

## **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND THE LEAGUE OF THE HAUDENOSAUNEE**

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**B**enjamin Franklin is well known for a stunningly diverse array of contributions. Most widely remembered, perhaps, are his clever turns of phrase, many of them originally published in *Poor Richard's Almanac* and later incorporated into American culture as the very apotheosis of wise sayings (and, by now, the most overworked of literary clichés). He is known as a publisher, an inventor, and a shaper of political thought, through his writings and his diplomatic undertakings, both on the North American continent and in Europe. More broadly, he is remembered as a leader of the Enlightenment and a major contributor not only to scientific practice but, especially in his work on electricity, to the development of scientific theory.

Less well remembered, at least until recent decades, or at least less emphasized in popular accounts of Franklin and his contributions, is the extent to which his own social and political thought was shaped by contacts with and knowledge of ancient aboriginal traditions. Indeed, a strong case can be made that key features of the social structure eventually outlined in the United States Constitution arose not from European sources, and not full-grown from the

foreheads of European-American «founding fathers», but from aboriginal sources, communicated to a significant extent through Franklin.

In what follows, a brief sketch of the main argument will be offered: the Constitution developed, in several of its key elements, from the Articles of Confederation before it. The Articles, in turn, had grown out of roots established originally in Franklin's «Albany Plan of Union» of 1754, and these were themselves strongly influenced by the practices and the active encouragement of the League of the Haudenosaunee, referred to by the colonists, following the French, as the «Iroquois League». The idea of a confederation of sovereign independent states under one federal roof for certain limited vital common concerns had no precedent in Europe, and was resisted powerfully in the American colonies. But the case for such a union had been consistently pressed by the Haudenosaunee tribes as a condition for vital co-operation, was adopted by Franklin, and was moved forward gradually in colonial affairs, from its first formal proposal in Albany in 1754 to its ultimate adoption in the Articles of Confederation and U.S. Constitution. While Franklin was not alone, by 1787, in advocating a permanent union of equal sovereign states, he had served throughout the period, going back to his earliest publications of Indian treaties in 1736, as a champion and midwife of this idea. And as Franklin made explicit in many places, one didn't have to go far to see that the idea would work. It had worked for hundreds of years for the Haudenosaunee nations, accomplishing for them exactly the goals desired by the North American English colonies, later to become the several states of the United States of America.

While the influence of aboriginal American social and political life on the development of uniquely American visions and ambitions is manifold, and can be well documented back to the earliest encounters of colonists with natives, Franklin's role in moving this influence to the level of formal acceptance, to the point where it became part of the structure of a new nation, is special. Here is where his diplomatic skills played their most important domestic role. Franklin helped European colonists to learn political lessons that could not have been taught in Europe, at least without the example and influence of native ways.

### *I. First Contacts*

The main lines of interaction between colonists and aboriginal Americans during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century have long been well known to scholars, but not all of what is known has penetrated through to popular consciousness. It is widely understood, for example, that the earliest colonists in New England were given considerable assistance in learning how to cope with their

new environs — help in learning what to plant and when, help in constructing shelters that would fend off the coldest of winter winds, and so forth — by natives they encountered upon arriving in the «new world» at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620. The story, in particular, about the help offered to the Pilgrims by «Squanto» after their first miserable winter is by now part of U.S. folklore, a central component in the story of the «first Thanksgiving» which, in turn, is celebrated as one of the most important U.S. national holidays to this day. The picture of Squanto kneeling on the ground, explaining the proper technique of planting maize, recommending even that the plants be fertilized by burying fish beside the seeds, was engraved on the minds of generations of young history students (to the extent, anyway, that *anything* was engraved on their minds).

What most Americans still don't know, however, is that «Squanto» spoke English when he came out of the woods to greet the colonists for the first time. Indeed, Tisquantum (for that was his real name<sup>1</sup>) had been to Europe at least once — and perhaps twice — for an extended stay, and had seen parts of both Spain and England, before the colonists touched shore at Plymouth. Not only that, but Americans don't generally know either that when the Pilgrims arrived they found entire villages that had been emptied of people, fields that had been cleared and prepared for crops, woodlands that were cleared like parks. Among these empty native villages was Patuxet, Tisquantum's birth place, which the English had named «Plymouth» subsequent to a 1614 exploratory voyage of Captain John Smith of Virginia colonial fame. It was almost as if the ground had been prepared for their arrival. The ultra-religious Pilgrims believed, apparently, that this was precisely so: a benevolent deity had made the land ready for their arrival. All they needed to do was to make themselves worthy of this great beneficence and move in.

Deity or no, the story was a bit more complicated than that. Europeans had been visiting the area around Patuxet/Plymouth since at least 1603, and probably earlier than that. Portuguese explorer Gaspar Corte-Real had already abducted fifty natives or more from Maine in 1501. Interestingly, when Corte-Real looked over his captives, he discovered that two of them wore items — two silver rings and a broken sword — that had unmistakably come from Venice. That was in 1501, just nine years after Columbus's voyage of «discovery». Beyond these earliest documented contacts, it is known that English fishing vessels were certainly working the waters off Newfoundland by at least the 1480s, and almost as certainly must have appeared on the mainland soon after.<sup>2</sup>

Any visits of Europeans to North American shores that early, though, are so far undocumented, accomplished as they would have been by private fishermen rather than formal, government-subsidized voyages of exploration. What is certain is that there had been contact — either direct or indirect — between Euro-

peans and the aboriginal natives of New England before 1501, and this contact continued on and off throughout the sixteenth century. Giovanni da Verrazzano paid a visit in 1523, carting off a boy of about eight years old. In 1603, a British trader named Martin Pring set up a base for his party of forty-four near Patuxet / Plymouth for the purpose of gathering sassafras for a few weeks. In 1605 and 1606, Samuel de Champlain visited Cape Cod. By 1610, England had about two hundred vessels of various kinds working the coasts off Canada and New England. Other European nations — France, Italy, Portugal, Spain — could account for hundreds of other ships in the same waters. By 1610, in other words, fully ten years before the Pilgrims arrived, the coasts and waters off New England were teeming with Europeans and, just as important, with European germs.

Tisquantum in particular, though, was kidnapped into slavery, along with at least nineteen other Patuxet natives, by Thomas Hunt, a lieutenant of Captain William Smith, in 1614. He and his fellow Patuxets were taken to Spain to be sold, together with yet other natives captured along the way on Cape Cod, but by the time his English captors got to Málaga on the Spanish Mediterranean coast, they found that the market for slaves had dried up by edict of the Roman Catholic church. Eventually, Tisquantum persuaded the Spanish priests who had saved him that he should be allowed to try to return home. He managed to make his way to London, where he was taken under the wing of John Slany, a ship-builder who had contacts in the new world. He stayed in Slany's home for several years, learning English and apparently serving as a source of considerable social interest among Slany's friends and peers.<sup>3</sup> In the end, Tisquantum persuaded Slany to help him get back to Newfoundland on a fishing boat. Once there, he was able to make his way home, to Patuxet.

Patuxet, however, had disappeared. Contact with Europeans had, in the years while Tisquantum had been in Europe, finally led to severe epidemic and the near total decimation of the native population in the area around his home village. The entire Wampanoag tribe, of which the residents of Patuxet were a part, had been laid waste. Tiny remnants of survivors could be found here and there, but what had been a relatively thickly populated landscape now had no humans left at all. This was the landscape as the Pilgrims found it in November of 1620. And it was this same, Europeanized «Squanto» who was to greet them, and help them, in the following year.

## *II. Aboriginal Relations with Colonists Before Franklin*

European colonists learned how to live in their new world from the aboriginals who had lived there for centuries before the Pilgrims arrived. The natives,

in turn, learned from the Europeans. There were no social or political monoliths in these interactions: both natives and colonists were fragmented into sub-groups, and as one would expect, opportunities for interaction were multiple, rather than singular. It is easy to remember the wars, in which whole native tribes were wiped out, and in which colonists expanded their dominion in a constant push to the west. It is not so easy to remember that different colonies differed in their approaches to the acquisition of more space, and that different native groups responded differently to the Europeans now in their midst.

While a dominant theme in New England expansion involved military conquest of particular native groups, these conquests often also marked native maneuverings in local tribal conflicts. Throughout the history of early colonial expansion, Europeans had natives by their side as they marched westward. In New England, anyway, the colonists were greeted by tribes already hostile to one another in varying degrees, so that the Europeans were often regarded as potential allies in offensive or defensive wars that had arisen for reasons quite independent of the colonial presence. So colonial groups found themselves facing not a wall of united resistance from native Americans, but rather a quite porous array of different tribes with different agendas. As long as the colonists were united, they could exploit differences among the tribes facing them, forming alliances with some in campaigns against others. But the nature of the European colonists on American soil rapidly undermined the chances of maintaining such solidarity.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, European colonization has expanded all along the Eastern seaboard and well into the Great Lakes. But it wasn't just English. The Dutch dominated the Hudson River valley from Albany in the north down to New Amsterdam in the south. French colonists occupied the St. Lawrence through to bases all along the northern Great Lakes. European ambitions for North American colonies were strong, but they were quite diverse. Even among the English, attitudes toward natives were sharply divided. In most of New England, for example, it seems to have been commonly believed that land rightfully belonged to those who were willing to till the soil and make it productive. Natives, who seemed less committed to whacking down forests to increase crop production, were therefore not regarded as having rightful title to the land, so there was nothing wrong, in many colonial minds, with moving them off it in order to make the land more productive.

In Rhode Island, though, the attitude of Roger Williams and his followers was importantly different. Williams contended that the land did belong to the natives, and that only purchase or other contractual agreement could legitimately pass title from the natives to others. Farther south, in Pennsylvania, the followers of William Penn in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century made the same case.

Attitudes of the several different European tribes toward the natives they were confronting — natives who were themselves arrayed in similarly different tribes — thus varied immensely from place to place on the continent.

Add to this the fact that as more and more Europeans pored into America, it became less and less likely that *any* governing authority could represent «the colonists» in negotiations with the equally diverse native tribes. The situation seemed quite chaotic not only to traditional European observers, but to the colonists and to the natives themselves. Treaties agreed to in one place were freely ignored in other places. No colony felt bound to comply with what any other colony had negotiated, no native tribe felt bound by contracts entered into with any other, and few of the individuals on either side felt completely bound by anything. In particular: even where a particular tribe could establish a particular treaty relationship with some particular colony, no treaty or agreement seemed effective in preventing particular violations by particular colonists. Similarly, treaties agreed to by tribal elders did not always constrain particular tribal members. The difficulty was felt — and remarked on — by participants on all sides.

By the eighteenth century European colonies were pushing west from colonial bases along the entire eastern seaboard. Interactions were many between the different colonies and different native tribes, but by the time the English had pushed the Dutch out of Albany and New Amsterdam in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and by the time Pennsylvania had begun to feel the need to expand its own boundaries to the north and west, a new and different reality was encountered. While the colonists had faced more or less enduring alliances of native tribes before, they now encountered something quite different west of Albany and north of Philadelphia. They encountered a large, ancient, and stable nation, comprised not of loosely-knit ephemeral alliances of tribes, but a solid, self-confident union. They were confronted, in short, with something never seen before in European experience: a strong confederacy of otherwise autonomous tribes, one that had held together against other native tribes for hundreds of years. This powerful force had been named the «Iroquois League» by the French, but they called themselves the Haudenosaunee Confederation.<sup>4</sup>

### *III. The Haudenosaunee*

The Haudenosaunee Confederation, or Iroquois League, had existed in what is now north-central New York for what may have amounted to several hundred years by the time they were first encountered by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries. Historians are not unanimous about when the Confederation actually came into existence, with estimated dates varying from 1142 to 1536<sup>5</sup>. But there

is no doubt that it was well established by 1776, when the European-American colonists finally made formal moves toward separation from English rule, or by 1777, when the Articles of Confederation were adopted by the Second Continental Congress, or by 1789, when the now liberated colonies began their new, united existence as a nation, under the U.S. Constitution. Even if the latest date for the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederation were accurate, therefore (which would appear to be fairly dubious, given the weight of evidence for an earlier origin), it was older by the time the European-Americans formed their new nation than that nation is now.

By all accounts, however, the Confederation was formed at a time of great strife — perhaps lasting many generations — among the five tribes that finally agreed to unite under a single «Great Law of Peace». The tribes in question were the Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Cayuga, whose collective domain extended through most of what is now central New York State and exerted powerful military, diplomatic and economic influence well beyond its acknowledged boundaries.

As the traditional story goes<sup>6</sup>, the rationale for the union was basically Hobbesian: to attempt to put aside the severe antagonism that had yielded non-stop war and misery over a lengthy period of time and to lay the groundwork for an environment in which human productivity and happiness could be facilitated. The difficulty for the five tribes was just as Hobbesian: none was willing to surrender autonomy to any great degree, and none was willing to lay down its arms unless assured that all others did too. The fact that these five tribes were not alone in their world — there were other outlying tribes whose antagonism could be expected to continue unabated even if some kind of agreement were accomplished among the five — further aggravated the problem.

The solution, in the end, was an elaborate arrangement in which very few matters, apart from prevention of internal warfare, collective defense, and promotion of cooperation and trade, were to be settled at the level of the Confederation. All other matters were to be handled, as they had been before, by the individual tribes at a local level. Furthermore, all matters that actually came before the «national» confederate body required close consultation among all levels of organization, and action could not be taken in any matter without consensus. All of this was codified in a «Great Law» which, because it could not be written down, was carefully embodied in ritual and tradition, to be acted out and repeated in all of its grand detail on a regular basis from the time of the initial agreement to (as it happens) the present. The Haudenosaunee Confederation continues to exist to this day — some call it the world's oldest continuous democratic republic — albeit in considerably diminished form.

The original idea, though, was of a union fashioned in the face of a real alternative state of war of all tribes against all. The powers of the Confederation were strictly limited to matters on which the five tribes could reach agreement. All other matter were left to the individual tribes themselves. Not only did this arrangement facilitate internal peace and trade, but it made of the Confederation a powerful force in the world around them. The Confederation explicitly reached out its hand to other tribes for friendship, offering them the prospect of strong mutual defense alliances and lucrative trade opportunities. But the offer was not made without a tacit threat: the Confederation soon became a powerful military force in the region, both in defensive and offensive terms. Tribes beyond the Confederation which chose to refuse the alliance offered them could foresee being at perpetual war (where war, a la Hobbes, is measured by a continuing disposition to do battle, if not indicated by battle at every moment) with an extremely mighty opponent. Many contingent alliances were formed over the life of the Haudenosaunee Confederation, and its influence extended well beyond its immediate territory<sup>7</sup>.

Records on both native and European sides indicate that Jacques Cartier encountered the Haudenosaunee in his voyages to the St. Lawrence River region between 1534 and 1541, in what was at the time described to Cartier as the era of the thirty-third lifetime chief of the Confederation. Cartier appears to have abducted an important Haudenosaunee chieftain in the course of his second visit, in 1536, which made the natives somewhat reluctant to welcome him and the colonists he brought from France in 1541. The five nations, by this early time already fully at war with Cartier and his entourage because of the abduction and other affronts, drove the would-be French colony out by 1543. By 1714, the Tuscarora, a tribe that had moved north from the Carolinas to escape invasion and persecution at the hands of European colonists there, sought protection from the Haudenosaunee. The tribe was in due course incorporated into the Confederation as a kind of non-voting protectorate, and the five tribes thus became six.

By the 1720s, colonial expansion had pushed out from New England well west of the Hudson, to the eastern border of Haudenosaunee territory, and the Confederation was equally encountering pressure on its southern boundary, as Pennsylvania's colonists pushed to the west and north. While the Haudenosaunee's northern boundary was well marked by what is now called Lake Ontario, the (now) Six Nations still also had to deal with the French both in the northeast, along the St. Lawrence River, and to the northwest, along the Niagara frontier. The intrinsic power of the Confederation meant that the six nations were no easy mark for colonial expansion, and were, indeed, respected and courted by the colonists on all sides as important trading partners, as potential

buffers and allies in continuing conflict between the British and French, and, unified as they were into a Confederation, as a possibly dangerous potential enemy. Contact between the Haudenosaunee and the colonists proved fruitful in another, less tangible way, as well: the six nation Confederation served as an empirically successful model for possible emulation by the thirteen English colonies, as they began to reflect on the difficulties created by their own relative estrangement from one another.

In the course of the colonial period, many agreements and treaties were forged between the Haudenosaunee nations and the several English colonies. Indeed, such agreements were of intense interest on both sides. Both the English and French hoped to persuade the Haudenosaunee to help them advance their interests against the other. English colonies on all sides hoped not only to secure trade and military cooperation with the Confederation, but to bargain for territorial concessions to support their own expansion into territories claimed by the natives.

The Haudenosaunee, concerned first and foremost, as always, with defense of their own common interests, saw both opportunity and danger in forging cooperative alliances with the Europeans on their borders. They were naturally frustrated, though, even when inclined to try to work out some such arrangements, by the rather wide assortment of negotiating partners they were forced to deal with. The difference between French and English negotiating partners was easy enough to understand and was, indeed, quite welcome: competition between England and France raised considerably the potential market value of Haudenosaunee cooperation to both. But dealings with the English were especially difficult to comprehend. Confederation negotiators could, for example, make an agreement with officials of colonies on their eastern boundary, only to discover that this agreement was not considered binding by any other English colony. Worse, they found that agreements made with colonial officials were not always effectively enforced by the colonial governments, so that individual colonists still felt free to make incursions into native territories without restriction or penalty from any colonial authority. Treaty meetings between colonists and representatives of the Haudenosaunee were frequently punctuated by complaints from the natives to the effect that the colonists ought to get their act together, accompanied by pointed lectures on how fruitful the Haudenosaunee's own confederation had been, since antiquity, in resolving problems of disunity on their side.

By 1720, one hundred years after the establishment of the first successful European colonies along the northeastern seaboard, European interest in the ways of life of indigenous Americans was at a high point on both sides of the Atlantic. Books commenting on such matters had actually been extremely successful during the whole period since 1492, when American natives had begun to be abducted to

Europe and shown off there, but the colonial period, in which Europeans in the Americas had had to interact quite closely with the natives, had raised European interest to a fever pitch. This lively interest grew from 1620 on, punctuated by such especially significant moments as Roger Williams' return visit to England in 1643, when his extremely positive reports about native American customs and demeanor seem to have influenced significantly the political thought of the time<sup>8</sup>. It is no coincidence that the «state of nature» of humanity became a staple of political philosophy during this period, in so far as the American experience with people and social arrangements heretofore unknown encouraged reflection on how European social and political institutions came to be, and on what might justify them. English thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke could disagree on just how bad things would be if Europeans hadn't come up with «civil society», but native Americans provided both philosophers — together with Jean Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx 100 and 200 years later — with prime images of how things could or would be in its absence.

By 1720, though, things had reached an important landmark. European colonies were pushing to the west, French and English competition in the New World was heating up, and the Haudenosaunee Confederation, with its ancient «Great Law» institutions, stood precisely in the middle of all this, for better or for worse.

In 1727, Cadwallader Colden published the first edition of his influential *History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New York in America*<sup>9</sup>, which he claimed was the first account of its kind in English (he referenced French predecessors, though). While Colden described his subjects as «barbarian» because of such things as their practice of torturing captives, he also portrayed them as having a kind of noble genius, especially in what he perceived to be their fervor for the general principle of liberty. His overall impression, in fact, was that contact with Europeans had tended to make the natives worse in character, rather than better. This book became extremely influential on both sides of the Atlantic, and by 1747 was issued in a second, expanded edition which was read with great interest by Benjamin Franklin. But by that time Franklin had already involved himself to a significant degree in colonial/native relations.

#### *IV. Franklin and the Albany Plan*

Franklin's interest in native affairs dates at least from 1736, when he began publishing the proceedings of treaty councils for public consumption. At that time, at the age of 30, he had been in Philadelphia for about thirteen years. As a general rule, he sought materials for publication that would be widely market-

able, and the accounts of native treaties did not disappoint in this respect. He continued to publish these treaty accounts on a regular basis for over a quarter of a century until, on a trip to England in 1762, he learned that several English publishers were in competition with him for the same audience.<sup>10</sup>

By 1744, Franklin and his press had become a vital force in Philadelphia. His *Pennsylvania Gazette* was one of the largest and most influential newspapers in the colonies. His popular *Poor Richard's Almanac* was appearing annually. He was the official printer for the Province of Pennsylvania, and as such it was his press that produced all of Pennsylvania's paper money, its state documents, and its laws. He also served as Philadelphia's postmaster, which gave him free access to the mails for distribution of his publications. As Bruce Johansen has put it, «If a ... Pennsylvania family ... kept printed matter other than the Bible in the house, it was very likely that whatever it was — newspaper, almanac or legal documents — bore Franklin's imprint.»<sup>11</sup>

In the course of the period from 1736 to 1744, Franklin's press also became well known for its publication of native treaty councils. These accounts were of considerable interest to the colonists, addressing as they did a matter that was of central economic and security interest to them. In the one hundred years before 1776, approximately fifty treaty accounts, summarizing forty-five treaty councils, were published. Franklin's press was responsible for the publication of more than a quarter of these.<sup>12</sup> So it was no novelty that Conrad Weiser, a good friend of Franklin's and a frequent source of treaty documents for Franklin's press, brought him another one in the summer of 1744.

Weiser had served as a kind of unofficial colonial host for a treaty meeting held at Lancaster, Pennsylvania in June of that year between representatives of the Haudenosaunee Confederation and colonial representatives of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. Weiser was warmly regarded by the Haudenosaunee, having been adopted into the Mohawk tribe and having established strong personal relations with Canassatego, the Haudenosaunee chief who headed the Haudenosaunee delegation.

The Lancaster meeting was one of a series, in which colonial governments hoped, among other things, to secure a stronger alliance with the Haudenosaunee against the French, who posed a threat to the English colonies both in terms of trade and in terms of political and military influence in North America. Weiser indicated to Franklin that, in this most recent meeting, the Haudenosaunee had finally made a clear commitment to such an alliance, one that had been sought by the colonies during the entire eight years in which Franklin had been publishing treaty proceedings. The condition placed by the Haudenosaunee on sealing such an arrangement was simple to enunciate, but not so easy to accom-

plish: the several English colonies must somehow find a way to bring the management of their trade with the natives, along with their diplomacy, under unified control. No effective alliance could be established, the Haudenosaunee insisted, unless the colonies brought their several foreign policies under some kind of unified control.<sup>13</sup>

The proceedings began on 22 June, 1744, exactly 262 years before this, our present conference, which commemorates the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth year. The most important agenda item for the Haudenosaunee was invasion of native territory by colonial squatters. Another key issue involved the sometimes unscrupulous behavior of the colonial «Indian agents» who were supposed to handle native trade, but little real progress was made on this second matter. By the end of the conference, though, on 4 July, colonial representatives had agreed to try to prevent further incursions of settlers into all disputed territory, while warning that it might not be practically possible to ensure universal compliance. With that qualified offering in hand, the agenda could move to strengthening the alliance. Canassatego, speaking for the Confederation, offered cautiously in exchange to «take all the care we can to prevent an enemy from coming onto British lands.» In his closing address to the entire council, he offered the following advice:

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 much strength and power; therefore, whatever befalls you, do not fall out with one another.<sup>14</sup>

Franklin was impressed with the account given to him by Weiser of the 1744 Lancaster meeting. He took it to be important enough to publish 200 extra copies of the interpreter's record of the proceedings and to send these to England. Canassatego's words, together with his consistent pressure on the English to unite for their own benefit, struck a chord with what Franklin appears slowly to have begun to believe on his own: the colonies needed to find some way to combine their several interests into one, at least as regarded their relations with the natives. The English Crown, to which all colonies pledged allegiance, was not managing its colonial affairs efficiently, whether from its own perspective or from that of the colonists. Such a degree of separation as then marked the colonies was not only foolish but, in the end, dangerous to all English interests, whether colonial or not.

Cadwallader Colden's *History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New York in America*, originally published in 1727, was re-

published in 1747. Franklin knew Colden well enough to have corresponded with him frequently by this time, and he asked Colden for a copy of the new edition. His opinion of the book was high enough that he then asked for fifty copies to sell through his own bookstores.

Added to the propitious re-publication of Colden's book was the fact that local concern about the French had escalated in 1747, when French and Dutch privateers had raided along the course of the Delaware River, even threatening Philadelphia itself. As a defensive measure, it was Franklin who organized a volunteer militia, which grew every year, with Franklin elected by the militia as its colonel, until Britain ordered that it be disbanded in 1756.<sup>15</sup> But concern about French maneuverings made colonial relationships with the Haudenosaunee, who by now controlled an alliance that could be considered a buffer all along the territory that separated the French from English colonies, all the more important.

By 1750, Franklin's growing concern to establish a greater unity among the colonies had taken practical form in his efforts to establish a general colonial postal system and in his creation of the American Philosophical Society. He became even more convinced of the importance of securing alliance with native tribes in behalf of general English colonial interests, particularly resonating with works defending that thesis that came to his attention as a publisher, like Archibald Kennedy's 1751 pamphlet *The Importance of Gaining and Preserving the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest Considered*<sup>16</sup>. Kennedy was collector of customs and receiver general for the Province of New York at the time he wrote this pamphlet, and he argued vigorously that alliance with the Haudenosaunee, in particular, was of vital importance to the trade of Great Britain and to the peace and prosperity of the colonies.<sup>17</sup> After reading this pamphlet, Franklin wrote to James Parker «I am of the opinion, with the public-spirited author, that securing the Friendship of the Indians is of the greatest importance for these Colonies.» In particular, Franklin wrote to Parker that it was important in this regard

to unite the several Governments as to form a strength that the Indians may depend on in the case of a Rupture with the French, or apprehend great Danger from, if they break with us.<sup>18</sup>

In this connection, Franklin went on to compare the Haudenosaunee experience with the needs and capacities of the colonists:

It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble, and yet a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies.<sup>19</sup>

It was not long after this correspondence with James Parker that Franklin was moved to prepare a report concerning the work of Pennsylvania's Indian agents. He felt it important to include, in this report, the following caution about some of them, echoing concerns consistently enunciated by native negotiators at treaty councils:

Some very unfit Persons are at present employed in that business. We hope that the Governor will enjoin the justices of the County Courts to be more careful in the future whom they recommend for Licenses; and whatever is though further necessary to enforce the Laws now being, for regulating the Indian Trade and Traders, may be considered by the ensuing Assembly.<sup>20</sup>

In 1752, the French continued their provocative advances in the frontier areas west of Pennsylvania. In June, for example, French troops attacked the native town of Pickawillany, home to the Haudenosaunee-allied Twightwee tribe. Concerned especially about the strategic significance of such military actions as they impacted English interests, the Pennsylvania Assembly voted to budget 800 pounds in aid for the Twightwees. In the remainder of the year the French continued their advances against territories allied in one way or another with the Haudenosaunee, and French forts began to spring up at new sites in the border country.

By early 1753, the concern of the Province of Pennsylvania about its conduct of relationships with natives, especially with the Haudenosaunee, had deepened considerably, given the growing importance of securing some kind of alliance to confront French aggressiveness. Franklin's prominence as a citizen of the Province ensured that his own similar concern was well known and that his advice on the matter was consulted. It was quite natural, under these circumstances, that he was appointed by Pennsylvanian authorities as one of the Province's commissioners in an important meeting with the Six Nations that was to be held later that year in Carlisle.

The Carlisle meetings, held in November, represented Franklin's first personal foray into official diplomacy. The main subject of this treaty council was, of course, mutual defense against the French. But native representatives once again raised the issue of the behavior of colonial traders, especially as regards the unscrupulous distribution of rum to native trading partners. The chief Haudenosaunee negotiator, Scarrooyady, complained that the traders had stopped bringing valuable commodities to the trading table and had found it easy to get almost anything they wanted from natives who had first been primed with liquor. He urged that this practice be stopped, and Franklin, along with the two other Pennsylvania commissioners, recommended to the provincial authorities that this request should be honored, if relationships with the natives were to be improved.<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime, plans were being made for a much bigger treaty meeting, to be held in Albany in June of 1754. War between France and England was looming, and in September of 1753 the London Board of Trade had instructed all of the English colonies, from Virginia northward, to join in «one general Treaty to be made in his Majesty's name.»<sup>22</sup> Franklin was appointed to be the Pennsylvania representative at this vital meeting.

The charge to the colonial delegation was right down Franklin's alley: they were to nail down a general alliance with the Haudenosaunee against the French, and they were to draw up a plan of unification for the colonies, which could then be ratified by them all. Franklin may by that time have become the best known advocate of unification in all of English America.

The results of the Albany Congress are well known. Prior to the meetings, by 8 June, Franklin had sketched out some «Short Hints Toward a Scheme for Uniting the Northern Colonies». The Congress itself opened on 19 June, with traditional ceremony, and commenced to a general recitation on both sides of common interests and concerns. By 24 June, the colonial delegates agreed, without dissent, on a motion in support of colonial union, which asserted, among other things, that such union was «absolutely necessary for ... [the colonies'] security and defense.» A subcommittee, which included Franklin and Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts, was appointed to «prepare and receive Plans or Schemes for the Union of the Colonies» that would then be taken up by the entire colonial delegation. This subcommittee deliberated for four days, and on 28 June it had come up with its own list of «short hints» to present to the delegates. According to Hutchinson, the list of suggestions that emerged «was the projection of Dr. F[ranklin] and prepared in part before he had any consultation with Mr. H[utchinson], probably brought with him from Philadelphia.»<sup>23</sup>

On 29 June, James de Lancy, the acting governor of New York, met with «Hendrick», who was called «Tiyanoga» among the Haudenosaunee and was one of the principle representatives of the Six Nations at the Albany congress. De Lancy had asked Hendrick for this special meeting so that Hendrick could provide information about the structure of the Haudenosaunee Confederation to the representatives of the English colonies, given that a principle part of the colonists' mission was to propose a plan of union. With this information in hand, then, the colonial delegation as a whole met eight times before the close of the congress on 8 July to discuss the «short hints» provided to them by the Franklin/Hutchinson subcommittee, but came to no firm resolution during this period. At the formal close of the congress, Hendrick reminded the assembled representatives of the advantages won by the Six Nations through their Haudenosaunee Confederation. De Lancy, in his reply, expressed the hope that

by a similar colonial union «we shall grow up to a great height and be as powerful and famous as you were of old.»<sup>24</sup>

On 9 July, the day after the official conclusion of the Albany Congress, Franklin was asked to finalize the Plan of Union that the delegation would then forward to the several colonies for ratification. The plan as elaborated by Franklin urged that all English colonies be joined together in a confederation governed by a single legislative body and a president-general, who would be appointed by London. The idea was to balance the Crown's need for control over its colonies, the colonists' desires for colonial autonomy in a relatively loose union, and the Haudenosaunee insistence on centralization of trade and diplomatic negotiations. What emerged from the deliberations of the Albany delegation, influenced powerfully by Franklin's diplomatic direction throughout, looked very much like the structure, outlined to De Lancy by Hendrick but well known to Franklin in advance, of the Haudenosaunee Confederation.

In particular, the fact that the individual colonies were to retain their own constitutions (provided that these didn't conflict with the idea of union) reflected the autonomy of the Six Nations within the Haudenosaunee Confederation. Further, the Plan of Union provided that each colony had veto power over the action of the Union, just as was the case among the Six Nations. Haudenosaunee decisions had always been deliberated in a «Great Council», which chose its own leader. Franklin's proposal for union called for a «Grand Council» to play the same role, in which the members chose the speaker. The provision that the Grand Council should be unicameral followed the lead of the Haudenosaunee system, rather than the bicameral English system. Finally, the size envisioned for the proposed Grand Council (forty-eight delegates) was very close to the size of the Haudenosaunee Great Council (fifty delegates).<sup>25</sup>

In light of the particular difficulties that had plagued interactions between the colonists and the native tribes, Franklin's Albany Plan of Union called further for control of trade and colonial expansion at the level of the Union. The need for such coordination of policy among the colonies was by now seen on both sides of the negotiating table as a necessity, if any solid alliance were to be possible between the new Colonial Union and the Haudenosaunee Confederation.

This bold plan of Union was not fated to come into existence. For all the good reasons there were for its adoption, it was ultimately rejected by both the individual colonial legislatures and by the English Crown. The colonies were too suspicious of one another to give up any of their autonomy, and the Crown was too suspicious of the power any Union might have to resist English demands. The Albany Plan of Union, thus rejected, was not, however, forgotten.

*V. Franklin, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution*

The English war with France ended in 1763, which consequently removed France as a motivating force in the drive for colonial union. But by that time the English government itself had begun to seem an alien force to many colonists, and animosities steadily grew over the subsequent decade. When skirmishes between colonists and English troops began to increase in frequency in 1775, the colonies began to talk about possible union in earnest, even before serious consideration was given to independence. A Franklin slogan, from the pages of his Philadelphia newspaper dating back to a few weeks before the Albany Congress of 1754, became common currency in the mid 1770s: Unite or Die. And under these circumstances, some plan was required for managing the common colonial interests. Articles of Confederation were drawn up, largely by Franklin, that carried forward many of the suggestions of the Albany Plan of Union. As Clinton Rossiter has observed,

The Albany Plan is a landmark on the rough road that was to lead through the first Continental Congresses and the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution of 1787<sup>26</sup>

While there may be differences among scholars about just how closely the Constitution resembles the proposals of the Albany Plan, and about just how much influence Franklin may have had over the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention, there can be no doubt that one key feature of the Albany Plan was manifestly present in the ultimate document agreed to in 1787: strong autonomy for the several states under a common federal government, the activities of which were restricted to the pursuit of specific common interests of the states. This kind of federal union had no precedent in European history, and it must be regarded as one of the more daring aspects of the new political arrangement proposed for the United States. Indeed: wherever other aspects of the Constitution may have come from, it is plain that this one didn't come from European philosophy or European example. The Articles of Confederation had struggled with a weaker version of a similar federal arrangement, and the Constitution was constructed to correct for some of those weaknesses. But it should be clear that this particular feature of the Constitution was a new attempt at accomplishing an old end, one that had seen its first formal expression in Franklin's Albany Plan.

It has been the burden of this paper to sketch an argument that has by now been made by many, to the effect that Franklin's Albany Plan, specifically as regards its call for a confederation of autonomous states and its specification of structure that would accomplish such a confederation, was influenced to a significant extent by the precedent of the Haudenosaunee League, which had lasted

since ancient times, was well known to the colonists, and was admired by Franklin. It was no small matter, either, that Franklin's diplomatic involvement (and the Albany Plan itself) came at a time when alliance with the Haudenosaunee was of considerable importance to colonial security vis-à-vis the French, and when the Haudenosaunee were making it clear that a condition of such an alliance had to be some form of colonial unification which, like theirs, would allow for greater reliability of negotiated settlements.

The need for an alliance against the French passed, but was shortly replaced by a need for alliance in negotiations with the English Crown. The ideas put forward in the Albany Plan were remembered by many, and Franklin was still around to bring them to life again in the Articles of Confederation and, ultimately, in the Constitutional Convention. On 3 July 1787, Franklin rose before the Constitutional Convention to propose a «Great Compromise» on the issue of how the new Constitution would effect representation of the will of the people: he proposed that representation should be proportional to population in the House of Representatives, but equal by State in the Senate. This proposal, in which he sacrificed his life-long preference for a unicameral legislature of the kind instantiated in the Haudenosaunee Great Council, was enacted by Convention on 16 July. So while this aspect of the Constitution departed from the Albany Plan, the most important aspects remained. A new nation emerged from the confederation of thirteen autonomous colonies: *e pluribus unum*. Thirteen arrows, a variation on an old Haudenosaunee tale of six arrows, were nearly impossible to break when they finally managed to hold together.

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<sup>1</sup> There is some reason to believe that even this wasn't his original name. The name «Tisquantum» appears to have referred to the rage of an important indigenous deity, and as Charles Mann has suggested, it would be about as unlikely that parents would give this name to a child as that an English family would name a child «Wrath of God». See Charles G. Mann, *1491* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 36. While this argument is at least moderately persuasive, it must be observed that one can never be sure *what* parents will name their children.

<sup>2</sup> Mann, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, it may have been in Europe that Tisquantum learned the practice of burying a fish with seed as fertilizer, a practice he is said to have later taught the Pilgrims. This technique was certainly known in Europe at the time, and it's not clear it was widely known among native Americans.

<sup>4</sup> There is some redundancy in this way of naming the Confederation, since «Haudenosaunee» means something like «the people of the completed longhouse», which is basically just another way of saying «the League» or «the Confederation». Also, ways of referring to the Confederation may have varied from tribe to tribe and from dialect to dialect. See Barbara A. Mann and Jerry L. Fields, *A Sign In the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee* ([www.wampumchronicles.com/signinthesky.html](http://www.wampumchronicles.com/signinthesky.html) 1997), end note #1.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some traditional native tribal sources suggest that the founding might have been as much as three thousand years ago. For an argument defending the thesis that the Confederation was in fact founded on 31 August 1142, see Mann and Fields, *A Sign In the Sky*. The argument triangulates among information gleaned from several independent sources, but is based in large part on data concerning notable solar eclipses visible from key sites in Haudenosaunee territory.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Paul A.W. Wallace, *The Iroquois Book of Life: White Roots of Peace* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 1986). Some scholars suggest that the best and most coherent written version of the story was recorded in 1899 by Haudenosaunee Chief John Arthur Gibson. This version has apparently never been translated in its entirety, although an edited version was translated by William Fenton and deposited in Smithsonian archives.

<sup>7</sup> For a good brief overview of Haudenosaunee diplomatic activity during the early European colonial period, see especially Donald A. Grinde, Jr., *The Iroquois and the Founding of the American Nation* (Indian Historian Press: 1977), pp. 26-31.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of Roger Williams' contribution to European conceptions of native American society, see Donald A. Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, 1991), especially chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New York in America [1727 and 1747]* (republished at Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce E. Johansen, *Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution* (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Gambit, 1982), p. 57. In the present section, I follow Johansen's well-documented account quite closely.

<sup>11</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>12</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 58. These treaty councils were no mere board meetings. Haudenosaunee law required that any such high level meeting be attended by broad representation from the tribes, both to indicate genuine Confederation support for whatever was negotiated and to ensure that tribal representatives did not stray too much from established Haudenosaunee interests. The Haudenosaunee party at Lancaster, for example, consisted of 245 chiefs, warriors, women, and children. The meetings with colonial representatives lasted for nearly two weeks before they were adjourned (Johansen, p. 58).

<sup>14</sup> The original source of this quotation, taken here from Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, pp. 61-62, is Franklin's own account of the 1744 treaty council, published in Carl Van Doren and Julian P. Boyd, eds., *Indian Treaties Printed by Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Historical Society, 1938).

<sup>15</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 63. The structure of Franklin's militia was interesting, by comparison with European precedent: not only was membership wholly voluntary, the militia men elected their own officers. Franklin was re-elected leader of the militia through every year of its short existence. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this arrangement, for purposes of the present discussion, was that, as novel as it was among Europeans, it was quite consistent with Haudenosaunee custom, as documented in Colden's book.

<sup>16</sup> Archibald Kennedy, *The Importance of Gaining and Preserving the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest Considered* (New York: James Parker, 1751).

<sup>17</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 64. The pamphlet had been published not by Franklin himself, but by James Parker, his printing partner in New York City.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 65. That this conviction of Franklin's mirrors closely the advice given by Canassatego to the 1744 Lancaster treaty council, advice published by Franklin and conveyed via special publication to Britain at the time, is crucially important to the thesis that Franklin was influenced by the Haudenosaunee. It would be foolish to maintain that Franklin would never have thought of unification without Haudenosaunee influence, of course. The thesis is only

that the Haudenosaunee advice played an important role in solidifying Franklin's conviction that unification was necessary. And of course it was not just that Canassatego had recommended such unification: it was that the Haudenosaunee had ancient experience with precisely the sort of union that Franklin deemed necessary for the colonies.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Johansen, *Forgotten Founders*, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Clinton Rossiter, «The Political Theory of Benjamin Franklin,» in Esmond Wright, ed. *Benjamin Franklin: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), pp. 179-180.