

# The Iroquois Confederacy and the Foundations of American Democracy

## Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies  
Grade Level: Grades 7-8  
Suggested Duration: Two 50-minute class periods

## Stage 1 Desired Results

### Established Goals – Montana Social Studies Standards

(1) The civics and government content standards for sixth through eighth grade are each student will:  
(c) explain how global and American Indian civilizations and governments have contributed to foundational documents of the United States;  
(d) distinguish the structure, organization, powers, and limits of government at the local, state, national, and tribal levels.

### Understandings

- Students will understand American Indian people have had and will continue to have an impact on our society.
- Images and ideas associated with our democracy were borrowed from American Indian cultures.
- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell. (EU 6)
- American Indian tribal nations are inherent sovereign nations and they possess sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. However, under the American legal system, the extent and breadth of self-governing powers are not the same for each tribe. (EU 7)

### Essential Questions

- How was early America influenced by the Iroquois Confederacy?
- How can American Indian oral traditions help us better understand history from multiple perspectives?

### Students will be able to...

- Develop an understanding of how the Iroquois influenced American colonists and the key events leading up to the American Revolution.
- Consider how the governing principles of the Iroquois Confederacy are represented in our democracy.



Indian Education for All Unit

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Students will know...

- the Iroquois Confederacy played an important role in the early formation of the US Democracy.

## Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

### Performance Tasks

1. Students will be asked to find and share information from their textbooks, analyze and discuss a short video clip, and write and share a short response to one of three questions.

## Stage 3 Learning Plan

### Learning Activities:

#### Class Period 1

Have a student display a dollar bill (may also want to display an overhead of the US Seal). Find the Great Seal of the United States on the right side of the dollar bill. Notice that the eagle on the Great Seal is clutching arrows in his left claw. Ask the students to describe anything else they see in the seal. Explain that the idea for this imagery was born when Ben Franklin met with the leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy, particularly, a conversation he had with Canassatego, an Onondaga leader. Canassatego handed an arrow to Ben Franklin and asked him to break it. He was able to break it easily. He then handed Franklin six arrows. He was unable to break them. Ben Franklin used this demonstration later when the colonists were divided on how to proceed but growing upset with the British and their increasing efforts to tax the colonists to pay for the cost of British troops in the colonies. He is famously quoted as having said "We must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately." He also used the concept of strength through unity in early currency during the American Revolution with the image of 13 interlocking rings.

Explain to students they are going to learn about the role of the Iroquois in the American Revolution and their shared principles and values that were adopted in the formation of our democracy. Ask them to make a list of things they know about the role of the Iroquois and other tribes in the American Revolution. Also ask them to peruse the textbook chapter(s) regarding the American Revolution and write down any references to the Iroquois or other tribes they can find about the role and contributions of Indian tribes during the American Revolution. After five to ten minutes, ask students to share their responses and lead a five to ten-minute discussion. Possible talking points or lines of inquiry might include how Indians are portrayed in textbooks, the general lack of knowledge and information about the Iroquois and Indians found in textbooks, things they found surprising during the exercise, and further questions they might have.

Explain that the Iroquois have a unique perspective on the events the students have been learning about in the textbook and in class. Also explain that their stories about this time period are passed down orally through the generations. Descendants of the tribal nations who make up the Confederacy still pass down oral stories and traditions today. Many of these stories focus on the early interactions

between the Iroquois Confederacy and the colonists. Tell the students they will now watch a video in which Oren Lyons, an Iroquois Faith Keeper, will explain the American Revolution from an Iroquois perspective. Tell the students to take note of what Mr. Lyons' says about how American colonists developed their ideas about independence and liberty and the Albany plan of Union and write down any thoughts or ideas.

Explain that Mr. Lyons is a representative of the Onondaga and Seneca nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. He is also a chosen Faithkeeper of the Seneca nation. Explain that as a Faithkeeper he leads his people by preserving their customs, traditions, values, and history. Also, he must uphold the great law of peace and represent them among the other nations of the world.

Play the video clip of Oren Lyons 2003 Address at the Bioneers Conference.

After the video, reference Mr. Lyons' explanation of the Iroquois position of neutrality during the war between the colonists and the British. Remind them that the status Indian tribes as sovereign nations within the United States played a role in these interactions and that Indian tribes are still sovereign nations today. Split the students into groups of three to four and ask them to discuss the questions below for two minutes each. Tell them one student should record the key points from their conversation. Keep a timer and advise students when two minutes has passed and they need to move on to the next question.

1. What did you learn about the Iroquois contributions to America's ideas of independence and liberty?
2. Do you think there should be more information about the Iroquois in the textbook? Why or why not?
3. How might America be different today if not for the influence and actions of the Iroquois prior to and during the American Revolution?

Conclude the class by having student groups share out the main things they discussed regarding each question and highlight any key points or ideas.

### Class Period 2

Recap the lesson, video, and conversation from the previous class period. Several key talking points might be the way in which the colonists saw the Iroquois as a sovereign nation, the position of neutrality taken by the Iroquois prior to the war, the fact different tribal nations ended up on different sides during the war itself, and the Iroquois presence at Valley Forge.

Explain to the students they will learn more about the Iroquois and their influence on the American Revolution. Tell them they will be put in groups and assigned a question to explore by conducting online or other research for the first half of the class period. You can keep them in the same groups as the day before if desired. You may also need to schedule library or computer lab time. Depending upon your number of groups, you may need to assign a question to more than one group.

1. What are the tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy and how is their government structured?
2. How did the Onondaga and Mohawks come to be on opposite sides during the Revolutionary War?
3. What was Ben Franklin's relationship with the Iroquois and how did it influence his ideas and contributions to American democracy?
4. What were the Articles of Confederation and how were they influenced by the Iroquois Confederacy?
5. What were some other Indian tribes involved in the American Revolution and what was their roles?

### Materials/Resources Needed

Dollar bill – US seal is on the back

Video clip of [Oren Lyons 2003 Bioneers Conference address](#)

[Designs on money during the American Revolution](#)

Possible websites for online research

- [The Iroquois Confederacy](#) Encyclopaedia Britannica
- [How the Iroquois Great Law of Peace Shaped U.S. Democracy](#) Public Broadcasting Service
- [The Indians War of Independence](#) Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
- [The Six Nations of Confederacy During the American Revolution](#) National Park Service
- [Guide to Haudenosaunee Education](#) Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian