

The Five Nations

The Five Nations developed a sophisticated political system that stressed equality and accountability for their leadership. The most powerful political body in the Iroquois Confederacy was the Great Council of Chiefs. The Iroquoian word for chief is “*sachem*.” The power of the chiefs was limited/balanced by the matriarchs. The matriarchs were responsible for electing and removing leaders. The Great Council wielded limited central authority over the members of the Confederation. Individual nations were free to disagree and pursue their own agenda if they wanted to. The sachems and people were governed by a code of unwritten laws called the *Great Law*. No one was above the *Great Law* (a system of laws handed down to them from Dekanahwidah).

The Iroquois developed a democratic political system. The "Iroquois Confederacy" was an inclusive political system that promoted unity amongst its members. In France, only the wealthy and powerful had any say in the political life of the nation. The Catholic Church and the king were the most powerful institutions in France and would not share power. French society was stratified along rigid class lines. The king of France was the law. This being the case the law could change with the changing moods of the king. France did not have a constitution until following the French Revolution in 1789. The *Great Law* was an unwritten set of rules encouraging public participation in decision-making. Referendums were held and leaders were recalled if they proved to be incapable (or corrupt). Decision-making was shared by both males and females. Chiefs had to honestly listen to suggestions made by members of the tribe because if the people were unhappy the chief could be removed from power. Anyone could bring complaints against a chief to the "Great Council of Chiefs."

The system of democracy developed by the United States following the American Revolution was directly modeled after the Iroquois Confederacy. Politicians like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson saw the wisdom of adopting the Iroquois style of government. In particular, this system guaranteed unity while allowing individual states freedom of action; moreover, the idea of keeping leadership accountable was attractive. The greatest strength of Iroquois society was how it involved both men and women in the political process. Prior to European contact women (matriarchs) enjoyed real power. However, European fur traders questioned the “manliness” of the Iroquois men who would obey the wishes of women. The Iroquois who dealt directly with the English adopted the idea of “patriarchy.” Consequently, the influence of women was reduced dramatically. And with women taken out of the picture, there was no one capable, experienced or willing, to keep leadership accountable.

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Leaders pursued policies that either only benefited themselves or their particular nation. Patriarchy led to the eventual destruction of the Iroquois Confederation. Arguably a similar decline or development is affecting the health and effectiveness of the American political system in the 21st Century.

From a democratic standpoint the Iroquois system was obviously the better of the two. In Iroquois society, people knew their rights as outlined by the *Great Law*. Unlike France where authority was often arbitrary, authority in the Confederacy was based strongly upon the concept of the rule of law. In the French system, the king both made the laws and enforced them. This inevitably led to an inconsistent application of the law.

Why did the Europeans Come?

There were economic, religious, and technological factors that influenced the Europeans to sail across the Atlantic and establish colonies:

ECONOMIC FACTORS

- 1). The economic policy of mercantilism influenced kings to compete with one another for overseas empire and resources.
- 2). Cities were becoming over-populated and colonies seemed like the logical place to put extra people.
- 3). The desire for profit encouraged merchants to find new trade routes to India and China.

RELIGIOUS FACTORS

- 1). Christian missionaries were encouraged by kings to discover new lands and convert the natives.
- 2). Missionaries wanted to convert the “uncivilized” and “godless” people of N. America.

TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS

- 1). Advances in such areas as navigation and shipbuilding gave the Europeans the means to sail longer distances safely.
- 2). Advances in weaponry gave the Europeans somewhat of an advantage over First Nations groups that might have resisted their presence.

When two societies meet they often conduct trade. They share technology, culture, and ideas. This sharing or mutual influence is called “cultural flow” by cultural anthropologists.

The Europeans influenced the First Nations of North America both negatively and positively. Some of the positive influences of the Europeans on the First Nations were: 1). Native peoples were introduced to new foods such as bread, peas, salt, etc.; 2). They were able to trade for woolen cloth/blankets; and 3). They were introduced to iron tools and weapons.

The Europeans were tolerated by the First Nations mainly because of the trade. In reality, the Europeans would not have survived their first few winters had it not been for the assistance of America’s indigenous peoples.

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Some of the negative influences of the Europeans on the First Nations were: 1). Europeans introduced the natives to alcohol; 2). The Europeans brought with them diseases that the native peoples had no resistance to; 3). The fur trade encouraged competition between various First Nations making war between them more likely; and 4). Religious orders like the Jesuits undermined established traditions by converting people to Christianity.

It should be noted that trade systems had been established in North America *before* the Europeans arrived. Thus, there was economic competition and consequently warfare between the Iroquois and Huron for centuries prior to the arrival of Cartier or Champlain. In fact, the European-First Nation fur trade was so efficient and profitable primarily because it utilized pre-existing trade networks that penetrated virtually the entire North American continent. Thus, European fur traders as they moved ever westward discovered that iron tools, guns, etc. preceded them.

The need to explore the oceans of the world was motivated by the desire for profit. Merchant-capitalists encouraged exploration so as to open up markets in China and India to European consumers. The spice trade had been a profitable industry in Europe for several hundred years prior to Christopher Columbus' arrival to the New World in 1492.