, dyes, and related chemicals that fed this new system of production. They domesticated and developed the hundreds of varieties of corn, potatoes, cassava, and peanuts that now feed much of the world. They discovered the curative powers of quinine, the anesthetizing ability of coca, and the potency of a thousand other drugs, which made possible modern medicine and pharmacology.

The drugs together with their improved agriculture made possible the population explosion of the last several centuries. They developed and refined a form of democracy that has been haphazardly and inadequately adopted in many parts of the world. They were the true colonizers of America who cut the trails through the jungles and deserts, made the roads, and built the cities upon which modern America is based.

Over the past five hundred years, human beings have sculpted a new worldwide society, a new political and economic order as well as a new demographic and agricultural order. Indians played the decisive roles in each step to create this new society. Sometimes they acted as prime movers, other times they played equal roles with a set of actors, and sometimes they were mere victims. But in all cases they acted as necessary although not sufficient causes. Somewhere in the telling of modern history, the writing of the novels, the construction of textbooks and instructional programs, attention drifted away from the contribution of the Indians to the heroic stories of explorers and conquistadores, the moral lessons of missionaries, the political struggles of the colonists, the great and impersonal movements of European history, the romance of the cowboy. The modern world order came to be viewed as the product of European, not American, history. The Americans became bit players, and only their role as pathetic victims remained visible.

The Indians, such as the woman crouched before me, disintegrated into peripheral people. They became little more than beggars on the world scene, pleading for food, for the redress of land and treaty rights, for some attention. In ignoring the Indian cultures, however, we are doing far more than merely slighting the American Indians of their earned place in history. We may be hurting ourselves because of what we have all lost.

In staring at that ancient woman from the time before the white man came, I could not help but wonder what practical knowledge we were losing with her impending death. Through grubbing in the woods did she know of some plant that might serve as a key to feeding the starving masses in the tropics? From poking in ponds and bogs did she know of a concoction that might cure multiple sclerosis? From countless nights under the stars did she know of some weather-forecasting device that we had missed, or

did she know something about the anatomy of the night birds that helped them to see through the dark? Had she incorporated something into her diet that prevented stomach cancer? Did her language have the capacity to express some idea more easily than ours, or could it help in the writing of new computer codes? She lived in an environment that few people in the world have ever been able to survive. What knowledge did she have that made that possible? How did she survive for so long in a place that would kill most of us within days? Soon after my visit the old woman died, and now we may never know.

When she died a treasure of information went with her, for she was one of the last Yuquis to live their traditional life. In losing her and the Yuqui culture, we lose more than just a small band of people. We lose a whole world view, for each culture creates the world in a different way with unique knowledge, unique words, and unique understandings. While most of this cultural knowledge may be of no importance to us today, we have no idea what value it may yet hold for our children in generations to come. For centuries our ancestors saw no value in the potato or rubber or the Huron concoction of vitamin C to cure scurvy, but in time all of these came to have important roles to play.

The world has yet to utilize fully the gifts of the American Indians. Hundreds of plants such as amaranth and quinoa are hardly even known, much less fully utilized. Who knows how many more plants might be out there waiting to serve humans? We still do not understand the complex mathematical systems of the Mayas and the sophisticated geometric science of the Aztecs. Who knows what completely different systems of computation and calculation now lie buried in the adobe of Arizona or beneath the rocks of Inkallajta? The civilizations of Mexico and Guatemala developed a more accurate calendar than the one used in Europe, but it took decades of work for us to understand its superiority. Who knows what additional knowledge they had about the stars, the planets, the comets, and who knows how much knowledge still lies locked in the stone monuments yet to be discovered in the jungles of Guatemala or Belize?

We often know even less about the millions of American Indians surviving today, speaking their language and preserving at least

some of their traditional cultural knowledge. The Quechuas of Bolivia, the Crees of Canada, the Guaranis of Paraguay, the Yanomamos of Venezuela, the Hopis of the United States, the Zapotecs of Mexico, the Sumus of Nicaragua, the Guajiros of Colombia, the Shuars of Ecuador, the Mayas of Guatemala, the Cunas of Panama, the Shavantes of Brazil, and a thousand other Indian nations are not dead. They are only ignored.

In the five hundred years since Columbus's voyage to America, the people of the world have benefited greatly from the American Indians, but the world may have lost even more than it gained. Some information that died with the old Yuqui woman and with the hundreds of exterminated tribes, nations, and cities may be lost forever. Some of it may be retrieved by coming generations of scholars who have the opportunity to study our past. Sadly, however, we know much more about the building of the pyramids of Egypt, thousands of miles and years from us, than we know about the pyramid builders of the Mississippi. We know more about the language of the long-gone Hittites than we do about the still-living Quechua speakers descended from the Incas. We know more about the poetry of the ancient Chinese than about the poems of the Nahuatls. We can decipher the clay tablets of Mesopotamia better than we can the stone tablets of Mesoamerica. We understand the medical practices of ancient Babylon better than those of the living Dakotas. We understand more about the interbreeding of the Angles and the Saxons than we do about the mixing of the Indians in America with the European and African immigrants. We know more about the Greeks' mythological tribe of Amazons than we know about the dying Yuquis of the Amazon. The history and culture of America remains a mystery, still *terra incognita* after five hundred years.

Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492, but America has yet to be discovered.