

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-13 The Iroquois Confederacy

II: The Roots of Disunity

Williams, Arizona

July, 1973

Mr. Richard H. Nolte

Institute of Current World Affairs

535 Fifth Avenue

New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The most striking difference between the Iroquois Confederacy today and three hundred years ago is that today half the Iroquois reject the authority of the Council of Chiefs. More than 5,000 Seneca, living mostly on two reservations in western New York, comprise a quasi-independent republic governed by elected legislators, executive officers, and judges. The Seneca had always been the most populous of the Six Nations, and eventually became the most sophisticated, in European terms. The second most populous, the Mohawk, are also estranged from the Confederacy, although their relationship to it is more ambiguous and possibly reconcilable. The affairs of the Mohawk, on the St. Regis Reservation in extreme northern New York, are directed by a Council of elected Chiefs. Because they are elected, they are not recognized by the Iroquois hereditary Chiefs that meet at Onondaga. Another set of Mohawk Chiefs, who have been appointed to their offices according to traditional Iroquois forms, are recognized by the League Chiefs as the legitimate Mohawk leaders. They meet periodically and pass judgement on questions confronting the Mohawk, but their decisions carry no weight with federal and state authorities because the traditional chiefs are not the elected chiefs. The Mohawk people appear to support their elected government, but a growing number back the hereditary chiefs.

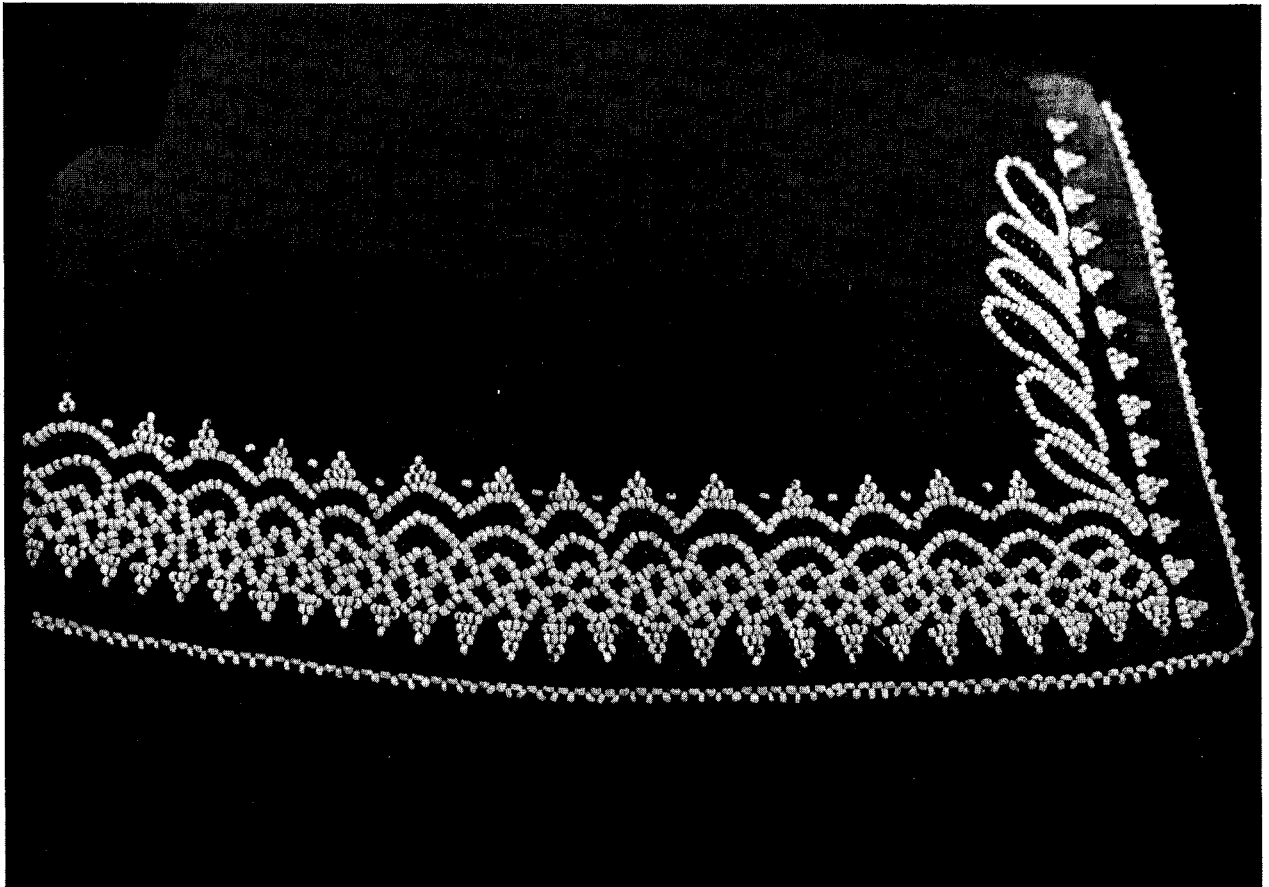
The Keepers of the Western and Eastern Doors of the Longhouse, in other words, have abandoned their trusts. The Onondaga, as I wrote in the previous newsletter, are working with determination to preserve the League, but the defection of the Seneca and Mohawk over the past 150 years has badly crippled the Confederacy in practical terms, however strong it may be as an ideal.

The Onondaga get equally little help from the other two of the original Five Nations, the Cayuga and Oneida, although these two are insignificant with respect to population. Having lost their homelands through forced sales in the early 1800's,

the people of both nations scattered among other New York Iroquois or moved to Wisconsin or Canada. Today about 350 Cayuga comprise the Cayuga Nation. They live among the Seneca south of Buffalo, and operate under elected officers. The Oneida in New York number about 500, most of them mixed into the population of the Onondaga south of Syracuse. (There are more than 8,000 Oneida in Canada and Wisconsin.) A few families live apart, south of Utica, on a 32-acre patch of Oneida homeland recently restored to Oneida ownership. Although the Oneida have an elected President, they are now engaged in legal battles and efforts of social reorganization the ultimate object of which is to reconstitute the Oneida Nation on its original land and under hereditary chiefs.

The strongest support for the old Confederacy comes from the Sixth Nation-- the Tuscarora, and a band of Seneca who split from the main body of Seneca when they abandoned the hereditary chiefs in the 1840's. The Tuscarora, numbering about 800, live on a 5700-acre reservation near Niagara Falls. The traditionalist Seneca band-- the Tonawanda Seneca-- number about 1000, and live on a reservation of 7,549 acres about 75 miles east of Buffalo. When the Council of Chiefs of the Six Nations is summoned to the Council Fire at Onondaga, the Tonawanda Band supply the Seneca Chiefs. (Under the Confederacy constitution, each of the member nations sends a different number of chiefs to the League Council meetings: the Onondaga, fourteen; the Seneca, eight; etc. The League Chiefs of a Nation are members of only certain "chiefly" clans represented among the people of the Nation. Luckily, the Seneca clans entitled to confer Confederacy Chieftainships are all present in the Tonawanda Seneca subpopulation.) But to fill others of the 49 Chiefs' places around the Central Council Fire, the Confederacy must bend the Great Law a little. One man attends as an Oneida Chief, for example, who, according to the relevant clan matron empowered to appoint a man to that chieftainship, has not been properly confirmed in that office.

The elective-hereditary schizophrenia that dogs individual nations-- the Seneca and Mohawk particularly-- is replicated at the confederate level. In Canada, about 10,000 Iroquois of all six nationalities comprise their own Confederacy. They have their own Central Fire tended by Canadian Onondaga, their own Tododaho, and so on. Some New York Iroquois maintained that the two Confederacies are actually one, but appearances suggest otherwise. There are instances of cooperation. The New York Iroquois regularly call upon Canadian League Chiefs to attend Council meetings at Onondaga (N.Y.) in fulfillment of the roll call specified in the



Great Law. (For example, if the New York Cayuga should not be able to supply both the Snipe Clan Chiefs allotted to them, because no Snipe Clan families exist among the New York Cayuga, the Snipe Clan Cayuga Chiefs at the Canadian Six Nations Reserve might be summoned to Onondaga.) And the New York Confederacy Chiefs visit the Canadian Confederacy from time to time for solidarity meetings. But for practical purposes the two Confederacies are separate, parallel institutions.

Of these various obstacles in the way of full restoration of the Iroquois Confederacy, the independent Seneca Nation bulks largest. The gradual isolation of the Seneca from the other members of the Longhouse was the result of consistently divisive treatment of the Six Nations by the United States government and citizens. The "dehorning" of the Seneca hereditary chiefs in 1848, and the establishment of a republican system of government in their place, resulted directly from the dissension caused among the Seneca by a fraudulent purchase of national territory by white men. Softened by alcohol and bribes, barely half the Seneca Chiefs in 1838 promised all four remaining Seneca reservations to the Ogden Land Company for \$202,000. Although the Iroquois require unanimous consent before a measure is considered law, federal commissioners supported the land company when an appeal was made by the Seneca and some Quaker supporters to the effect that the agreement was invalid because it carried the marks of a scant majority of the chiefs. Some of those marks were later proved to be forged.

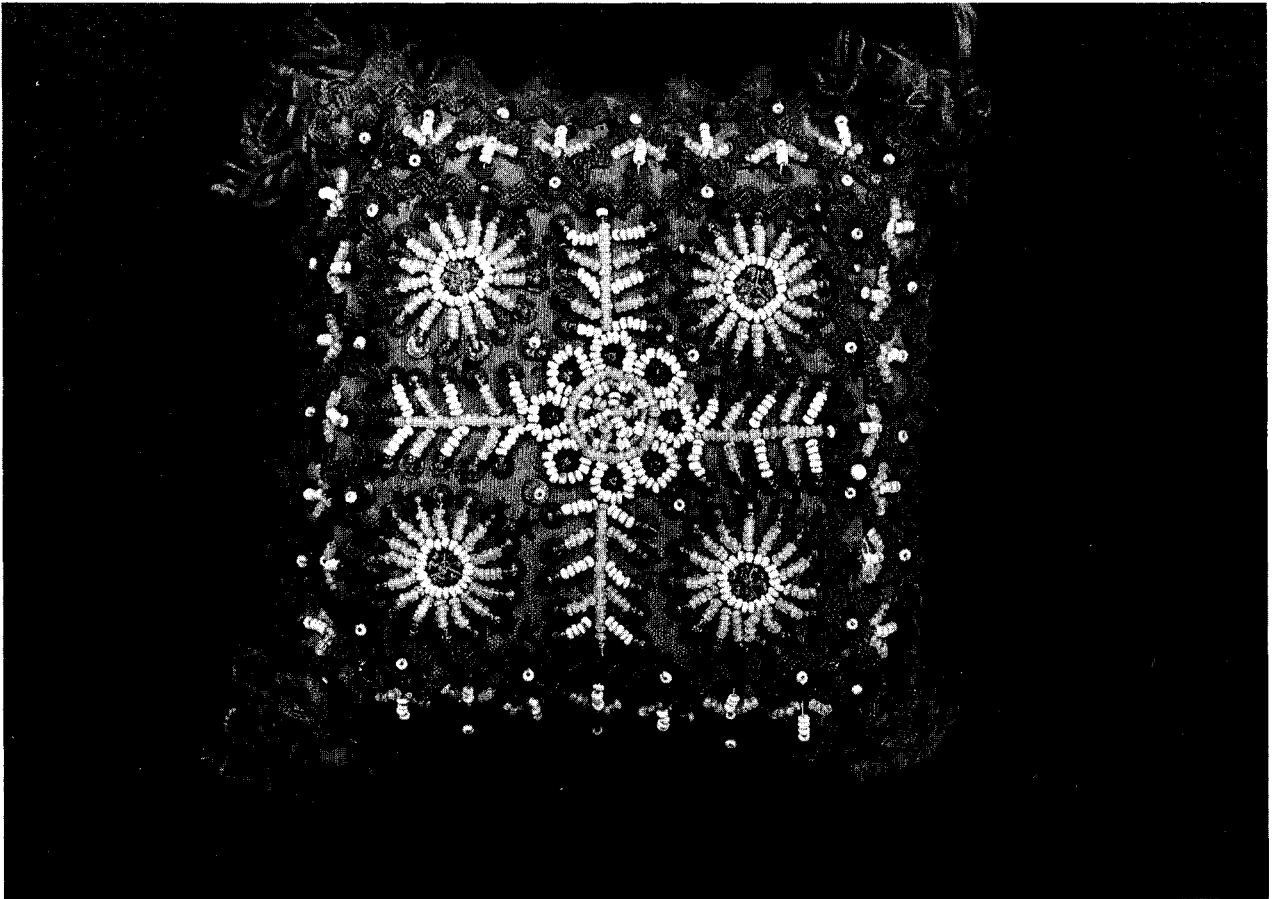
Many of the "chiefs" were not hereditary chiefs, but that did not matter to the Ogden Land Company or the Commissioners. Ultimately the Congress prevented the alienation of two of the reservations. Of the two granted to the Land Company, one remained under the occupancy of the Tonawanda Seneca, who live there still. The complicity of many hereditary chiefs in the sellout disgraced those individuals irreversibly, and discredited the hereditary government. White-educated, young, intellectual Seneca men, apparently influenced by political trends in Europe at the time, framed the new republican constitution.

The Ogden Land Company's "purchase" climaxed a 50-year period of such transactions, during which the Iroquois land area was reduced to one tenth of the original. The 90,000 acres left to them were scattered across the state. Before the Revolution, the easternmost Mohawk, near Albany, could get a message to the westernmost Seneca, near Buffalo, in three days. Runners covered 100 miles per day over trails through the heart of Iroquoia. By 1850, the Nations were separated from one another by vast tracts of fenced land defended by wary settlers against any Iroquois incursion. The acquisition of Iroquois lands would not have succeeded if their traditional polity and society had remained intact. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, the intricate bonds that had knit the Six Nations together for 300 years had been attenuated to a point of useless fragility.

In the early years of the new Union, the federal government set about the dismemberment of the League quite openly. The United States claimed to have conquered the Six Nations along with the British in the War for Independence. Accordingly, the U.S. agents at the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1784 approached their meeting with Iroquois representatives with the avowed purpose of imposing a settlement unilaterally. At the treaty, the U.S. agents demonstrated their authority by taking hostages, speaking to the Iroquois in insulting language, and refusing to recognize the Confederacy. This is the way one member of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the Continental Congress instructed the commissioners before the treaty began.

"(The Iroquois) assume a perfect equality. Instead of conforming to Indian political behavior, we should force them to adopt ours-- dispense with belts (wampum), etc....I would never suffer the word 'Nation' or 'Six Nations,' or 'Confederates,' or 'Council Fire at Onondago' or any other form which would revive or seem to confirm their former ideas of independence....They are used to be called Brothers, Sachems, and Warriors of the Six Nations. I hope it will never be repeated."

Although the Treaty was signed by warriors, not chiefs, and under duress, and although the League Chiefs repudiated it soon after, the Americans considered it law.



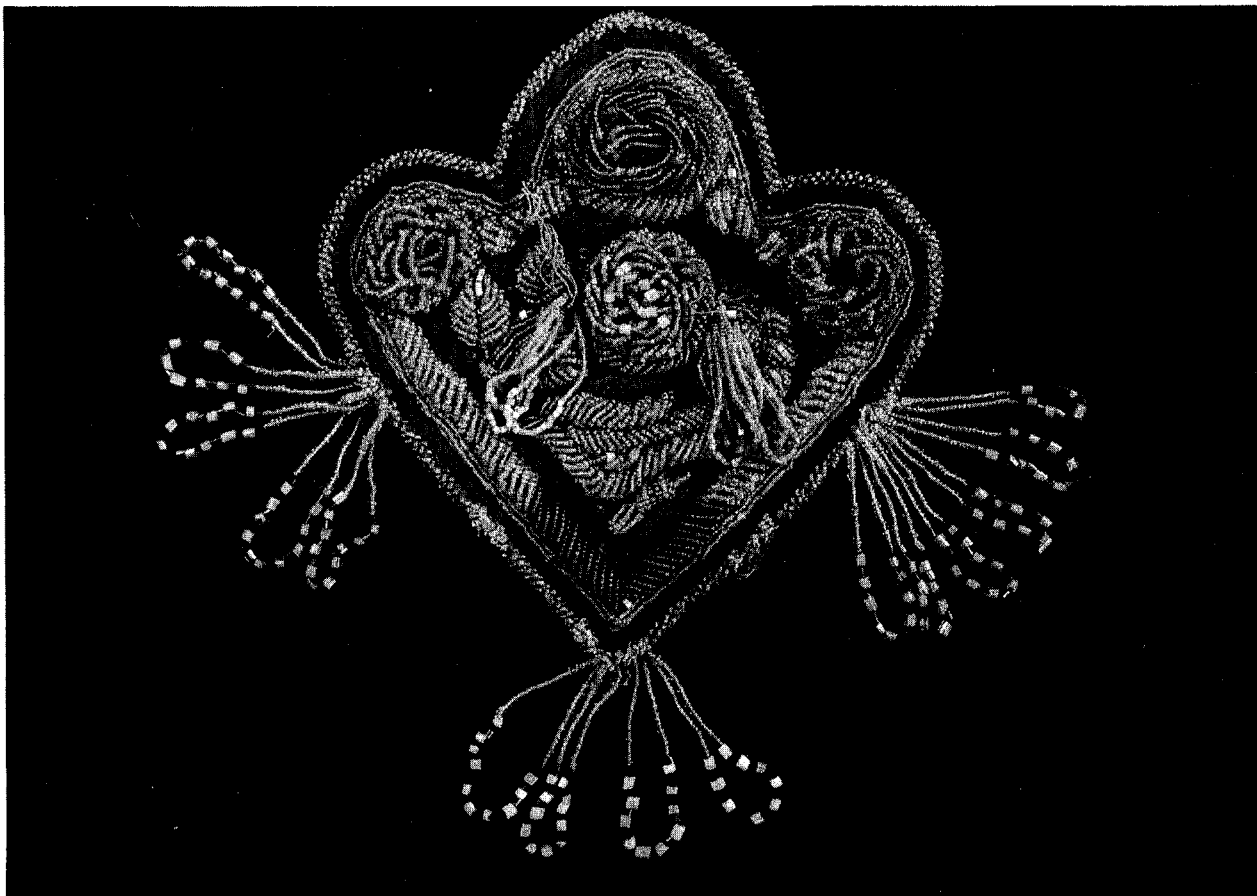
In 1789, Secretary of War Henry Knox promulgated a new Indian policy that remains in effect to the present time. It recognized that the Iroquois had not been conquered, and that they retained title to their land. The title could be taken from him only through negotiation. This change in policy seems to have reflected not just a recognition of principles of international law, but also a practical judgement as to the likely expense and duration of wars of extermination. The prevailing attitude about the future of the Americans natives was not affected by the government's new recognition of the Indian's right to the soil. In keeping with humanist theories of the corrigibility of all men, Knox believed that it was the government's responsibility to convert the Indian to European lifeways. To advance "the process of society from the barbarous ages to its present degree of perfection," he urged that missionaries and supplies be sent to Indian country. In particular he wanted to encourage in the Indian "a love of exclusive property." The strong-arm tactics the government used at Fort Stanwix now gave way to subtler techniques of persuasion in connection with the purchase of Indian land. In these negotiations the white man continued to undermine the already disintegrating Confederacy.

The most destructive of the Americans' strategies was to treat with each

nation separately, and with factions within the leadership of particular nations. By the Great Law of the Iroquois, the authority of the League Chiefs was coextensive with the boundaries of the entire Six Nations territory. A Mohawk League Chief, in other words, had equal authority in the lands of the Seneca and the lands of the Mohawk. (A Mohawk Chief who was not also a member of the Council of Chiefs of the League would have authority only among the Mohawk, of course.) That provision helped protect the Iroquois against the rise of a particular nation to domination of the Confederacy, and it distinguished the League of the Iroquois from all other native federations. The success of the Iroquois in limiting local authority to that degree is explained by pre-Confederacy history. Originally the nations were politically amorphous. At the time of the founding of the Confederacy, the chiefs who became League Chiefs under the Great Law were probably village headmen. Their association with the other chiefs of their "nation" was probably informal, based on the proximity of their villages and similarities in their dialect of the Iroquois language. In fact, the nation concept never figured in Iroquois affairs except as an administrative convenience until the white men began treating with the separate nations.

The unifying threads among Iroquois above the level of village organization but below the Confederacy level were the matrilineal clans. In pre-Confederacy days, each of the eight clans was represented in every nation. Thus the notion of sharing out authority equally among the League chiefs fit with the Iroquois experience of allegiance to both his own locality and a pan-Iroquois ritual family. The matrilineal clan system lent a cohesive strength to the League. That may be the single most important factor explaining the survival, such as it is, of the Iroquois and their Confederacy in the heavily settled, otherwise virtually Indian-free northeast. Although there are many exceptions to the pattern, the clan system works as follows.

A person is born into the clan of his mother. He lives in a house known as the home of members of his clan (although the father of the house is of another clan). Some houses today still carry the symbol of the clan (Wolf, Bear, Eel, etc.) over the door. A person may not marry another member of his own clan. Property is passed in the female line of descent. If a child is born of an Iroquois mother and non-Iroquois father, the child is Iroquois, of the mother's clan and nation. If a child is born of a non-Iroquois mother and an Iroquois father, he is not Iroquois, but, like any foreigner, may be adopted into an Iroquois clan. The senior woman of a clan (clan matron or clan mother)



alone is authorized to elevate a man to one of the hereditary chieftainships. Notice that since a man's son is not of his, the father's, clan (since the son is a member of his mother's clan, and she cannot have married within her own clan), a son does not succeed his father as a chief. A person's loyalty is first to his (nuclear) family, then to his (extended) matrilineal family, then to his (international) clan, then to his nation and the Confederacy.

The binding, stabilizing effects of this system were many, and some of them still operate. First, clan affiliations moderated nationalistic tendencies. Second, clan mothers, and women in general, checked the power of chiefs, who could be removed for cause. Third, by vesting property rights in the women, the Iroquois virtually eliminated father-son feuds over property. Fourth, although Iroquois men were away from their home villages for months or years at a time hunting and fighting, leaving their women unattended, the Iroquois families did not suffer the instability characteristic of patriarchal hunting societies. All the children of a given woman were "legitimate," since their lineage was indisputably established as their mother's. Finally, vesting ultimate political authority in the sedentary females and their female descendants had the useful effect, in a

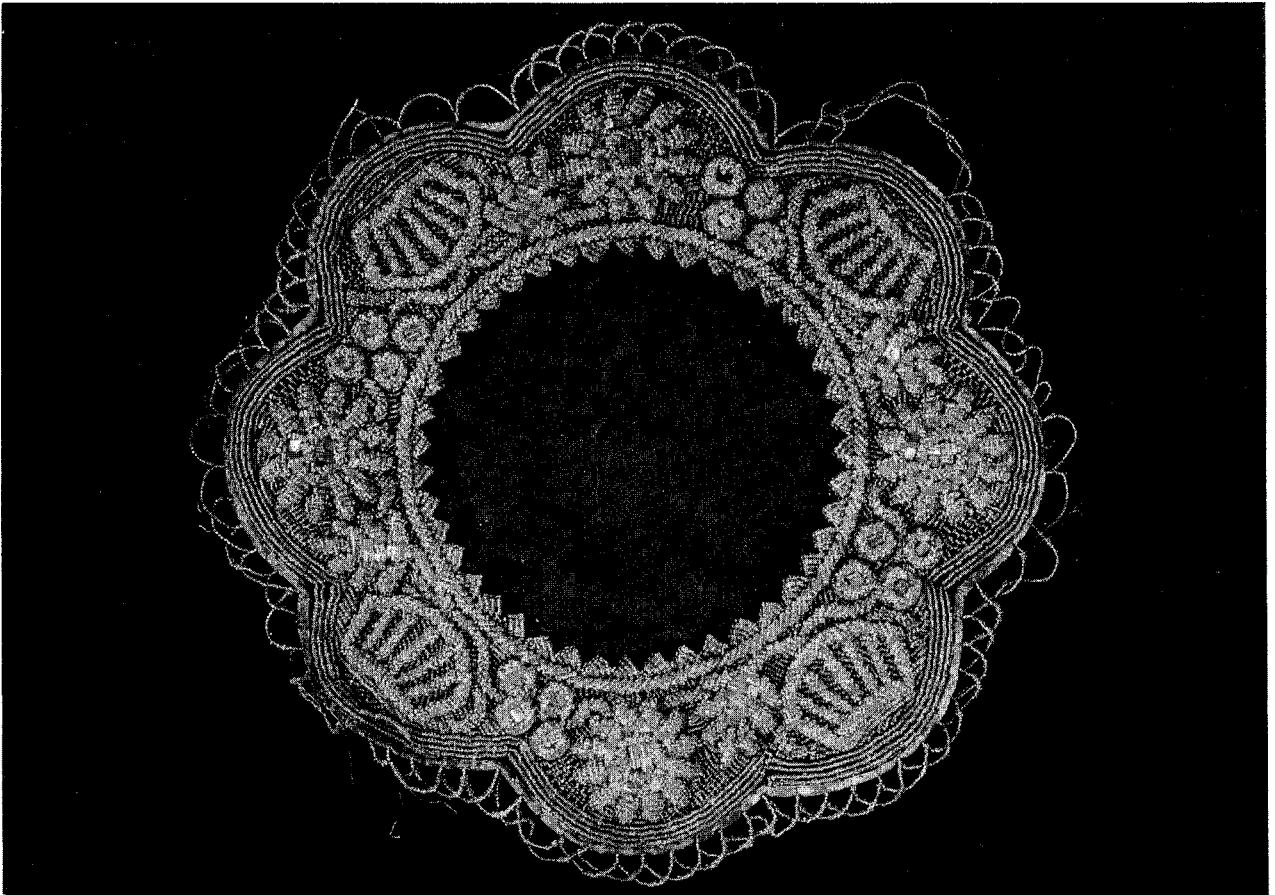
society that fostered military heroics in its men, of insuring that casualties in the field did not trigger crises of succession at home.

These constitutional and social protections against the ascendancy of one individual or nation did not prevent the development of a fierce and independent military. In fact, by putting major civil offices constitutionally out of reach of all but certain clans, and by allowing chiefs to serve for life, the Iroquois forced men to turn to military exploits to prove themselves. The Great Law designated two Chiefs (Seneca, since the great military threat before colonization came from the west) as War Chiefs, but the Council of League Chiefs was prohibited from making war. If individual Chiefs wanted to fight, they could do so only if they first renounced their chieftainships. The business of war fell to small bands recruited locally by warriors. As the League was at war with Indians or Europeans almost continuously from its founding till the War of 1812, war-making rivalled hunting as the principal male activity. From time to time, the women influenced military affairs by turning popular opinion against a campaign they judged vain or likely to be unprofitable. Sometimes the women forced the issue by refusing to prepare food for the trail. But gradually a male military leadership class arose, especially in warfare with the Europeans. Eventually they combined separate war parties under a single leader. (The Mohawk Joseph Brant is probably the best known of these "generals.") As these leaders appeared, the League Chiefs wisely tried to accommodate them in the government by recognizing them as non-hereditary Pine Tree Chiefs (life peers, as it were). In time these non-hereditary chiefs came to speak for the Confederacy not only in dealings with European military allies, but also in the treaty sessions with the European enemy. In the nineteenth century, white commissioners and land agents chose to continue to pretend that the warriors represented the constitutional authorities of the Iroquois.

Before I describe one of the "sales" through which the Confederacy was finally decimated, consider the interests of the parties to these transactions.

The non-hereditary Pine Tree Chiefs; chronically disrespectful of the authority of the League, looked for recognition and material rewards in settlements with the Europeans.

Commissioners representing the American government; sought to secure lands in the west to pay the army after the Revolution and War of 1812. By giving land to veterans in exchange for the inflated currency in which they had been paid,



the government simultaneously satisfied the troops and stabilized the dollar.

New York State: had its own troops to pay, and a policy of asserting state sovereignty in all spheres before the federal government could assert its own.

The settlers: out of reach of the state and federal authorities entrusted with the protection of Indian interests, they valued the Iroquois lands above all the rest of the northwest territories. Continental soldiers had brought back fetching reports on the land of the Six Nations. Settlers particularly coveted Seneca and Oneida land, crisscrossed with good trails and dotted with large villages in ample clearings. (As late as 1840, visitors to western New York reported that the remaining Iroquois still lived better than their white neighbors in the wilderness.)

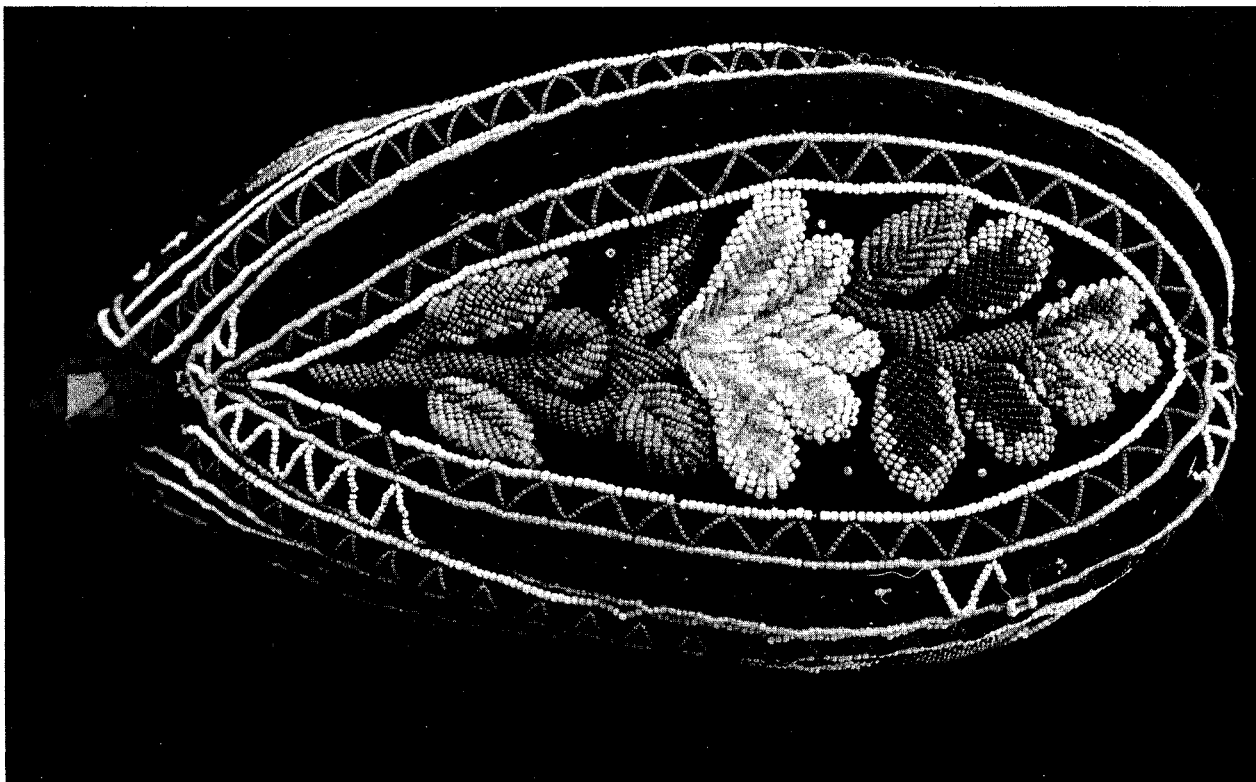
White land agents: operated in Iroquoia before and after the Revolution. Turned quick profits by selling huge tracts to New England and European speculators and developers, who sold to settlers. The land agent's principal service was to quiet Indian title to the land.

By 1797, all the Iroquois but the Seneca had been driven from their homelands to small reservations, Canada, or the west. In that year, the Seneca sold all but a small fraction of their homeland, at the Treaty of Big Tree. Agent Robert Morris's performance at Big Tree is a showcase example of conquest through fraudulent purchase. First he singled out the most prestigious Seneca Chief,

entertained him in elegant Philadelphia, and bribed him. When the treaty began, he bribed three other prominent Pine Tree Chiefs. Then he displayed presents and 750 gallons of whiskey to be awarded to the Indian negotiators after they signed. When the Seneca spokesman refused to sell more than one township, Morris bribed the Pine Tree Chiefs again and arranged a meeting with them apart from the hereditary chiefs. When the Pine Tree Chiefs said they would consult the clan mothers, Morris distributed gifts to the women and promised that the money the nation would receive for its lands would buy the food and clothing that Seneca men irresponsibly failed to provide for their women and children. The women consented, the warriors consented, and fifty chiefs-- mostly Pine Tree Chiefs-- signed the treaty. The terms included grants and annuities for the Indian signatories.

Why did bribery work? Partly because it was applied along lines of division already established within the community, between hereditary and non-hereditary chiefs, men and women, and the like. But there was probably a general depression among the Iroquois at this time that lay them open to blandishments of money, food, and especially liquor. The People of the Longhouse were sick, poor, and desperate. Between 1763 and 1793 the population of the Confederacy decreased from about 8,000 to about 4,000. (Its pre-Revolution peak was probably about 15,000.) Sullivan's Raid in 1779 laid waste 500 houses and all surrounding crops. The next winter was the worst of the century. In the next fifteen years, epidemics of measles and smallpox-- European diseases-- visited the Iroquois.

The Americans saw the miserable condition of the Indians and took advantage of it. For example, the Oneida in 1785 (and the Tuscarora and Massachusetts living with them) were being overwhelmed by encroaching white settlers. The Oneida had seen the Mohawk pushed out of the Mohawk valley before the Revolution, and must have watched with mounting dread as the Longknives moved gradually along the Iroquois east-west trail. As the settlers moved in, the supply of game dwindled quickly, leaving the Oneida weak and hungry, more willing now to trade land for food, cash, and liquor. A Protestant missionary named Samuel Kirkland, who had converted all but a few of the Oneida and persuaded them to side with the Colonial government in the Revolution, described his flock in 1785 as "filthy, dirty, nasty creatures-- a few families excepted," living on nothing but potatoes, squash, and corn. In June of that year an American agent reported that it seemed a good time to negotiate the sale of Oneida lands, since supplies were extremely short among them. It took New York State representatives just two days to acquire a

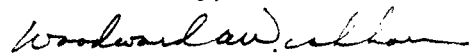


half million acres of Oneida land, including the best of their remaining hunting grounds. Despite guarantees contained in the Treaty of Fort Stanwix with the federal government ("The Oneida and Tuscarora nations shall be secured in the possession of the lands on which they are settled"), signed in 1784, these two nations, the only Iroquois to have allied themselves with the Americans in the Revolution, had lost all their land by 1840.

Some Iroquois nationalists see the all but total deterioration of Iroquois self-government, solidarity, and national purpose since the Revolution as the result of truly systematic policies of destruction on the part of the American and Canadian governments. For instance, I was talking to an Onondaga Chief whose mother was a Mohawk and father Onondaga. One of the interesting wrinkles, I had thought, in the clan system among the Iroquois was the Mohawk practice of reckoning clan membership and lineage patrilineally, in contrast to the matrilineal custom among the other five nations. So I indicated to my friend that I understood that since neither his Mohawk mother nor his Onondaga father could properly confer membership in either nation or clan, he was a man without a country. His father, who had been sitting silent behind me, spoke up sharply. He said the British had imposed that change on the Mohawk as "a part of their policy of genocide. Just like the Allotment Act. They just wanted to kill off the Indians."

I tend to separate in my mind events as different as the British missionaries' introduction of patrilineal descent among the Mohawk and the action of the U.S. Congress to divide Indian land in severalty. I tend not to assume that the missionaries and the Congressmen were part of a concerted effort. But maybe the other construction of history, seeing all white policies as consciously coordinated genocide, saves an Indian from a more frightening view-- that the destruction of Indian life has instead been the outcome of discoordinate policies motivated sometimes by magnanimity, sometimes by racism, often by both. A man might be more comfortable with a vision of his oppressors as purposeful.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

P.S. The beadwork in this newsletter demonstrates the European influence that by the mid-nineteenth century, when these pieces were made, had overwhelmed the pre-contact design motifs of the Iroquois. The examples on pages 9 and 11 show the specific influence of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French floral styles. Page 3: Cayuga leggings worn by the women, tied just below the knee and touching the tops of the moccasins. The material is red broadcloth. Pre-contact Iroquois wore similar leggings, apparently, made from deerskin embroidered with porcupine quills. Page 5: an Oneida pincushion, probably made for sale to whites. Page 7: another Iroquois pincushion, of translucent white and pink beads. Page 9: an Oneida mat, also for sale to whites. Page 11: a bonnet made of black velvet and large beads. These were made in direct imitation of the Scotch Highlander cap, and worn in the mid-eighteenth century by Iroquois men.

Received in New York on August 13, 1973.