

THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY

The Haudenosaunee • “People of the Longhouse”

THE SIX NATIONS

MOHAWK	ONEIDA	ONONDAGA
CAYUGA	SENECA	TUSCARORA

BOOK CLUB CONNECTION The Iroquois Confederacy was a sophisticated alliance of Indigenous nations whose strategic location and political power made it a major force in colonial America and the American Revolution.

What Was the Confederacy?

- A federation of separate Indigenous nations in northeastern North America.
- Each nation retained substantial control over its own affairs while cooperating on diplomacy, war, and matters affecting the Confederacy.
- The Haudenosaunee political tradition was organized around the Great Law of Peace.
- The Confederacy existed long before the United States and became one of the most influential Indigenous political alliances in North America.

The Six Nations

- **Mohawk** — easternmost nation; strongly associated with the Mohawk Valley and eastern New York.
- **Oneida** — centered in central New York.
- **Onondaga** — the central council-fire nation; near present-day Syracuse.
- **Cayuga** — associated with the Finger Lakes region.
- **Seneca** — westernmost of the original Five Nations and a major power in western New York.
- **Tuscarora** — migrated north from the Carolinas and joined the Confederacy in the early 18th century, creating the Six Nations.

How Did Its Government Work?

- The nations were represented in a Grand Council traditionally composed of 50 hereditary sachems, or chiefs.
- Important Confederacy decisions were reached through consensus rather than a simple majority vote.
- Clan mothers held important political authority, including roles in selecting and removing certain leaders.
- Individual nations maintained their own identities and considerable independence.

KEY IDEA The Iroquois were not a single “tribe.” The Confederacy was an alliance of distinct nations — somewhat like a federation in which members cooperated while preserving their own political identities.

Why Was It So Powerful?

- Its territory stretched across much of present-day New York State.
- It occupied a strategic position between the Atlantic colonies, French Canada, the Great Lakes, and the continental interior.
- The Confederacy influenced important trade routes and the fur trade.
- Both Britain and France sought Haudenosaunee friendship and military support.

- Its diplomacy allowed the Confederacy to exert influence far beyond the size of its population.

The American Revolution

- The Revolution created a profound crisis: should the Confederacy support Britain, support the American rebels, or remain neutral?
- Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga communities generally leaned toward or allied with Britain.
- Many Oneida and Tuscarora supported the American cause, although individual choices and community positions could be more complicated.
- The result was a devastating division within the Confederacy itself.

A CIVIL WAR WITHIN A CIVIL WAR

Haudenosaunee people who had belonged to the same great political alliance could find themselves supporting opposite sides in the Revolution.

The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign — 1779

- George Washington ordered a major American expedition into Haudenosaunee country.
- American forces targeted communities associated principally with nations allied to Britain.
- Towns, food supplies, crops, and orchards were destroyed.
- The campaign caused severe displacement, hunger, and suffering and had lasting consequences for Haudenosaunee communities.

Connection to Our First Civil War

- H. W. Brands emphasizes that the Revolution was not simply Britain versus a united American population.
- American colonists themselves were divided into Patriots and Loyalists.
- The Revolution likewise fractured Indigenous alliances, most dramatically the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.
- This helps us see the Revolution as a series of overlapping conflicts among neighbors, families, communities, and nations.

BOOK CLUB TAKEAWAY The Iroquois Confederacy demonstrates why the American Revolution was much more complicated than “Americans versus British.” The conflict forced Native nations to make difficult strategic choices, divided a centuries-old alliance, and reshaped the political map of northeastern North America.

Six Nations — Quick Memory Aid

- **M** — Mohawk
- **O** — Oneida
- **O** — Onondaga
- **C** — Cayuga
- **S** — Seneca
- **T** — Tuscarora