Indians and the American Revolution
By Wilcomb E. Washburn

The late Wilcomb E. Washburn was one of America's most versatile and accomplished historians, receiving his Ph.D. (American Civilization) from Harvard University in 1955. This is the annotated text of a presentation he made here in Riverside, CA during the time he was Director of American Studies at the Smithsonian Institution. The author of more than sixty books and articles, he was noted for his expertise concerning the history of Virginia and the American Indian. Works include *The Indian in America* (1975) and *The Assault on Indian Tribalism: The General Allotment Law (Dawes Act) of 1887* (1975).

The role of the American Indian during the American Revolution was a shadowy and tragic one, symbolized by Benjamin West's painting, now in the National Gallery of Art, of Colonel Guy Johnson, the British superintendent of Indian affairs in the North, and Joseph Brant, the great Mohawk warrior. It was a shadowy role, but an important one. It was shadowy not only because the Indian operated physically from the interior forests of North America and made his presence felt suddenly and violently on the seaboard settlements, but because the Indian was present also in the subconscious mind of the colonists as a central ingredient in the conflict with the Mother Country.

After a century and a half of exploration and settlement, the English colonists, in 1763, were finally masters of the coastal areas of North America. With rapidly growing populations they now turned inward away from the sea to a larger destiny. The Great War for Empire in the 1750s and 1760s had resulted in the expulsion of the French political and military presence from the interior. The powerful Indian nations who lived in the region were now unable to play one European power off against the other. Their conflicts with the English would now be conducted without benefit of European allies. The need to coordinate British power in America in the face of the French
threat had led, in 1755, to the appointment of a superintendent of Indian affairs for
the northern department, an office to which Sir William Johnson was appointed. In
1756 a similar superintendency for the southern colonies was established, with Sir
Edmond Atkin as superintendent. The superintendents operated in subordination to
the commander-in-chief of British forces in America. While not taking the conduct of
Indian relations entirely out of the hands of the colonial governors and assemblies,
the existence of these new colonial officers marked a significant diminution of the
powers inherited and assumed by the individual English colonies.

With the conclusion of the Great War for Empire, the English government applied
further controls over colonial freedom to act, particularly in restricting settlement
westward within the chartered limits of the colonies. By the Proclamation of 1763,
the lands beyond the Appalachian mountain chain were declared off limits to colonial
governments, the lands being "reserved" to the Indians under the cognizance of the
British Crown which reasserted its sovereignty and control over the area. Although the
anger of the colonies was tempered by the knowledge that the freeze was a
temporary measure and not necessarily permanent, it marked another example of the
tightening noose placed by the home government over colonial freedom of action.

The status of the Indian nations of the interior is not easy to describe. Certainly they
attributed to themselves independent status which they felt able to maintain by force
of arms. The English government, on the other hand, asserted ultimate sovereignty
over Indian lands by virtue of the ancient charters which former kings of England had
granted to those undertaking to plant colonies in the New World. Though speculative
in origin and based on ignorance of the geography of the New World and of the power
of the Indian nations in the interior, the charters were brought forth in legal
arguments whenever the possibility of their full realization was possible. ¹

In their dealings with the Indian nations, the English authorities utilized the treaty
form of negotiation in which solemn covenants were entered into as between
equals. During the period 1763 to 1775, a series of boundaries between the
colonists and the Indians of the interior were created from Lake Ontario to Florida, confirming in the minds of Indians (and of many colonists) the belief that the Indian country was closed to speculation and settlement by the increasingly aggressive colonists.

Lord Dunmore's War of 1774 marked the beginning of the breakdown of the arrangements by which the seaboard colonies and the Indian nations of the interior were to be kept apart. Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia, sought to seize the abandoned Fort Pitt, captured from the French during the Great War for Empire, in support of Virginia's charter claims. Dunmore's move into the trans-Allegheny areas of western Pennsylvania (Virginia's charter claims were to the west and northwest) led to war with the Delawares and Shawnees. The conflict triggered a response from the Iroquois to the north who stood in the relation of elder brothers to the Shawnees and Delawares. Superintendent of Indian Affairs Johnson worked diligently to keep the Iroquois out of war. He pointed out that the Six Nations (who comprised the Iroquois Confederacy) had renewed and confirmed the "Covenant Chain subsisting between us" at the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, October 26, 1768. But the Iroquois demanded to know why whites were not honoring the former treaties and boundary lines and were moving beyond the mountains into the Ohio River valley. While arguing in council to forestall Iroquois involvement in Dunmore's War, Johnson on July 11, 1774, died and was succeeded by his nephew and son-in-law, Guy Johnson. Guy Johnson was relieved when, in a series of conferences culminating in a great meeting at Onondaga in October 1774, the Iroquois decided to ratify the pledge to remain at peace with the English and to persuade the Shawnees to settle their differences with the Virginians. Joseph Brant (left, in a portrait by Gilbert Stuart), a Mohawk graduate of Eleazar Wheelock's Indian School at Lebanon, Connecticut (later moved to Hanover, New Hampshire, where it became known as Dartmouth College), was particularly persuasive in these conferences. 2
The English government, meanwhile, continued its policy of restraining colonial expansion into the territory reserved to the Indians. By the Quebec Act, the seaboard colonies were seemingly shut off from expansion into the lands they claimed by charter, those lands being incorporated into the new British province of Quebec. The fact that this restriction was in the form of an Act of Parliament, and not an administrative decree, made it all the more damaging to the pretensions of the colonies. By the act, the province of Quebec was extended as far south as the Ohio River. Control was placed in the hands of a royal governor with a standing army under his command to support him and with no representative assembly to bother him. While the Quebec Act is usually interpreted in terms of its religious significance (its provisions for religious toleration of Catholicism outraged good Protestants), in fact, as Francis Jennings has pointed out, the act was more significant in putting a brake on the land speculation of the seaboard colonists and fixing sovereignty and control of the areas of potential expansion in England and in Parliament rather than in America and in colonial legislatures. 3

Whether one seeks to explain the subsequent break as a direct consequence of the British government's attempt to stymie colonial land speculation and expansion, or merely indirectly related to it, there is no doubt that British restrictions on colonial freedom of action in this as in other fields helped to convince the colonists that violent reaction might be the preferable alternative. Violence was not long in coming. When the citizens of Boston threw overboard English tea (while, interestingly, dressed as Indians), the English government responded by closing the Port of Boston. In explaining the growing crisis to the Iroquois at a conference in January 1775, Guy Johnson asserted that:

This dispute was solely occasioned by some people, who notwithstanding a law of the King and his wise Men, would not let some Tea land, but destroyed it, on which he was angry, and sent some Troops with the General [Thomas Gage],
whom you have long known, to see the Laws executed and bring the people to
their senses, and as he is proceeding with great wisdom, to shew them their great
mistake, I expect it will soon be over. 4

Neither the loyalists nor the patriots sought to enlist Indian support at this time.
Indeed, both sides urged the Indians to remain neutral on the grounds that the
disputes were a family quarrel in which the Indians were not concerned. Yet,
informally, the line was not so clearly drawn. George Washington, in the winter of
1774-1775, recruited some gunmen from among the minor Eastern tribes, the
Stockbridge, Passamaquoddy, St. John’s and Penobscot Indians. By the fall of
1775, General Gage, the British commander, would use Washington’s actions to
justify his orders to Guy Johnson and John Stuart (who had succeeded Atkin as
superintendent of Indian affairs for the southern department) to bring the Indians
into the war when opportunity offered. 5

In July 1775, the Continental Congress proposed a plan similar to the
superintendencies created by the Crown for managing Indian affairs except that
three geographical departments instead of two were created. Commissioners were
appointed for each department. The Congress also drafted a talk which could be
delivered by the commissioners to any tribes in their district. The talk asserted
that:

This is a family quarrel between us and Old England. You Indians are not
concerned in it. We don’t wish you to take up the hatchet against the king’s
troops. We desire you to remain at home, and not join either side, but keep the
hatchet buried deep. 6

Not until the summer of 1776 did either the Americans or British formally and
officially attempt to involve the Iroquois, the most powerful northern nation, on
their side. Informal approaches, however, were made with increasing frequency.
In July 1775, Ethan Allen, of Vermont, sent a message to the Iroquois urging them to shun the King’s side. Allen asserted:

I know how to shute and ambush just like the Indian and want your Warriors to come and see me and help me fight Regulars You know they Stand all along close Together Rank and file and my men fight so as Indians Do I want your Warriors to Join with me and my Warriors like Brothers and Ambush the Regulars, if you will I will Give you Money Blankets Tomahawks Knives and Paint and the Like as much as you say because they first killed our men when it was Peace time. 7

Meanwhile, the British were similarly exciting the Six Nations. The Indians were invited "to feast on a Bostonian and drink his Blood." With good anthropological understanding the British provided a roast ox and a pipe of wine as the symbolic substitute for the rebels. 8

The Iroquois at first resisted the blandishments of both sides. As a Seneca warrior put it, in reply to the warnings against the Americans made by Colonel John Butler, who acted for Colonel Johnson in the latter’s absence:

We have now lived in Peace with them a long time and we resolve to continue to do so as long as we can - when they hurt us it is time enough to strike them. It is true they have encroach’d on our Lands, but of this we shall speak to them. If you are so strong Brother, and they but as a weak Boy, why ask our assistance. It is true I am tall and strong but I will reserve my strength to strike those who injure me. If you have so great plenty of Warriors, Powder, Lead and Goods, and they are so few and little of either, be strong and make good use of them. You say their Powder is rotten - We have found it good. You say they are all mad, foolish, wicked, and deceitful - I say you are so and they are wise for you want us to destroy ourselves in your War and they advise us to live in Peace. Their advice we intend to follow. 9
Although the Indians refused to be swayed by either side at this time, uncertainty as to how they might be affected by the struggle caused bitter divisions to be formed among them.

Meanwhile, in July 1776, Colonel Guy Johnson and Joseph Brant, the Mohawk, had returned to New York from a visit to England. While in London, Brant had been warmly received and highly honored. George Romney had painted his portrait. Brant had become more than ever convinced that the Indian future lay with the British Crown and not with the American colonists. After distinguishing himself at the Battle of Long Island, Brant slipped through the patriot lines in order to return to Iroquoia and bring his countrymen into the fight against the Americans. In conjunction with Colonel Butler, the British commander at Fort Niagara, Brant succeeded in getting four of the six Iroquois nations to take up the hatchet against the Americans. Only the Oneida and the Tuscarora refused. The decision for war was made at a great congress at Irondequoit in July 1777, at which the Indians were finally overwhelmed by massive gifts of rum, provisions and useful goods. 10

The bloody seal to the fateful decision made by the Iroquois to break their traditional unity (as well as their neutrality) was the Battle of Oriskany, August 6, 1777, which occurred when American General Nicholas Herkimer was on his way to relieve beleagured Fort Stanwix. Herkimer failed, but the Seneca allies of the British in particular, suffered heavy losses. Seventeen of the thirty-three Indians killed were Seneca as were sixteen of the twenty-nine wounded. In Indian terms, where success in battle was measured by the smallness of one's own losses, the battle was a disaster. Even more galling than the men lost was the fact that the Great Peace established by the Iroquois Confederacy was now dissolved. Brother was fighting brother. Oneidas and Tuscaroras had fought with Herkimer against their fellow Iroquois on the King's side. 11

Shortly after the battle of Oriskany, the patriot cause seemed vulnerable to destruction at the hands of General John Burgoyne who had moved south from
Canada in June 1777 in order to cut off the middle and southern colonies from those in New England. On the way, Indian auxiliaries in his command murdered a young lady, Miss Jane McCrea, in a celebrated incident which fed the fuel of patriot propaganda that (as Jefferson put it in the Declaration of Independence) the King had "endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontier the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions." When General Philip Schuyler received word during a conference with the Oneidas and Tuscaroras at Albany, in September, that the American army had engaged Burgoyne's at Freeman's Farm he immediately asked for their assistance and received it. The warriors, fresh from their participation in Herkimer's campaign, joined General Horatio Gates' army and rendered invaluable assistance. 12

The British thrust was turned back and warfare in New York State in 1778 and 1779 consisted of guerrilla raids by British supported Iroquois on interior New York settlements such as that at Cherry Valley. The raids led to a massive counter offensive planned by George Washington and commanded by General John Sullivan which entered the Iroquois homeland and applied a scorched earth policy to the villages and cornfields which the Indians had prudently abandoned. Years later, in 1790, when the Seneca leader, Cornplanter, was negotiating with Washington, he recounted that "When your army entered the country of the Six Nations we called you Town Destroyer; and to this day when that name is heard our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers." 13

In the inland areas of the South, even more powerful Indian nations existed than in the North. The Southeastern nations could muster 14,000 warriors: 3,000 each among the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Creeks, plus 5,000 hardy Chickasaws. The southern Indians had been subjected to the same encroachments by the colonists that the northern Indians had experienced. By the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals on
the Watauga River in March 1775, the Transylvania Company had obtained a title of sorts to much of present day Kentucky and middle Tennessee. But the Cherokee chief Dragging Canoe had stalked out of the negotiations, warning that any attempt to settle the area would turn the land dark and bloody. 14

The British sub-agents Alexander Cameron and Henry Stuart attempted to warn the American settlers who were encroaching on Indian lands at Watauga and Nolichucky. Their warnings enabled the settlers to prepare themselves against attack and to characterize the British cautions - suitably distorted - as evidence of British instigation of Indian attack. For the most part, the Americans refused to heed the warnings to leave. 15

The patriots, who had appointed commissioners to deal with the Indians as prescribed by the Continental Congress, sought to persuade the natives that the King’s agents were now superseded by themselves. In April 1776 a conference was held with representatives of the Cherokees, but most of the tribe absented themselves. The colonial representatives urged the Cherokees (and, in a later conference, the Creeks) to remain neutral and not be swayed by British arms or arguments. The American case was not persuasive and, in May 1776, a delegation from the north composed of Shawnees, Delawares, and Mohawks, arrived among the Cherokees and convinced them to take up the tomahawk against the encroaching Americans. Devastation soon followed on the frontier. 16

The response of the southern colonies was similar to that in the North. Devastating strikes were made by American armies against the Cherokees. Like the Iroquois, the Cherokees chose to let their country be ravaged rather than attempt to engage the American columns in pitched battles. Instead, they retired further west and watched the colonial soldiers destroy their crops and houses. Like the Iroquois, though to a lesser degree, the Cherokees were riven by factional strife on how best to confront the deteriorating situation. 17
Thomas Jefferson’s reaction to the Cherokee attacks on the frontier expressed his sense of the seriousness of the situation:

I hope that the Cherokees will now be driven beyond the Mississippi and that this in future will be declared to the Indians the invariable consequence of their beginning a war. Our contest with Britain is too serious and too great to permit any possibility of avocation from the Indians. 18

The fate of the Cherokees dampened the inclination of the Creeks to seek vengeance against the encroaching settlers at the possible cost of similar retaliation. Nevertheless, an opportunity to strike a coordinated blow occurred when late in 1778 a British fleet arrived in Georgia. Savannah fell to it, and a force was sent inland to Augusta. By virtue of poor communication (one might almost say a total lack of effective communication), John Stuart, the Indian superintendent in Pensacola, was uninformed of the move and was unable to bring Creek allies and local loyalists to the assistance of the British troops. 19

Although huge amounts of goods were annually provided Britain’s Indian agents for use in keeping her Indian alliances firm (£75,000 sterling in 1778 for the southern Indians alone), few results were evident to an increasingly skeptical Parliament. In March 1779, in considering a money bill, heated comments about the apparently fruitless expenditures of such sums were made. 20 Yet Indian goods continued to be vital in maintaining Indian support. As one observer put it, “Reason and Rhetoric will fall to the Ground unless supported by Strouds and Duffells. Liberality is alone with Indians true Eloquence without which Demosthenes and Cicero or the more modern orators Burke and Barre might harangue in vain.” 21

Meanwhile, the new Spanish ally of the revolting colonies outgeneraled the British in the Gulf Coast region. Bernardo de Galvez, moving from New Orleans east along the coast to Mobile, was able to seize that port on February 10, 1780, after General John Campbell, the British commander in West Florida, had dismissed his
Choctaw auxiliaries without adequate thanks or recompense. Campbell had earlier frittered away this support by calling them in unnecessarily in response to false alarms. 22

When Pensacola, further east, was next threatened in March 1780 by the Spanish, 2000 Creeks under Alexander McGillivray and William McIntosh rallied to the support of the British. The Spanish settled down to wait for the Indians to depart, but victory eluded them when, after six weeks, a British fleet arrived. Galvez was forced to retire. 23

In March 1781, a Spanish fleet again appeared off Pensacola with a 4000 man army which overmatched 1500 British soldiers, 400 Choctaws, and 100 Creeks. After fierce fighting, in which the Indian allies of the British distinguished themselves, the garrison capitulated May 8, 1781. The fall of Pensacola was soon followed by the fall of Augusta and Savannah. British collapse in the South was imminent and the King’s Indian allies were forced to choose their future course. 24 The Cherokees and Chickasaws sought to negotiate peace with the Americans. The Creeks continued to stand with the British; the Choctaws wavered. 25 When the British finally evacuated St. Augustine in 1783, they were astonished to find that numbers of their Indian allies sought to join them. As one Indian talk put it, "If the English mean to abandon the Land, we will accompany them - We cannot take a Virginian or Spaniard by the hand - We cannot look them in the face." The commandant of the garrison expressed his amazement at the Indian attitude:

The minds of these people appear as much agitated as those of the unhappy Loyalists on the eve of a third evacuation; and however chimerical it may appear to us, they have seriously proposed to abandon their country and accompany us, having made all the world their enemies by their attachment to us. 26

In the Preliminary Articles of Peace of 1782, no mention was made of the Indians. Despite their important role and visible presence, they had receded into the
shadows of European diplomacy. Recognition of their existence and status was easier to ignore or deny in Europe than in America. Brant, the Mohawk, was outraged that the King seemed to be selling out the Indians to the American Congress. Daniel Claus, the British agent for the Six Nations in Canada, was astounded that the English negotiator in Paris, Richard Oswald, had ignored, or been ignorant of, the boundaries of the Indian country established by the Fort Stanwix treaty line of 1768. "It might have been easily reserved and inserted that those lands the Crown relinquished to all the Indn. Nations as their Right and property were out of its power to treat for, which would have saved the Honor of Government with respect to that Treaty," he wrote. Other Englishmen were outraged. "Our treaties with them were solemn," Lord Walsingham noted, "and ought to have been binding on our honour." Lord Shelburne, on the other hand, vigorously defended the Preliminary Articles, asserting that "in the present treaty with America, the Indian nations were not abandoned to their enemies; they were remitted to the care of neighbours." 27

The Spanish representative at the Paris negotiations, the Conde de Aranda, had similarly asserted that the territory west of the Appalachians to the Mississippi, which England grandly delivered to the American colonies, belonged to "free and independent nations of Indians, and you have no right to it." But the American negotiators rejected the Indian claim and asserted the full authority of the colonies to possess the lands west to the Mississippi. 28

In their succeeding negotiations with the Indians, the Americans attempted to convince the Indians that by choosing the losing side in the struggle they had lost all their rights. They asserted that the Indians were a conquered people. James Duane in 1784 advised the governor of New York not to treat with the Iroquois as equals, saying that "I would never suffer the word 'nation' or 'six nations' or 'confederates,' or 'council fire at Onondago' or any other form which would revive
or seem to confirm their former ideas of independence they should rather be taught that the public opinion of their importance has long since ceased." 29

Neither the Iroquois, nor the Indians of the Old Northwest, nor those of the South, tamely accepted colonial assertions of sovereignty by right of conquest. Although most of the powerful nations which had hitherto held back the tide of English expansion had chosen the wrong side in the Revolution, they still possessed land and power only partially diminished by the war. The British government, embarrassed by the reproaches of their erstwhile allies, continued to hold the forts of the Old Northwest and to provide trade goods and sympathy to their Indian allies though refusing military aid for a renewed attack against the Americans. Attempts by American forces to impose their will on the Indians confirmed the fact that the Indians had not been conquered by the Americans during the Revolution, for these attempts were repeatedly frustrated. In 1790, General James Harmar’s expedition into the Maumee Valley resulted in an embarrassing failure. In 1791, General Arthur St. Clair's army was similarly defeated by the Indians near Fort Wayne, Indiana. In the South, McGillivray of the Creeks played off Spanish and American authorities, finally negotiating a treaty with the United States in New York in 1790. In 1794, General Anthony Wayne finally did manage to defeat the Northwest Indians at *Fallen Timbers*. But the resistance and strength of the natives had refuted the notion that conquest could be asserted rather than won. 30

With the formation of the Constitution and the establishment of a new government, Secretary of War Henry Knox, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, and President George Washington formulated a policy of honor and good will toward the native Americans. As expressed in the Northwest Ordinance, the policy asserted that:

The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their
property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them. 31

Yet the passions engendered by the American Revolution, despite the good will expressed in the formal policy enunciated by the government, was to lead to bitter and violent confrontations on the frontier. The bloody ground of Kentucky was to be repeated in region after region as the undisciplined and unregulated expansion of the American people got underway. In the end the Indian was the loser. That he would have been a loser even if the King had repressed the rebellion is probable; but his decline would not have been so swift or so bitter.