

Native Impact on the American Revolution

by

Misha

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The biting cold seemed to seep into the bones of the bedraggled rebels as they huddled in log shelters. Their feet were cracked and bleeding, their clothes too thin and their bodies devoid of fat as they hungered in the grip of winter. Outside, a sentry in his full uniform, wearing every scrap of extra clothes, shivers, leaning back against the wind. His ears perk up as he hears a rhythmic crunch-crunch and scrape-drag sound of snow. He instinctively shoulders his musket and peers into the gloom. He sees a hunched shadowy shape moving slowly toward him, then another and another, all in a row. He calls out "Halt!" and the shapes freeze in place like a still-life painting. The snow slackens and he can see buckskins decorated with bright beads, painted quills and feathers. It is the Oneida, scores of them, and they are laden with packs and drags full of maize to deliver to the Continental Line¹.

This scene was one of dozens of contrary images that one could envisage to represent the Native American contribution to the War for Independence. The Native Nations fought for and against the rebellion. Some remained neutral, but all had an effect. Whether the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy or the Five Civilized Tribes, their part was no smaller than that of the French or Spanish in the American Revolution. The United States is a nation carved by European settlers out of what was relatively virgin land. These settlers brought to the continent a civilization that has become one of the greatest in history. However, the "savages" that were the

¹ Unknown, "American Revolution 1776-83," *The Oneida Tribe Of Indians Of Wisconsin*, 2010, <http://www.oneidanation.org/culture/page.aspx?id=2446/> (accessed November 10, 2010).

sole inhabitants of the continent, although largely ignored in conventional histories, had a profound effect on the politics, strategy and tactics of the war that formed a new nation.

The Native Nations that held the inland forests of North America were various and sundry with tribes within nations and different clans within those tribes. There is no way to paint the Natives with a broad brush concerning anything, the least of which is not the politics that led up to and beyond the American Revolution. In spite of the popular image of a chief in charge of a whole nation of Natives, each small community had leaders, and each of those communities had the prerogative to act independently, outside of the overarching opinion of the Nation to which they belonged. However, the focus here will be on the larger blocs and Nations as they relate to the Revolution. The two largest blocs of the time were the “Five Civilized Tribes” in the South consisting of the Seminole, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Creek Nations²; and the “Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy” in the North that included the Oneida, Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora peoples³. While the overall aim at the start of the revolution was for Native neutrality, the fortunes and tides of war dragged almost every Tribe into the fight on one side or the other – and with so many factions within each nation – sometimes both sides.

The Iroquois Confederacy, hailed as the longest participatory democracy in existence, is one based on brotherly peace⁴. The union was long established as a bloc before they made

² Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 36.

³ Joseph Glatthaar and James Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 17.

⁴ John Kahionhes Fadden, "The Six Nations: Oldest Living Participatory Democracy On Earth," *Ratical.org*, 2010, http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/ (accessed November 12, 2010).

contact with the “more advanced” European colonists and exists to this day⁵. However, as the war dragged on and the Continentals invaded Canada the Confederacy was fragmented and began choosing sides⁶. Likewise, the Nations of the South began to be drawn into the fight by the actions of the Rebels and Tories alike. The factors ranged from the perception of the end-state of the new American Nation and its encroachment on Native lands as well as the ideals of the Continental Congress and all points between.

The rift among the Iroquois cannot entirely be blamed on the Revolution however, as there was already signs of trouble with the sectarian partisanship of missionary Christianity creating a small civil war between Anglicans and Presbyterians with traditional “pagans” caught in between⁷. Nonetheless, as the British heavily courted the Iroquois people as well as the Five Civilized Tribes, the image of Americans pushing west was none too pleasing for the natives. The British had established limits on expansion by the colonists with treaties like that of Fort Stanwix⁸ and the Proclamation of 1763. It did not help the Patriot cause that the likes of George Washington among many other wealthy Americans had already begun to speculate on the properties in the Indian country. Additionally historical precedence like the Bacon Rebellion shed light on the nature of American interest on the frontier. This led to a large faction of Natives siding with the British throughout the war. However, in spite of many historians dismissing the

⁵ Bruce Johansen, "Dating the Iroquois Confederacy" (Ratical.org, 1995), 62-63, Online Notes.

⁶ Glatthaar and Martin, 122.

⁷ Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35.

⁸ Glatthaar and Martin, 119.

role that the Proclamation of 1763 had to play in the Revolution, it had a greater impact than is initially evident in most modern histories of the war.

The ongoing land speculation by Washington, Jefferson, Henry and others in the Kentucky territory was a huge investment scheme in which many placed hopes of riches. Washington in particular had been buying the title rights to land bounties from veterans of the French and Indian wars, amassing huge claims to land in the Indian territories. This speculation was based on the Fort Stanwix Treaty that ceded a huge portion of Kentucky to the British Colonists and was brokered with the Iroquois Nations. Unfortunately, their claim to the land was tenuous at best, as it was traditionally a Cherokee holding. The Colonists wanted that treaty ratified and the Proclamation rescinded so that westward expansion could continue and fortunes could be made. The British declined to acquiesce to either, as they feared an ongoing Indian insurgency that they knew would be costly in terms of blood and treasure. Hence, the British and Indians became natural allies in the coming war, and raised the stakes for the colonists in real monetary ways to push for separation from the Crown⁹.

Conversely, there were Native leaders who saw the value of friendship with the Americans in both material and ideological grounds. Men like Chief Shenandoah would strive to keep the Six Nations neutral in spite of the growing angst. He traveled to visit the Continental Congress prior to the signing of the Declaration of Independence and impressed the likes of Benjamin Franklin who stated that “The ‘savages’ are, in fact, as civilized or more civilized than the Whites...¹⁰” Shenandoah would receive recognition from Washington as being a great friend

⁹ Holton, 5-11.

¹⁰ Unknown, "American Revolution 1776-83," *The Oneida Tribe Of Indians Of Wisconsin*, 2010, <http://www.oneidanation.org/culture/page.aspx?id=2446/> (accessed November 10, 2010).

to the American Army and in fact delivered, along with Polly Cooper and other Oneida, several hundred bushels of corn to the hungry Continental Line at Valley Forge in 1777.

Materiel support was not the only way that the Natives participated in the revolution. The battle of Oriskany saw the first major action between Native forces fighting for opposing sides in the war and is cited as being the breaking point of the Iroquois Confederacy. On 6 August 1777 after the Americans had refurbished Fort Stanwix (on Oneida advice) as a show of strength to their frontier settlers, the Natives and the British alike, a relief column of Americans and Oneida were ambushed by British and Mohawk leading to one of the bloodiest battles of the war. The other side of this escalation was the massive numbers that contributed to the British cause, particularly in the south.

The British plied the Natives with trade goods, alcohol, weapons and promises of protection against American encroachment for their participation¹¹. They also paid handsomely for American scalps. This led to the general uprising of Natives in the south, as well as four of the Six Iroquois Nations going to war against the Americans. In the South, the Cherokee and others went on a spree throughout frontier settlements, raiding and pillaging as they went¹². The Northern Indians were led to the British alliance by the Mohawk Joseph Brant, taking with him the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca people¹³. This was mainly guerilla warfare, as well as scouting for the Regulars. However, this would also lead to a ruthless counterinsurgency program by the Americans which would not end with the revolution and would see the

¹¹ Wilcomb Washburn, "Indians And The American Revolution," *Americanrevolution.org*, circa 1975, <http://www.americanrevolution.org/ind1.html>. (accessed November 11, 2010).

¹² Ibid

¹³ Glatthaar and Martin, 246.

displacement of the vast majority of the Natives from east of the Appalachian Mountains¹⁴.

Thomas Jefferson was livid at the actions of the Indians, especially the Cherokee and in effect called for ethnic cleansing¹⁵.

The Americans responded mercilessly to the attacks and felt betrayal by the Natives. Washington and Greene would send Sullivan to “Butcher and Bolt” in Indian country slaughtering and razing as they went¹⁶. The necessity of keeping the natives from raiding the frontier settlements and harassing the Continental Line, as well as aiding the British, made retributive expeditions a necessity in the eyes of the American high command. Sullivan’s expedition alone razed more than 40 villages and destroyed 160,000 bushels of corn¹⁷.

This insurgency and counterinsurgency was nothing new in the Americas and the tactics employed by the American army relied heavily on those borrowed from their Native neighbors. These tactics had proved effective in the ongoing frontier disputes, as well as the French and Indian war, that won North America for the British. The British and French employed Indian scouts and fighters throughout the war, but the British irregulars, the Rogers’ Rangers, not only fought like Indians, but codified their tactics and techniques in a document that is still in use today by the US Army Rangers¹⁸. Rogers’ precepts, along with the leadership of Daniel Morgan

¹⁴ Calloway, 123.

¹⁵ Washburn

¹⁶ Terry Golway, *Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005), 241.

¹⁷ Calloway, 47-50.

¹⁸ Robert Rogers, "Roger's Rangers Rules Or Plan Of Discipline," *Military-info.com*, 2010 (1757), <http://www.military-info.com/freebies/roger.htm>. (accessed November 10, 2010).

and others in the use of these tactics in the war would be another important, albeit indirect, contribution of Native ingenuity to the war effort.

Robert Rogers was appointed to command an independent company of rangers in 1757 and recruited the woodsmen of Massachusetts to flesh that company out. He was a stickler for field craft and combat discipline and formed his unit with a list of rules that effectively listed all that the frontiersmen had learned in observing the Indians and made the rangers a light-footed, stealthy fighting force¹⁹. Rogers was a pragmatic leader enlisting men with skill and potential instead of merely status, even enlisting former slaves and Indians. Rogers offered his services to the Continental Army, but was rebuffed. He was incensed and thereafter fought for the British²⁰. They became renowned for their daring-do and were soon the premier scouting force of the British Army²¹. However, his innovative tactics and skills were already a part of the American fighting force – and would be used to great advantage by the Americans.

The American Army was for all intents and purposes modeled on its European cousins as the American high command were mostly former British officers, and their advisors were of the German and French aristocracy. However, Washington and others had fought in the French and Indian war and knew how to take advantage of terrain, mobility, camouflage and weaponry. The Continentals had a weapon that would portend things to come in warfare – the rifle. While not used in massive numbers the rifle was effective at a much greater range than the smoothbore musket and skirmishers were used to target the British command before the main forces were

¹⁹ Rogers

²⁰ Unknown, "A Brief History Of The Queen's Rangers 1776-83," *Queensrangers.co.uk*, 2009, <http://www.queensrangers.co.uk/QR2009/History.html>. (accessed November 10, 2010).

²¹ Steven Kavanaugh, "Rogers' Rangers," *Rogersranger.org*, 1998, <http://rogersrangers.org/rogers/index.html>. (accessed November 10, 2010).

within range of each other. Other riflemen under the command of Men like Daniel Morgan would act as guerillas, harassing the British army and living off the land²². These men used stealth, firepower and mobility to best the British Regulars time and again.

The war in the north was a frustrating one for the British as Washington used Indian style fighting on a large scale. He would refuse to do set-piece battle until the enemy made a mistake or the overall situation was in his favor. This is not to say that he used Indian tactics, just that his strategy was more fluid than the conventional European force. His battlefield tactics remained largely that of Europe and with the help of his European advisors, his army survived. In the south was something of a different story.

The British dominated the southern theater as the populace was riddled with Tories and the Five Civilized Tribes led by the Cherokee harassed the frontier settlements and the Continental Army mercilessly. Men like Francis Marion and Nathaniel Greene would be paramount to keeping the British occupied and frustrated in the South. Marion, known as the "Swamp Fox" had learned his tactics in the French and Indian wars well as he fought the Cherokee. He employed these same tactics against the British to great effect, harassing and stymieing the Redcoats at every turn²³. Likewise Greene effectively used his irregulars and guerillas to harass the British rear to such an extent that he exhausted the British and helped force an end to the war²⁴.

²² Golway, 241.

²³ Amy Crawford, "The Swamp Fox," *Smithsonianmag.com*, July 1, 2007, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/biography/fox.html>. (accessed November 11, 2010).

²⁴ David Hayball, "George Washington's Generals: Major General Nathanael Greene," *Revolutionarywararchives.org*, August, 2006, <http://www.revolutionarywararchives.org/greenehay.html>. (accessed November 10, 2010).

The nations that peopled North America were established long before the arrival of Europeans to the continent. While the colonies grew and expanded the Natives adapted and assimilated to some extent while maintaining their own identity. As the colonists moved closer toward self determination and ultimately independence, there is little doubt that the Native nations had a lasting and profound impact on not only the Casus Belli but the conduct of the war and ultimately the establishment of a country that has long endured. The direct and indirect contributions of the Native Nations to the American Revolution are indeed as important as they were impressive.

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