

Haudenosaunee Culture

The Great Law as a Model for US Democracy

Objectives:

- Describe some of the similarities and differences between the governments of the United States and the Six Nations.
 - List the key principles of the Haudenosaunee's Great Law.
 - Explain the values and attitudes that underlie decisions made by Haudenosaunee about their lives and their futures.
 - Compare consensus building to voting in decision-making.
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The organizing principles of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy or Six Nations) are explained through their Great Law of Peace. It details their overall philosophy, how participating nations should interact with each other and with outside communities. The central concept of the Great Law is unity in strength – strength through consensus decisions and in thinking “with one mind. According to the Haudenosaunee, the Great Law was described to them many centuries ago by a man called the Peacemaker.

Basically its called the Great Law of Peace because it's aimed at satisfying people's needs to use their minds instead of violence to settle their problems. So it is really aimed at passions. It's aimed at hatreds, and it constructed a very elaborate culture based on negotiations and on principle of coming together to solve problems using your mind and not your weapons.

John Mohawk Ph.D.
Seneca, Professor of American Studies
SUNY Buffalo

The first principle is peace, the second is equity and justice and the third one is the power of the good minds. And that's great power, but it's a collective power. It doesn't work unless it's together. Each nation maintains its own leadership, but they all agree that common causes would be decided in the Grand Council of Chiefs.

Oren Lyons
Faithkeeper
Onondaga Nation

One good mind to make decisions, that's the way we proceed. When the Confederacy was born, each nation agreed to act as a part of a league. There is autonomy for each nation, each nation has its own fire. Each nation has its own chiefs, its own Clan Mothers, but when it comes to matters that impact the entire Confederacy, then we act as one.

The Peacemaker used as a symbol of our Confederacy, not a flag, but a tree, the great white pine: the Tree of Peace. And at the base of that tree grow four white roots in the four cardinal directions of the earth; north, south, east and west. And any nation that can embrace the concepts of peace, power and righteousness, can follow back one of those roots to the Tree of Peace and join there with us.

G. Peter Jemison
Faithkeeper, Cattaraugus Reservation,
Seneca Nation

Some people believe that the Haudenosaunee's Great Law of Peace had an impact on the development of American democracy. That belief is highly controversial, but scholars say there is much evidence to support it.

I think elements of the idea of freedom of religion comes out of the Indians. I think the idea of free speech as a necessary element of public discourse comes from the Indians. I'm fairly certain that the structure of the United States government descends from a confederacy. First it had a monarchy, then it had articles of confederation which was a confederacy. And now we have the federal sort of representative government idea. But the intermediate one, the American confederacy, had to be influenced by the Indians. I don't think it's an accident that the first proposal for a government for the colonies looks strikingly like the structure of the Confederacy of the Six Nations of the Iroquois, even down to the number of representatives and what their powers and limitations would be and all that. It's impossible to imagine that all of those could be coincidences. It seems as though the Americans were watching, especially Benjamin Franklin, who took a big interest in the Indians.

John Mohawk, Ph.D.

In 1851 Benjamin Franklin did say that "It would be a strange thing ...if Six Nations of ignorant savages should be capable of forming such a union and be able to execute it in such a manner that it has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble, and yet that a like union should be impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous."¹

Franklin, and a number of colonial leaders, admired the emphasis on diplomacy and lack of crime and punishment in Haudenosaunee societies. In the wake of the American and French Revolution they were enamored of the idea of an egalitarian society, one that encouraged, rather than punished freedom of speech. Force was not needed to keep the peace, and there were no class structures, no King, Queen or aristocracy in absolute power.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

Elementary -- Middle School Levels

- **SEVEN GENERATIONS**

Read about the Haudenosaunee's Seventh Generation philosophy at the Six Nations' website: http://sixnations.buffnet.net/Culture/?article=seventh_generation. Chiefs must consider the effect their decisions have on descendants seven generations into the future. How does seven generations translate into years? Look at newspapers or news magazines to find a decision about an issue: was the decision made with concern for future (or past) generations? Compare the Seventh Generation philosophy with the philosophy of current US politicians. Do you believe US politicians exhibit long-term view in their actions? Can you think of an example of a US politician who worked on long-term goals?

High School -- Advanced Levels

- **THE GREAT LAW**

The Great Law is available at <http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/iroquois.html>. Read line 104 under "Religious Ceremonies Protected" and line 19 under "Rights, Duties and Qualifications of Lords." Contrast the descriptions in the Great Law with the election and removal of officials in the US Government.

- **CONTRAST THE GREAT LAW WITH US CONSTITUTION**

Review the excerpts from the interview with John Mohawk. Do you think the American constitution truly promotes a classless, egalitarian society? Explain why or why not.

- **CONSENSUS VS. VOTING ACTIVITY**

Review the interview excerpts from Oren Lyons and Peter Jemison and go to the Six Nations web site (<http://sixnations.buffnet.net/>) to find out more about the Haudenosaunee Great Law, its principles and values. How does consensus differ from a voting process?

To test the difference between voting and consensus yourselves, divide your class into **two decision-making groups**. Both groups must decide on an issue important to the class or school.

The **voting group** can be larger. This group will list suggestions and vote by **secret ballot**. Discussion and persuasion are allowed. If this group is very large, divide it into smaller segments to give each member a better chance to expressing his or her views. At a designated time, have the large group vote on the issue.

The **consensus group** will list suggestions and discuss the merits of each issue suggested. If the group is large, break it into smaller sections to promote discussion. Again, discussion and persuasion are allowed. This group will conclude its business when they all agree on how to resolve the issue. Those expressing their opinions should have the full attention of the rest of the group. Interruptions are not allowed. Have them keep track of the time it takes to reach a decision.

Before beginning to deliberate, each group will have to define how it will make its final determination in case of a tie in the voting group or in case of a different opinion in the consensus group. Examples of **resolution strategies** for breaking a tie could include: having the oldest person decide, having the person wearing red decide, etc. Examples of resolution strategies for the consensus group include further discussion and majority rule.

After the decisions are made discuss the following:

- Was one method of decision-making better or worse than another?
- What did it feel like to hold a minority opinion in the voting group vs. the consensus group?

Based on their experience with this activity, have students define their own classroom government to resolve selected issues or make decisions. Throughout the year, have them evaluate their decisions and decide what changes, if any, are needed to make their process of decision-making better.

REFERENCES

- 1 Albert H. Smythe, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 3, 42.

ON-LINE RESOURCES

Albany Plan, US Historical Documents Archive

<http://w3.one.net/~mweiler/ushda/albany.htm>

Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace

<http://sixnations.buffnet.net/>

The Iroquois Constitution

<http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/iroquois.html>

The United States Constitution

<http://www.house.gov/Constitution/Constitution.html>