

The Iroquois Confederation

Long before the United States had its first constitution, Native Americans in present-day New York State had crafted their own plan of government. About 1570, two Native American leaders—Dekanawida (DEK • uh • uh • WEE • duh) and Hiawatha—urged people in their region to make peace and join together to resist invasions from other nations. Their actions led to the formation of the Iroquois Confederation of the Five Nations, which included the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca.

Indian legend, passed along from generation to generation, credits Hiawatha with giving the speech that laid the foundation for unity before the council of five Indian nations. Following Hiawatha's speech the leaders discussed and adopted the idea of a confederation.

A number of clans, each with its own village, made up each nation. Women leaders of each clan elected a chief to represent them at meetings of the council, the representative body of the Confederation. To ensure equality among the nations, the delegation from each nation had one vote at council meetings.

Although Native Americans in other parts of North America also created confederacies, the Iroquois Confederation was better organized and more effective. This was perhaps because they had a constitution—the first in the Americas. Though this constitution was not written down until 1850, its provisions included:

The object of these laws is to establish peace between the numerous nations of Indians . . . for the preservation of life, property and liberty . . . And the number of chiefs in this confederation of the five Indian Nations are fifty . . .

All lords of the Five Nations Confederacy must be honest in all things . . . It shall be a serious wrong for anyone to lead a lord into trivial affairs, for the people must ever hold their lords high in estimation out of respect to their honorable positions.

When a candidate lord is to be installed he shall furnish four strings of shells (or wampum) one span in length bound together at one end. Such will constitute the evidence of his pledge to the confederate

Multicultural Heritage

Focus on Freedom

ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

The Articles of Confederation, drafted in 1777 by the Second Continental Congress, was the first document that bound the states together. Most members of the Continental Congress were wary of a strong central government, and the Articles of Confederation reflected this concern. It guaranteed the independence and sovereignty of each state and gave the states all powers not specifically granted to Congress.

Article 8. All charges of war, and all other expenses that shall be incurred for the common defense of general welfare and allowed by the United States in Congress assembled shall be defrayed out of a common treasury, which shall be supplied by the several states, in proportion to the value of all land within each state, granted to or surveyed for any person, as such land and the buildings and improvements thereon shall be estimated according to such mode as the United States in Congress assembled shall from time to time direct and appoint. The taxes for paying that proportion shall be laid and levied by the authority and direction of the legislatures of the several states within the time agreed upon by the United States in Congress assembled.

Congress, then, could not levy taxes but depended upon the states themselves to raise income. During the period between 1781 and 1789, the states supplied Congress with only one-sixth of the funds it requested. This played havoc with foreign trade and even prevented soldiers from

receiving their pay at times. The Articles did give Congress the authority

To ascertain the necessary sums of money to be raised for the service of the United States, and to appropriate and apply the same for defraying the public expenses; to borrow money or emit [print and circulate] bills on the credit of the United States, transmitting every half year to the respective states an account . . .

Examining the Document

Reviewing Facts

1. Explain how the Articles of Confederation reflected the writers' dislike of a strong central government.

2. State a result of the weak central government under the Articles of Confederation.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment: Congress can levy taxes. Many people complain about taxes. What value do you see in them?



Iroquois Wampum Belt

lords that he will live according to the constitution of the Great Peace and exercise justice in all affairs.

—THE CONSTITUTION OF THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERATION, TRANSCRIBED 1850

The constitution guided the Confederation for more than 200 years, ensuring peace for the member nations. During the American Revolution, however, some nations fought for the colonial cause, while others supported the British. In 1779 United States Major General John Sullivan led an expeditionary force that defeated the British supporters. The Confederation did not survive the split in loyalties or the disastrous defeat at the hands of Sullivan's forces.

Despite the ultimate defeat of the Confederation, the Native American concept of representative government influenced the course of early American democracy. The government that the Articles of Confederation established included many features similar to the characteristics of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Examining Our Multicultural Heritage

Reviewing Facts

1. Identify the founders of the Iroquois Confederation.

2. Describe the representative assembly of the Iroquois Confederation.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. Making Comparisons What features of the Articles of Confederation were similar to the constitution of the Iroquois Confederation?