Treaty of Canandaigua: The Political Necessity of Peace

As the British raised the white flag of surrender over Yorktown, Virginia in October of 1781, the reign of Great Britain over the American colonies came to a conclusion. The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783, and with it, the United States was recognized as ‘free, sovereign, and independent. . .’¹ Forgotten in the treaty were the many Native American tribes that were still present in the newly formed United States. Thus commenced the busy period of treaty-making with the Indian nations within the infant years of America. Among the numerous treaties that appeared was the Treaty of Canandaigua, an accord involving the United States and the Six Nations of the Iroquois. This treaty ensured peace and friendship between the two parties, but this essay will focus on its political reality and necessity.

The Treaty of Canandaigua cannot be examined as a solitary document, or even as a solitary event. Instead the treaty exists as a threshold. Canandaigua can be seen as the culmination of a decade’s worth of Native American diplomacy, but also as the beginning of treaty-based relations between the United States and the Iroquois.² This essay cannot and will not explore all those events, defining or subtle, which led to the Canandaigua Treaty. The driving forces behind the treaty will simultaneously demonstrate its vital back-story.

In late 1790, President George Washington appointed Timothy Pickering, originally from Salem, Massachusetts and formally the Quartermaster General, as the

² Note: In this essay, I will use the terms “Iroquois,” “Iroquois Confederacy,” and “Six Nations” to denote those groups of Native American tribes who call themselves the Haudenosaunee. These tribes include the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, the Seneca, and the Tuscarora; see Map 1.
new commissioner to the Iroquois Confederacy. At this point, United States relations
with most Indian nations had become tenuous at best. A series of unfair treaties had left
the tribes of the West, most specifically the Miami, completely dissatisfied, and upon
Pickering’s appointment, war seemed imminent. It was under, and because of, these
severe circumstances that Pickering was to begin the slow, but steadily effective
negotiations with the Six Nations.3

Pickering’s appointment coincided with the launching of a new stage in federal
diplomatic, as well as military, relations with Native American tribes. Until this time, the
United States, functioning under the Articles of Confederation which placed Indian
affairs under the Department of War, had utilized methods of military intimidation to
compel Native Americans to submit to treaties which often resulted in the forced cession
of their lands. This was the situation which faced the Six Nations of the Iroquois shortly
after the end of the Revolutionary War. In a treaty that stood as the beginning of all
future interactions with the federal government, the Iroquois Confederation, led by
Seneca war chief Cornplanter, begrudgingly signed the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in October
of 1784. The terms of the treaty included the creation of a demarcation line from “the
mouth of Oyonwagea Creek on Lake Ontario, four miles east of Niagara south to the
mouth of Buffalo Creek, and east of the Niagara portage, thence due south to the northern
boundary of Pennsylvania, thence west to the end of that boundary, thence south along

Campisi and William A. Starna, “On the Road to Canandaigua: The Treaty of 1794,” American Indian
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the west boundary of that state to the Ohio River." Under the treaty, the Iroquois ceded all lands west of that line.5

The 1784 Treaty at Fort Stanwix, along with the Treaty of Fort McIntosh, which dealt with the western Indian nations and signed the following year, resulted in great disaffection amongst the Native Americans involved. Tensions rose to a breaking point with the eruption of attacks from the Miami, a tribe which rejected the terms of their treaty. With what appeared at the time like a "threat of the... Iroquois tribes joining their brethren in the west... the United States [was forced] to rethink its policy on the taking of Indian lands."6 In 1789, Secretary of War Henry Knox presented his new Indian relations strategy to President Washington. It included the elimination of most elements of military force for a focus on "forming treaties of peace with [the Indian nations], in which their rights and limits should be explicitly defined, and the treaties observed on the part of the United States with the most rigid justice, by punishing the whites, who should violate the same".7 The federal government, however, still had to face the ramifications of the previous treaties.8

This new diplomacy plan highlighted the political necessity of peace and friendship with the Iroquois in order to prevent their joining the Western Indians in a war against the United States. At that point, the population of the Six Nations "numbered some forty-five hundred, including more than a thousand seasoned warriors, according to

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6 Campisi, 470.
7 Campisi, 471.
8 Fenton, 620.
a systematic census that the missionary [Samuel] Kirkland had just completed."9 Iroquoian neutrality was crucial, for "the last thing President Washington and his secretary of war wanted was another Indian war while General Anthony Wayne’s10 army was somewhere in Ohio [battling the Miami]. An Indian war cost manpower, goods, and money; treating for peace cost far less..."11

This was the context in which the newly appointed Pickering was sent by President Washington and Secretary Knox to meet with representatives of the Confederacy at Newtown Point, Pennsylvania. In his instructions to Pickering, the new diplomacy policy was evident. Knox told the commissioner that it was "the sincere desire of the general government that the indians, on all occasions should be treated with entire justice and humanity"12 Stating that "the great objects of the proposed meeting will be to impress on the minds of the indians that their interests and happiness depend upon the protection and friendship of the United States," Knox made clear the objectives of the United States in dealing with the Confederacy in stating:

That if the Six Nations shall be convinced that the United States are desirous of peace... and that any further opposition of the western indians, after receiving information of the humane dispositions of the United States, will be entirely unjustifiable... it is the expectation of the President of the United States, that the Six Nations... abstain from joining the enemy.13

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9 Fenton, 625.
10 Commander of the United States forces against the Indians in the West.
11 Fenton, 625.
12 Timothy Pickering papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, 60: 3.
13 Pickering, 60: 4.
"It will be important to dwell much upon this point," Knox emphasized. To lose the "friendship" of Iroquois and to subsequently be plunged into yet another war, would be disastrous for the new nation.\textsuperscript{14}

The meeting at Newtown was considered by all parties to be a success as it maintained peaceful ties with the Six Nations, but lingering concerns still remained as the situation with the Western Native Americans worsened. The issue of Iroquoian neutrality came to a head in 1793 with a meeting that was held between the Confederacy and the Western tribes. In an appeal to the Six Nations to "join them in their war against the Americans," the Western Indians wrote:

Brothers: The ancient confederacy which subsisted between us and the Five Nations [of the Iroquois], was, that, if any of the Five Nations were in distress, we would take them to us; we now see that you are in distress. . . that a large white beast stands with open mouth. . . ready to destroy you. . . we now take you by the hand, and invite you to come, and bring your beds, and sit down with us.\textsuperscript{15}

The leaders of the Confederacy insisted they would ponder the issue, but also consult the United States. Because of the quickly changing tides, the Iroquois made it clear to the federal government that a new treaty was in order.\textsuperscript{16}

Land, what Iroquois historian William Fenton called "the perennial issue of the century," was another political motivation behind the Canandaigua Treaty.\textsuperscript{17} The general consensus amongst Iroquoians was that their treaty with the United States at Fort Stanwix was unfair. In a speech to President Washington, Chief Cornplanter, a signer at Stanwix,

\textsuperscript{14} Pickering papers, 60: 2.
\textsuperscript{15} Campisi, 475.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Fenton, 631.
spoke of how “when our chiefs returned from the treaty at Fort Stanwix, and laid before our council what had been done there, our nation was surprised to hear how great a country you had compelled them to give up without you paying anything for it.”

Although the Treaty of Fort Stanwix was specific in territory boundaries, problems eventually arose. The Trade and Intercourse Act of 1790 ensured that “no person shall be permitted to carry on any trade or intercourse with the Indian tribes, without a license for that purpose under the hand and seal of the superintendent of the department, or of such other person as the President of the United States shall appoint. . . .” This act was largely ignored as many dubious and illegal dealings in Pennsylvania resulted in an accelerated settlement of the land supposedly ceded by the Seneca.

In early 1794, like the Miami of the West, the Confederacy formally rejected the terms of all previous treaties declaring: “We pay no attention to what has heretofore been done by Congress . . . their proceedings we consider as unjust.” The Iroquois “determined the boundary [they] want[ed] established,” and the threat of war was posed. All out property confusion, coupled with “persistent complaints about the Fort Stanwix [Treaty] . . . and the continued murder of Indians in the region” pulled the issue of land rights into the limelight, making it an issue that the United States had to address immediately.

Because these dealings with the Native Americans were less than a decade after the Revolutionary War, there still existed a collective paranoia regarding the possibility

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18 Pickering papers, 60: 9
20 Campisi, 476.
21 Campisi, 477.
22 Campisi, 476.
of British encroachment upon the new nation. Jack Compisi and William A. Starna argue the significance of this lingering concern in their article “On the Road to Canandaigua: The Treaty of 1794.” They explain that “British influence on the Indians served to frustrate federal attempts to open negotiations on the land boundaries.” Knox took these concerns seriously and declared that “the British had entertained the idea of waging war against the United States and . . . Colonel Simcoe, the British Governor of Lower Canada, had declared war inevitable.” The concerns of British interference were heightened with the arrival of William Johnson, an English interpreter, at the Canandaigua negotiations. As Pickering described it, Johnson’s presence ignited an immediate controversy that “retarded the business of the treaty” and “occasioned the loss of two days.” Eventually, Pickering succeeded in barring Johnson from the proceedings, thereby eliminating a direct British influence on the treaty.

The necessity of a treaty was not simply a political reality for the United States. Joining forces with Miami involved a great deal of risk for the Confederacy. It was clear that the United States was not afraid to retaliate. In a letter to the Miami, President Washington offers the tribe an opportunity to save . . . [them] from ruin.” He warns that “the United States are powerful, and able to send forth such numbers of warriors as would drive you entirely out of the country. It is true this conduct would occasion some trouble to us, but it would be absolute destruction to you, your women and your children.” With this as the potential response, the Iroquois deemed it unwise to side with their western counterparts. It seemed in their best interest to treat for peace with the

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23 Campisi, 476
24 Ibid.
25 Pickering Papers, 60: 205.
26 Pickering Papers, 60:41.
27 Ibid.
United States, for a treaty under circumstances of war could result in the complete dissolution of their way of life. A peaceful treaty would guarantee that their opinions would at least be heard and considered; and with the political clout the Iroquois wielded, the prospects for having their desires met were highly favorable.

All of these concerns which had been building over a decade, Iroquoian neutrality, continued war with the Western Indians, and land, were eventually solved with the Treaty of Canandaigua. Signed on November 11, 1794, by Timothy Pickering, various Quaker witnesses and interpreters, and fifty-nine sachems and war chiefs representing each nation of the Confederacy, the treaty established “a firm and permanent friendship” between the United States and the Haudenosaunee. Article One stated this explicitly, thus finally defining the relationship between America and the Confederacy. "Peace and friendship" was “no empty phrase.” The Iroquois at last established their independence from both the Western Indians, and the United States.

Articles Two, Three, and Four dealt primarily with land. Article Two “acknowledge[d] the lands reserved to the Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga Nations, in their respective treaties with the state of New York, and called their reservations, to be their property.” Article Three settled the ongoing tension within Pennsylvania regarding Seneca land boundaries. In the most specific of Articles in the treaty, the third outlines in a point-precise manner, the exact boundaries for the Seneca as agreed on by Pickering and the Seneca delegation. Article Four ensured that the United States would

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28 Arguably longer, but for the purpose of this essay, a decade.
30 Treaty of Canandaigua, Article One.
31 Fenton, 625
32 Treaty of Canandaigua, Article Two.
"never claim the same, nor disturb . . . any of the Six Nations, or their Indian friends residing thereon and united with them."\textsuperscript{33} The Iroquois were free to engage in whichever activities they pleased on their land without the interference of the United States. Although it would be this stipulation that would become contestable in the distant future, for the Iroquois of that period, independence was paramount.

Article Five provided a road for transportation to Lake Erie. This term “emerged from a compromise: Pickering wanted a corridor at Cayuga Creek, but the Senecas worried about encroachments on the strip from buildings, saloons, and other enterprises that would ruin their lives, deface the landscape, and spoil the fisheries.”\textsuperscript{34} Because of the concessions made by the Confederacy, the United States, in Article Six, promised “them a quantity of goods of the value of ten thousand dollars. And for the same considerations . . . the United States [added] the sum of three thousand to the one thousand five hundred dollars . . . making in the whole, four thousand five hundred dollars”\textsuperscript{35} This money, to be donated annually “forever,” would be used for the purchasing of “clothing, domestic animals, implements of husbandry, and other utensils.”\textsuperscript{36}

Article Seven attempted to standardize the prosecution procedures for Native Americans who commit crimes against United States citizens, and vice versa, and those Americans who injure or harass Indians. This provision called for the understanding that “no private revenge or retaliation shall take place; but, instead thereof, complaint shall be

\textsuperscript{33} Treaty of Canandaigua, Article Four.  
\textsuperscript{34} Fenton, 626.  
\textsuperscript{35} Treaty of Canandaigua, Article Six.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
made by the party injured, to the other . . .

This stipulation was enacted to end the constant blood feuding and revenge attacks that had characterized the Pennsylvania area for years. Peace and friendship were again reiterated, and thus followed the many signatures of agreement.

Although the past tense was used to discuss the Treaty of Canandaigua, the document has not been retired to the annals of history, nor was it disregarded by the United States as so many other Native American treaties were. The only single case of interference by the United States was in 1964 with the building of the Kinzua Dam on the Allegheny River which flooded nine thousand acres of the Seneca Allegheny Reservation. The stipulations established at Canandaigua, however, are still alive today amongst the Iroquois. The Haudenosaunee “continue to receive annual Treaty Cloth from the U.S. Government, an important symbolic gesture indicating that the terms of the treaty are respected and honored.”

Annual celebrations are held in Iroquois communities that remember the event, for to them, “it is the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua that defines their relationship with the United States. The treaty reaffirms their special status and, for many, its provisions symbolize a ‘way of life’.” Canandaigua is seen by many as a success story amongst a sea of failures. The Miami were eventually crushed by General Wayne, and with their defeat came unfavorable treaty provisions. The Iroquois, however, held fast to their self-preservation in a treaty that established a lasting peace and friendship that were the pleasant results of pressing political issues.

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37 Treaty of Canandaigua, Article Seven
38 Fenton, 626.
40 Campisi, 469.
Map 1. Lands of the Six Nations of the Iroquois by 1771.
