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COMMENTARY

The American Indian Legacy of Freedom and Liberty

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Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy, by Donald A. Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen,[1] is a thoroughly researched book that expands on the suggestive papers presented by Grinde and Johansen at the April 1992 Organization of American Historians meeting in Chicago.[2] In a discussion of both the papers and the book, I will concentrate on the book, because it offers broader arguments.

Let me begin by giving an opinion about the existing controversy, about who said what and what should be said about American Indians' legacy of freedom and liberty for all Americans. While we cannot prove that good old John Locke had a copy of the Iroquois constitution at his elbow when he wrote the second essay on civil government, some of us who study ethnohistory might take the position that his ideas are exceedingly familiar. One recalls the historic fact that Sir Isaac Newton and Baron Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz discovered calculus at about the same time but independently of each other; therefore, it is not impossible that Hiawatha and Deganaweda on one side and John Locke on the

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other discovered and commented on representative institutions of government, and that all three made substantial contributions to our democratic institutions of government. It is true, I believe, that the Iroquois executive, the great war chief, had a role similar to that of the American president in spite of the fact that the Indians and the early Americans had different lifestyles. It is also true, I am convinced, that North American Indian tribes respected the individual (possibly excepting the Tlingit, who had a form of slavery, and certain other tribes that mistreated women) and loved freedom. Further, I have found that there were checks and balances and elements of a parliamentary form of government among many Indians, particularly the confederated tribes of the East Coast.

There are those among us who have conjectured that Locke and Hiawatha, along with Deganaweda, might have had some kind of heavenly powwow-committee meeting to cogitate about problems of governance in both the New and the Old World. Carl Becker has written an intriguing book on *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*,[3] suggesting that we may not be wrong on this point. But more on Becker later.

Having identified some key elements in this subject, I focus on four points of argument: First, there is evidence to validate the reasoning of both Grinde and Johansen. Second, one can dispute the manner in which Indian democratic heritage is mishandled by Elizabeth Tooker and her supporters. Third, Mohawk chief and spiritual leader Jake Swamp and other modern Iroquois continue to expound on Indian ideals of freedom and peace. Fourth, two non-Indian scholars of yesteryear, Lawrence H. Gipson and Carl L. Becker, seemingly without knowing it, made certain contributions to Indian traditions of freedom.

Let me begin by saying I am convinced that Grinde and Johansen are doing pioneering work in Indian history, correcting the misdirected thinking of certain colonial historians and anthropologists. In so doing, they are spreading a new light of understanding and setting forth new themes for general American history and government.

In my considered judgment, Bruce Johansen, on his part, has given us a technically correct description and analysis of the institutions of governance of the Iroquois and other confederated Indian peoples. While I am not an authority on this subject, I find that what he says partly agrees with Elizabeth Tooker on Iroquois methods of governance. The disagreement with Tooker and others is that Johansen argues that Americans are indebted to the Indians for institutions of governance. Tooker especially disagrees, maintaining in essence that the Iroquois clan system, succession of chiefs, and Onondaga council traditions were so complex that it took years for her and L. H. Morgan to unravel them. Tooker's view implies that the colonials were ignorant and never understood Iroquois traditions and ceremonials. How does she know? In contrast, I find individuals such as Sir William Johnson, an adopted Mohawk with an Indian wife, who was practically an Indian when he wanted to assume that posture. And there were others. What is more, some modern Indians, notably Jake Swamp, Chief Wolf Clan of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation and leader in the Tree of Peace Society, say that there are still more secrets that Tooker does not know.

Tooker or no Tooker, my view is that the colonials did believe they observed democratic institutions among Iroquois and other confederated tribes. I make this generalization based on some forty years of researching and writing about early American Indian-white relations. In short, I overcome my modesty and become my own footnote, and I will maintain my own with anybody who wants to argue.

The overarching point here seems self-evident: It does not make a confounded bit of difference if the colonials misunderstood the intricacies of Iroquois family government traditions. They observed, over a period of centuries, powerful confederated Indian nations that appeared to have a viable representative system of government. Moreover, until about 1750, the Iroquois alone, through the diplomacy of their elected spokesmen, actually maintained a balance of power between the French and the English.

There was fear, admiration, and respect in the attitudes of Euro-Americans toward Iroquois statesmen, as we see in the writings of Indian superintendent Sir William Johnson, who took pains to educate the British Board of Trade about Indians. At the same time, there is a down side in the popular portrayal of Indians as savages, some of which came from Indian captivity narratives. Horror stories all but smothered the better reports. In many instances, there were no reports. As Bernard DeVoto once observed, because there is no written record does not mean there is no Indian history.

From a psychological perspective, we can propose that there were relatively few commentaries on Indians because people on the spot seldom comment on happenings on the spot unless they are of particular relevance at a particular time and place. Another factor to consider is that most colonials tended to look down on Indians. They hesitated to go on public record as eulogizing Indians in newspapers, broadsides, or public correspondence. Indians, like Black slaves, were low on the social totem pole and therefore were not worthy of notice. Judge Samuel Sewell took a risk by making appreciative comments about Indians, and he was not well received. More than a century later, his fellow New Englander, Francis Parkman, accused him of being a sentimental old fool who misunderstood savages.

Notwithstanding such historic racism, studied by modern scholars such as Roy Harvey Pearce and Winthrop Jordan, many colonial and revolutionary figures did speak out to commend Indian people for their healthful diet, their hygiene, their agricultural skills, their methods of defending themselves and making war, their appearance, their generosity, and their manner of governing themselves. Among such early American commentators were those who knew the Indians from firsthand contact and long experience. I refer to superintendents William Johnson and Edmund Atkin, colonial ranger Robert Rogers, historians Cadwallader Colden and Robert Beverly, military leaders such as General Robert Lee, Indian agents Conrad Weiser, George Croghan, and Richard Peters, and statesmen exemplified by Benjamin Franklin.

Leading colonial officials, as *Exemplar of Liberty* points out, could not help being exposed frequently to Indian ideas of confederation. This exposure is evident in the voluminous records of the 1754 Albany Congress and the numerous other Albany conferences relating to Indian affairs. These have been chronicled and analyzed by historian Lawrence H. Gipson. In two volumes of his monumental series, *The British Empire before the American Revolution*,[4] Gipson wrote at length about the Albany conference and made the point that colonials had, for decades going back to the late 1600s, been meeting with Indians to discuss problems of union and colonial defense. Thus, when Franklin put forth his Albany Plan of Union, there were many precedents—in fact, years and years of talking with Indians and cogitating about what to do in planning for a confederated government.[5]

It becomes obvious that Franklin had intimate contact with Indians at Albany and knew about other conferences and treaty deliberations. In his tract of 1781, *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America*, Franklin showed himself to be a typical colonial in his use of the term *savage.* At the same time, however, he fell back on his expertise and praised Iroquois decorum in parliamentary deliberations, in contrast to the disorder and confusion in the British House of Commons (*Exemplar,* p. 199).

What Johansen says about Iroquois democratic institutions agrees, in substance, with the carefully documented testimony of Cherokee Gregory Schaaf at a hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs on 2 December 1987.[6] Iroquois spiritual leader Oren Lyons, who testified at this hearing on the Iroquois constitution, has said repeatedly that "the basis of our nation is that the sovereignty of the individual is supreme.... [A]n Indian may not be driven from his own land." Lyons has pointed out that his people gave sanctuary to Dennis Banks, American Indian Movement leader, who, during his stay, kept in physical shape with fierce overland running practice. When asked why he ran, Banks replied that he had to be faster than those FBI guys who wanted "to catch me and put me in jail." The concept of freedom of movement is vigorously defended by the Iroquois as coming out of the Jay treaty and later ones giving the Indians of the Six Nations free movement across the Canadian border. The Iroquois, we may recall, have their own international passports, now accepted by nineteen nations. Lyons made these comments at the conference on "Indian Self-Rule," 17–20 August 1983, sponsored by the Institution of the American West, Sun Valley, Idaho.

Oren Lyons and Chief Jake Swamp have both been speakers on Indian freedom themes in my Indian history classes at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Jake Swamp and Gregory Schaaf are both leaders in the American Indian Tree of Peace Society, which keeps alive Iroquois traditions of peace that dovetail with ideas of democracy and self-determination for all peoples. It seems to me that in this nuclear age, the pleas for international peace made by the Iroquois and the Hopi at the United Nations and in cities throughout the world are of tremendous importance. The Tree of Peace Society alone has demonstrated the responsible and mature contribution of our native people to the world at large.

I have been a speaker on Indian treaties at the Six Nations longhouse at Onondaga and have heard, with minor variations, Iroquois orators express concepts of peace, liberty, and free movement similar to those of Oren Lyons, Jake Swamp, and Gregory Schaaf. More specifically, my visit to the Onondaga longhouse some years ago to speak on the subject of the Fort Stanwix treaty allowed me to see firsthand the traditional, representative behavior and parliamentary decorum of Iroquois leaders, men and women, seated on opposite sides of the longhouse. The discussion I observed on the controversial terms of this treaty was not unlike what Benjamin Franklin wrote about nearly two hundred years ago. For me, it was a great privilege to appear before this oldest parliament in North America (over one thousand years, according to some estimates).

That kind of legacy of freedom is present in Donald Grinde's analysis, in *Exemplar of Liberty*, of the Sons of Saint Tammany in Philadelphia and in New York. Research scholar Paul Zall, my colleague at the Huntington Library, characterizes Grinde's research and writing as positively first-rate. By tracing the origins and developments of the Tammany groups and showing their interrelationships to the Sons of Liberty and other revolutionary societies, Grinde has given us a masterful synthesis that demonstrates the positive impact that Iroquois institutions of governance had on Philadelphia politicians. They imitated the Indians; they tried to find out everything they could about them. The Tammanys of the eighteenth century had a lot of fun in their "Indian" antics, and, according to Zall, they had their jokes and counter-jokes. But, in the main, there was, as Grinde has documented, a strong thread of acculturation flowing through the "Saints," reaching far into the nineteenth century. One recalls that there were English sons of St. George and Irish sons of St. Patrick, and so there was a special feeling for the Sons of St. Tammany—a certain exclusiveness, even a sense of patriotism, as Grinde has found in looking into the Philadelphia records. When the Sons invited guests for a commemoration ceremony in 1773, their prestige was such that they did not hesitate to include leading politicians and merchant leaders of the middle colonies. Grinde and Johanson have given us a penetrating overview based on original records. They show us that Indian people did indeed have a role in the formation of the emerging national government.

A related story, apart from that of the Tammany Saints, involves the philosophers of the "heavenly city" of the eighteenth century. As Carl Becker and, later, William Brandon have written, the American Indians and the New World were everywhere in the thoughts of the eminent European *philosophes*. The Old World, they believed, was corrupt compared to the Edenic New World, which was inhabited by pristine, untainted, uncorrupted people living in a happy state of nature. Thomas Hobbes and other uninspired English philosophers wrote about an evil, corrupt state of nature, but the French philosophes did not. There is comment on this point in *Exemplar of Liberty*, and what I say supports the authors' arguments. We can agree that these French writers were actually propagandists for a new truth about the New World. Foremost among them is Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. He loved Indians and gave his readers starry dreams about the nobility of the New World inhabitants. Among the admirers of Montaigne were Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, and François-Marie Voltaire. There is little evidence to show that learned Jesuit missionaries of North America were fans of Montaigne, but they had their own ax to grind. With a blizzard of paper reports on Indian conversions and nonconversions, designed to extract funds for Canadian missions, they showered French church officials and lay readers with their *Relations*. According to one scholar, these *Relations*, or reports, were so popular that they have been compared to modern detective stories. There was intense interest in the heroic deeds of those who became Jesuit martyrs, including Isaac Jogues and Jean de Brébeuf, the "Ajax" of the missions. Although barbaric Indian behavior was emphasized by the priests, they also described the problems they had in converting hostile tribes and accordingly gave oceans of information about the institutions of governance among the Iroquois and their brothers, the converted Huron people. Needless to say, there was a host of eager readers in France and other European countries.

Probably the most significant of all of the Jesuit writers was the pioneer ethnologist, Father Joseph-François Lafitau, praised for his wisdom by scholars from Francis Parkman to William Fenton. The major philosophes of Europe were certainly familiar with Lafitau and the writings of the most prominent missionaries in North America. It is from these sources today that all writers on Indian peoples can garner their information. In between, of course, are middle transformers, the most prominent of whom is Lewis H. Morgan, who lived with nineteenth-century Iroqouis, mastered some of their tribal languages, and produced his monumental *League of the Ho-de-Ne-Sau-Ne, or Iroquois* (New York, 1851), now regarded as a kind of Bible for Iroquois scholars. But it was Carl Becker, in his *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, who demonstrated that the philosophers "denatured God" and then "deified nature." " For the love of God they substituted the love of humanity." Man was not depraved and there were natural rights of "all men . . . ."[7] Although Becker does not write about Indians as such, he shows us in no uncertain terms that the *philosophes* had a view of nature that was essentially good, wholesome, and inspirational.

William Brandon, in his book *New Worlds for Old*,[8] goes beyond Becker and documents the fact that reports from the New World had a powerful impact on the development of social thought over the three-hundred-year period from 1500 to 1800. What Brandon shows is that reports about American liberty and equality from writers like Baron Louis Armand de Lahontan, Lafitau, and the Jesuits' most significant historian, François Xavier Charlevoix, all helped to develop the concept of "natural" liberty which, in turn, evolved into the concept of the right to liberty. Brandon goes so far as to say that this change in European thinking found its way into the writings of such eminent figures as Pufendorf, Grotius, and Diderot. Father Charlevoix spoke of how "happy" Native Americans were. Others wrote about "absolute Notions of Liberty" among the Five Nations. In short, there was a kind of happiness in seeing the New World "regenerate the old."[9] One can see that such concepts are not unrelated to the Jeffersonian idea of "the pursuit of happiness." John Locke, it will be remembered, was concerned with property rights.

There is ample evidence that Indians, by their very presence, exposed the colonists to their happy ideals of freedom and democracy. The Indians and the propagandists mentioned above helped to influence the ideas of major French thinkers about the natural glory of Native American freedom and lifestyles. And we can be sure that the constitutional fathers read Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, and the rest of those we have mentioned. The proof is that their names are on the reading lists prepared by Jefferson and Madison in the Virginia gentleman's library. These names were later included on a list of books in the new Library of Congress for all good citizens to read. We can be sure, therefore, that the Virginia constitutional fathers, as well as their counterparts in other states, knew a lot about the heavenly city of eighteenth-century philosophers. So, in a sense, by a roundabout route going back even to the Jesuit *Relations*, Indians had a powerful influence on the thinking of Jefferson, Madison, and other constitutional founders of the past. We can conclude that on this issue and on other related issues, what Grinde and Johansen have written is widely supported and extremely significant in recognizing Native American contributions to our early American institutions of governance.

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NOTES

1. Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991.
2. Grinde, "The Constitutional Sons of St. Tammany, or Columbian Order . . ." and Johansen, "Native American Roots for Freedom of Expression as a Form of Liberty."
3. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932).
4. Lawrence H. Gipson, *The British Empire before the American Revoluion,*vols. 4 and 5 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1939 and 1942).
5. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 9, on recementing Indian alliances as an objective of colonials; and vol. 5, pp. 76, 133–42, describing the colonial desire for a fur trade monopoly and the need for Indian cooperation to squeeze out French fur trade interests.
6. Senate Congressional Resolution 76 (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 3–262. See also Gregory Schaaf, *Wampum Belts and Peace Trees, George Morgan, Native Americans, and Revolutionary Diplomacy* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1990), i–6, 13–14, 100 ff, 139, 204 ff. A little-known document at the Newberry Library, Chicago, illustrates the remarkable interest of the Continental Congress in the Six Nations Iroquois. It is entitled *Apocalypse de Chiokoyhikot, Chef des Iroquois, Sauvages du Nord de l'Amérique,* commissioned by order of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, 1777, "Imprimeur ordinaire des Colonies Conféderés." This document contains arguments of political persuasion directed toward French Canadians and the Iroquois in the form of an apocalyptic allegory.
7. Becker, *The Heavenly City,* 63, 102, 103, 130.
8. William Brandon, *New Worlds for Old: Reports from the New World and Their Effect on the Development of Social Thought in Europe, 1500–1800* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1989).
9. Ibid., 99, 104, 106–110.