



Indian Influences - Origin of Equality

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Article Word Count: 1643 [[View Summary](#)] [Comments \(0\)](#)

Native Lesson in Democracy: Rarely will one witness an elementary student stand in front of his or her classmates and credit Native American influence in the founding ideals of our government or constitution. Why should any student do such, when our curriculums clearly ignore historical truths of Indian Influences in order to protect our "comfort" in knowing our white forefathers and their incredible vision was born of white experience and education, and certainly not of observations of Native American societies and ideals. After all, categorization of Indian Peoples in the Euro-American world was that of inferior and uneducated populations, with nothing more to offer a young United States than lands, or so this is what most Americans learn today.

And yet, democratic governments were not a carryover from Europe, and nothing more than a Greek hypothetical that our educated forefathers only read about, in other words, a fairytale. It was Native American communities, the most famous being the Iroquois, who actually provided a practicing model of democracy for Europeans looking for representation in government, social power, and equality.

"It would be a very strange thing if six nations of ignorant savages should be able to form a scheme for such a union and be able to execute it in such a manner as it has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble and yet a like union should be impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies (1)." - Benjamin Franklin to James Parker, 1751.

It was the Iroquois who exemplified democracy at its greatest: a democracy created before European contact, a democracy with representation and systems of voting, a democracy with checks and balances, a democracy that practiced universal human rights and autonomy for all including women, and even adopted captives. Our Forefathers had to look no further than their Native neighbors to witness a civilized government that answered the needs of colonists tired of Monarchy.

"Our wise forefathers established union and amity between the Five 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 (2)." -Canassatego (Iroquois Spokesman to Colonist Delegates at Lancaster PA, 1744.)

"...the advice that was given about thirty years ago by your wise forefathers, in a great council that was held at Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, when Canassatego spoke to us, the white people..." "Brothers, our forefathers rejoiced to hear Canassatego speak these words. They sank deep into our hearts. The advice was good. It was kind. They said to one another: The Six Nations are a wise people. Let us hearken to them, and take their counsel, and teach our children to follow it...(3)" -Colonial Commissioner to Iroquois Leaders in Philadelphia, 1775.

In fact, Native American life-ways may also be partially responsible for colonists craving independence from England. Almost no Euro-American witness of Woodland Indian societies could deny a more rewarding way of life with freedom and equality, which was not enjoyed by themselves under their current white laws. This could have been quite possibly the seed of American Independence, or at least the water that nourished the movement.

"I am convinced that these societies of Indians enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under European governments (4)." - Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787.

100th Congression, 1st Session
S. Con. Res.76

In the Senate of the United States
September 16, 1987
Concurrent Resolution

To acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution..."

Whereas the original framers of the Constitution, including most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts, principles and governmental practices of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy..."

Whereas the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was explicitly modeled upon the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself;..."

Resolved by the Senate (the House of Representatives concurring) That- 1) the Congress, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges the historical debt which the Republic of the United States owes to the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations for their demonstration of enlightened, democratic principles of Government..."

(From Indian Roots of American Democracy published by the Northeast Indian Quarterly, 1988, pages 74-75)

Native Lesson: Women's Rights. The Women's Suffrage Movement owes part of its victory to Native influences. In a time when Euro-American women had less rights in her home and her government, and forced to be dependent on male relations, Woodland Indian women provided a model of female independence and power, while still in balance with communal reliance, collective responsibilities, and family ties. It was our late Native mothers who possessed the freedoms our white mothers were denied.

Indian women have said, "As an Indian woman I was free. I owned by home, my person, the work of my own hands, and my children could never forget me. I was better as an Indian woman than under white law..." Indian men have said (in regards to white laws), "Your laws show how little your men care for their women (5)." - Alice Fletcher, Ethnographer and noted suffragist.

Our Native mothers owned property - her home and furnishing, and her garden and produce. She controlled the food supply. Her property was to do with as she pleased, and needed no male authority for receiving property or disposing of it. She had the right to vote and be represented in her government by a women's council, and elect a spokesperson. She had the right to ask for war or peace, to voice her opinions as any man would under the same conditions, and never be disrespected in any manner, as being a woman was honorable in itself. She had the right to divorce, and she knew her children would never be taken away from her. She was a person with individual rights, and never the property of her father or husband, or a "thing." to be owned and transacted. Native women were full citizens with protected freedoms as any man. These rights of most Native women in the Northeast were all unknown to Euro-American women of the same period, only fueling the drive of women's rights sympathizers and giving them a basis to argue current women's issues.

Illustrating History: An Indian Woman Gives Her Horse Away - The Indian "wife is as independent in the use of her possessions as is the most independent man in our midst. If she chooses to give away or sell all her property, there is no one to gainsay her...When I was living with the Indians, my hostess...one day gave away a very fine horse. I was surprised, for I knew

there had been no family talk on the subject, so I asked: "Will your husband like to have you give the horse away?" Her eyes danced, and, breaking into a peal of laughter, she hastened to tell the story to the other women gathered in the tent, and I became the target of merry eyes. I tried to explain how white women would act, but laughter and contempt met my explanation of the white man's hold upon his wife's property (6)."

-Alice Fletcher, Recounting Her Observations at the International Council of Women in 1888.

Further than just property rights and representation in government, the important fact was that these Indian women had equal status and human rights, a large reflection on the social attitude of women and the female realm, which was obviously very positive in the Native worldview. This only highlighted the faults of the so-called "equality" based American society, including the unchecked treatment of American women by men, or lack of laws protecting women from attack and abuse, especially within their own household.

We almost see no physical abuse and other forms of violation of Indian women by Indian men before European influences. According to Native Peoples, misogyny (hatred of women) was more than rare, it was almost non-existent. The thought of what white men were able to get away with toward white women, or the fact that there were those who would abuse women to begin with, was absolutely horrifying to both Native men and women, and became a reason for some Native populations to reject both the introduction of Westernization and Christianity, which they associated with this behavior. However, most could not fit it off long enough, and Indian Peoples fell victim to the white "gender hierarchy," and Woodland Indian women began losing their status of equality during much of the historic period.

"...my women, they to whom we owe everything, what is there for them to do? I see nothing! You are a woman; have pity on my women when everything is taken from them (7)." -Indian Man to Alice Fletcher, in Regards to Indian Women Losing Their Livelihoods and Status

Suggested Books and Further Reading:

Iroquois Women: An Anthology

Parker on the Iroquois: The Constitution of the Five Nations

Iroquois Culture and Commentary

Indian Roots of American Democracy

Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution

Direct Quotes in This Article:

(1) Johansen, Bruce. Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution. 1982, p. 56.

(2) Barreiro, Jose, Indian Roots of American Democracy, Article: "Indian Thought Was Often In Their Minds." By Bruce Johansen, 1988, p. 41.

(3) *ibid* p. 42

(4) *ibid* p. 42

(5) Spittal, W.G. Iroquois Women: An Anthology. Article: "The Root of Oppression Is the Loss of Memory: The Iroquois and the Early Feminist Vision." By Sally Roesch Wagner, Ph.D. 1996, p. 225.

(6) *ibid* p. 225

(7) *ibid* p. 225

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Article Source: http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Sheryl_Hartman

This article has been viewed 781 time(s).
Article Submitted On: August 19, 2008