



## *The Great Law of Peace*

Fleeing the Nazi conquest of Europe, the writer Vladimir Nabokov and his family took a ship to the United States in the spring of 1940. Although Nabokov was the scion of a Russian noble family, he detested the class-bound servility ubiquitous in the land of his birth. He was delighted when the lowly U.S. customs officers on the Manhattan dock failed to cringe at his aristocratic bearing and pedigree. Indeed, he reported, "when they opened my suitcase and saw two pairs of boxing gloves, two officers put them on and began boxing. The third became interested in my collection of butterflies and even suggested one kind be called 'captain.' When the boxing and the conversation about butterflies finished, the customs men suggested I close the case and go." Their straightforward, even brash demeanor, with its implicit assumption that everyone was on the same social level, enchanted him.

Nabokov was hardly the first emigré to be surprised by the difference between Americans and Europeans—a cultural divide that Henry James, like many others, attributed to the former's "democratic spirit." As has been widely noted, this spirit has consequences both positive and negative. The sense that anyone is as good as anyone else fuels entrepreneurial self-reliance, but also can lead to what outsiders view as political know-nothingism. For better and worse, though, this spirit is widely identified as one of the Americas' great gifts to the world. When rich stockbrokers in London and Paris proudly retain their working-class accents, when audiences show up at La Scala in track suits and sneakers, when South Africans and Thais complain that the police don't read suspects their rights as they do on *Starsky & Hutch* reruns, when anti-government protesters in Cairo sing "We

Shall Overcome" in Egyptian accents—all these raspberries in the face of social and legal authority have a distinctly American tone, no matter where they take place. To be sure, apostles of freedom have risen in many places. But an overwhelming number have been inspired by the American example—or, as it should perhaps be called, the *Native American* example, for among its fonts is Native American culture, especially that of the Haudenosaunee.

A loose military alliance among the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and, after about 1720, the Tuscarora, the Haudenosaunee were one of the greatest indigenous politics north of the Rio Grande in the two centuries before Columbus and definitely the greatest in the two centuries after. The evidence is unclear, but the ancestors of the Five Nations, neighboring bands of gatherers and hunters, may have lived in their homeland since the glaciers retreated from the Finger Lakes—the eleven deep, narrow lakes that lie like cat scratches across central New York State. Some time around 1000 A.D., the Indian agricultural trinity of maize, beans, and squash appeared in the area. Taking up agriculture, the Finger Lakes people, by now consolidated into five main groups, lined the region's hills with farms. Population rose, as has happened time and time again when human societies make the transition from foraging to farming. The burgeoning cultures took to fighting with each other. Because the abduction, injury, or death of a family member had to be revengeed, every violent incident led to a spiral of brutal, tit-for-tat skirmishes. From this brutal environment a heroic figure emerged: Deganawidah, the Peacemaker.

So little is known about Deganawidah's life that archaeologists disagree about whether he actually walked the earth or belongs entirely to the realm of legend. Various traditions provide different accounts of his background, but most say that Deganawidah was not a member of the Five Nations. He was a shamanic outsider who was born to a virgin girl in a village far to the north. Abjuring his past, he floated from his home village in a canoe made from white stone and wandered the Adirondack and Allegheny forests, then a place of constant violence and, apparently, intermittent cannibalism.

Deganawidah had a message of peace. He couldn't easily promulgate it, though, because he had a tragic flaw: a severe speech impediment, perhaps a stutter. Somehow he connected with Ayenwatha, an Onondaga who was a famous orator. (As "Hiawatha," this man

became the protagonist of the historically confused epic poem of that name by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.) With Ayenwatha as Deganawidah's spokesman, the two men confronted Tododaho, the powerful leader of the Onondaga, a shaman in his own right, and a warrior-leader who was so deeply locked into the logic of prideful violence that he regarded the thought of peace as a betrayal. In the ensuing conflict Tododaho killed Ayenwatha's three daughters, nearly derauling the quest for peace. Other versions have the girls killed in a raid by another group. Whatever the circumstances, Ayenwatha vowed that no parent would ever experience such a loss again and rededicated himself to spreading Deganawidah's ideas.

Over the years Deganawidah and Ayenwatha persuaded the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, and Mohawk to form an alliance instead of constantly fighting. Tododaho and Onondaga continued to refuse. 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 couldn't. In the same way, Deganawidah prophesied, the Five Nations, each weak on its own, would fall into darkness unless they all banded together.

Soon after Deganawidah's warning, a solar eclipse occurred. The shaken Tododaho agreed to add the Onondaga to the nascent alliance. But he drove a hard bargain, demanding that the main Onondaga village, now buried under the present-day city of Syracuse, New York, become the headquarters for the confederacy. Despite all the convulsions of history, the Onondaga have kept the council fire burning for Haudenosaunee to this day. And Tododaho has remained the title for the alliance's main speaker.

Deganawidah laid out the new alliance's rules of operation in the Haudenosaunee constitution: the Great Law of Peace. When issues came up before the alliance, the Tododaho would summon the fifty sachems who represented the clans of the Five Nations. Different nations had different numbers of sachems, but the inequality meant little because all decisions had to be unanimous; the Five Nations regarded consensus as a social ideal. As in all consensus-driven bodies, though, members felt intense pressure not to impede progress with frivolous objections. The heads of clans, who were all female, chose the sachems, all male. As a rule, sachems were succeeded by their nephews, but the system was not entirely hereditary—sachems could

be impeached if they displeased their clan, and if their nephews were not deemed fit for office, someone outside the family could take over.

Striking to the contemporary eye, the 117 codicils of the Great Law were concerned as much with establishing the limits on the great council's powers as on granting them. Its jurisdiction was strictly limited to relations among the nations and outside groups; internal affairs were the province of the individual nations. Although the council negotiated peace treaties, it could not declare war—that was left to the initiative of the leaders of each of Haudenosaunee's constituent nations. According to the Great Law, when the council of sachems was deciding upon "an especially important matter or a great emergency," its members had to "submit the matter to the decision of their people" in a kind of referendum.

In creating such checks on authority, the league was just the most formal expression of a region-wide tradition. The sachems of Indian groups on the eastern seaboard were absolute monarchs in theory. In practice, wrote colonial leader Roger Williams, "they will not conclude of ought . . . unto which the people are averse." The league was predicated, in short, on the consent of the governed, without which the entire enterprise would collapse. Compared to the despotic societies that were the norm in Europe and Asia, Haudenosaunee was a libertarian dream.

In the same sense, it was also a feminist dream: the Five Nations were largely governed internally by the female clan heads, and the Great Law explicitly ordered council members to heed "the warnings of your women relatives." Failure to do so would lead to their removal. The equality granted to women was not the kind envisioned by contemporary Western feminists—men and women were not treated as equivalent. Rather, the sexes were assigned to two separate social domains, neither subordinate to the other: No woman could be a war chief; no man could lead a clan. Anthropologists debate the extent of women's clout under this "separate-but-equal" arrangement, but according to University of Toledo historian Barbara Mann, author of *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (2004), the female-led clan councils set the agenda of the League—"men could not consider a matter not sent to them by the women." Women, who held title to all the land and its produce, could vote down decisions by the male leaders of the League and demand that an issue be reconsidered. Under

this regime women were so much better off than their counterparts in Europe that nineteenth-century U.S. feminists like Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, all of whom lived in Haudenosaunee country, drew inspiration from their lot.

According to Haudenosaunee tradition, the alliance was founded centuries before Europeans arrived. Non-Indian researchers long treated this claim to antiquity with skepticism. The league, in their view, was inherently fragile and fissiparous; if it had been founded a thousand years ago, it would have broken up well before the Pilgrims. And there was little archaeological evidence that the league had existed for many centuries. But both traditional lore and contemporary astronomical calculations suggest that Haudenosaunee dates back to between 1090 and 1150 A.D. The former date was calculated by Seneca historian Paula Underwood, who based her estimate on the tally of generations in oral records. The latter came from historian Mann and her Toledo colleague, astronomer Jerry Fields. The Five Nations recorded the succession of council members with a combination of pegs and carved images on long wooden cylinders called Condolence Canes. (Iroquois pictographs could convey sophisticated ideas, but functioned more as a mnemonic aid than a true writing system. The symbols were not conventionalized—that is, one person could not easily read a document composed by another.) According to Mohawk historian Jake Swamp, 145 Tododahos spoke for the league between its founding and 1995, when Mann and Fields made their calculation. With this figure in hand, Mann and Fields calculated the average tenure of more than three hundred other lifetime appointments, including popes, European kings and queens, and U.S. Supreme Court justices. Multiplying the average by the number of Tododahos, the two researchers estimated that the alliance was probably founded in the middle of the twelfth century. To check this estimate, Mann and Fields turned to astronomical tables. Before 1600, the last total solar eclipse observable in upstate New York occurred on August 31, 1142. If Mann and Fields are correct, this was the date on which Tododahos accepted the alliance. The Haudenosaunee thus would have the second oldest continuously existing representative parliaments on earth. Only Iceland's Althing, founded in 930 A.D., is older.

Scholars debate these estimates, but nobody disputes that the Hau-