

Native American Ministries #6

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The Great Law of Peace

It started with the original Five Nations, the sixth nation, the Tuscarora would join the Iroquois confederacy sometime in the early 1700s. In the early second century (anno domini or common era as you wish ed.) when the original Five Nations and other Native nations were constantly at war with one another, there appeared from the north a prophet named Deganawidah, the Peacemaker. It is said that he was born of a virgin woman and, as a grown man, came to the Haudenosaunee traveling in a stone canoe. Deganawidah brought a message of peace. But because he had a speech impediment he was limited in sharing his message with people. He linked up with Ayenwatha (made famous by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's misguided poem "Hiawatha"), an orator from the Onondaga Nation. Over a long period of time, together they succeeded in stitching together an alliance among the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Oneida Nations. The fifth nation, the Onondaga with their leader the Tododaho, resisted joining the amalgam of nations. In a parley, Deganawidah took a single arrow and invited Tododaho to break it, which he did easily. Then he bundled together five arrows and asked Tododaho to break the lot. He was unable to do so. In the same way, Deganawidah prophesied, "the Five Nations, each weak on its own, would fall into darkness unless they all banded together" (1). Soon the Tododaho agreed upon the alliance.

Together the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee agreed on a constitution known as the Great Law of Peace. They established the limits of the new Grand Council, agreeing that they would govern relationships among the Five Nations and outside entities, but that affairs internal to each nation would be handled by them individually. The council negotiated peace treaties but declarations of war were left to the individual member nations of the confederacy. When issues were to be decided among the Five Nations, the Tododaho -- who by agreement was the chief of the chiefs -- would send out runners to announce to member nations the gathering of the Grand Council. The selected representatives or chiefs of the different nations gathered to make the decisions that were required to be unanimous.

Consensus was the manner in which decisions were made and it is still employed today in all deliberations of the Grand Council. This was a true consensus process, little resembling what we call consensus making today. One of the many unique features of the consensus decision-making process was that all decisions were required to take into account the impact of the final choices on the next seven generations. (2) Today the Six Nations Haudenosaunee is the longest-surviving democracy in the world and their unique passports are recognized by many nations.