The Indians' War of Independence

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson clearly described the role of American Indians in the American Revolution. In addition to his other oppressive acts, King George III had "endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions." Inscribed in the founding document of the United States, almost a sacred text, Jefferson's words placed Indians on the wrong side of the struggle for liberty and the wrong side of history from the very beginning of the Revolution. Thus while Americans fought for their rights and freedoms, Jefferson argued that Native Americans fought against them, the vicious pawns of a tyrannical king.

By the KING.
A PROCLAMATION.

GOD save the King.

George III's Proclamation of 1763, ending the French and Indian War and restricting British colonial activity on American Indian lands. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

All nations have their creation stories, where myth and history merge, and the creation story of the United States is no exception. In July 1776, the British had not—at least not yet—unleashed Indian warriors on the frontiers. In fact, the Stockbridge Indians of western Massachusetts, who were among the first to get involved in the Revolution, joined Washington's army, fighting against the redcoats. Most Indians tried to stay neutral in what they saw as a British civil war—getting caught in the middle of a domestic disturbance is never a good idea. Even when, eventually, most sided with the British, they were not fighting against freedom; like the American patriots, they fought to defend their freedom as they understood it. In Indian eyes, aggressive Americans posed a greater threat than did a distant king to their land, their liberty, and their way of life. The American War of Independence was an Indian war for independence as well.

This was not the first time Indians had waged a war of independence. A dozen years before American colonists rebelled against Britain, American Indians in the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes took on the mightiest empire in the world. In 1763, fresh from their

triumphs in the French and Indian War, the British were behaving like conquerors in Indian country. Baulking at the presence of British garrisons and the absence of British gifts, which the Indians believed served to cement alliances and ensure good faith relationships, Pontiac of the Ottawas, Guyashota of the Senecas, Shingas of the Delawares, and other war chiefs launched a multi-tribal assault that destroyed every British fort west of the Appalachians except Detroit, Niagara, and Fort Pitt. The colonial government in London responded by declaring the Appalachian Mountains the boundary between British settlement and Indian lands. This Royal Proclamation of 1763 alienated American land speculators like George Washington who had hoped to get rich by selling trans-Appalachian lands to westward moving settlers. Designed to bring order to the American frontier, the Proclamation initiated a chain of events that culminated in revolution and independence.

When the Revolution broke out, therefore, Indian peoples knew that Indian lands were at stake. The Cherokees had every reason to be concerned. For more than half a century, they had seen their lands in Georgia, eastern Tennessee, and western North and South Carolina whittled away in treaty after treaty with the colonies, and the tempo of land loss escalated alarmingly in the late 1760s and 1770s. Young Cherokee men, frustrated by their fathers' policies of selling land, were determined to prevent further erosion of the Cherokee homeland. They seized the outbreak of the Revolution as an occasion to drive trespassers off their lands. Cherokee warriors attacked frontier settlements in 1776, but they did so on their own, without British support and against the advice of British agents who urged them to wait until they could coordinate with His Majesty's troops. American forces immediately retaliated, burning Cherokee towns and forcing Cherokee chiefs to sue for peace, which they did at the cost of ceding even more land. Many Cherokees, led by a war chief named Dragging Canoe, migrated rather than make peace with the Americans. They kept up the fight from new towns they built around Chickamauga Creek in southwestern Tennessee. American campaigns against the Chickamauga Cherokees sometimes struck the villages of those Cherokees who had made peace instead because they were closer and offered easier targets. The Revolution left the Cherokee Nation devastated and divided, but the Chickamaugas remained defiant and continued to fight against American dominance until 1795.

The Revolution divided the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee as well. The Six Nations of the Iroquois League in upstate New York—the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras—constituted the dominant Native power in northeastern North America. They were accustomed to exerting their influence and flexing their muscles in colonial and intertribal diplomacy, and to playing off rival colonial powers, which they had done for much of the eighteenth century. But the Revolution shattered the unity of the League. Mohawks, led by war chief Joseph Brant and his sister, Molly Brant, supported the Crown, due in no small measure to the influence of Sir William Johnson, Molly Brant's husband. An Irish-trader-turned-Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Johnson had lived among the Mohawks for years and functioned as the pivotal figure in British-Iroquois relations until his death in 1774. But the Mohawks' neighbors, the Oneidas, leaned toward the colonists, influenced by their missionary, Samuel Kirkland, a Presbyterian/Congregationalist who favored breaking with the Church of England. At the Battle of Oriskany in 1777, Oneidas fought alongside the Americans, while Mohawks and Senecas fought with the British, a devastating development for Iroquois society that was built around clan and kinship ties.

Like the Cherokees, many Iroquois lost their homes during the Revolution. Mohawks were driven from the Mohawk Valley and Oneidas fleeing retaliation lived in squalid refugee camps around Schenectady, New York. In 1779 George Washington dispatched General John Sullivan to conduct a scorched-earth campaign in Iroquois country. Sullivan's troops burned forty Iroquois towns, cut down orchards, and destroyed millions of bushels of corn. Without shelter or food to sustain them, thousands of Iroquois people fled to the British fort at Niagara. But Niagara lay at the end of a long supply line that was closed during the winter months when vessels from Montreal and Quebec could not navigate the ice-bound Great Lakes. The refugees at Niagara endured exposure, starvation, sickness, and misery during one of the coldest winters on record. Iroquois warriors resumed attacks on American settlements on the frontiers of New York and Pennsylvania, to take grain and cattle as much as scalps and captives.

At the end of war, many Iroquois relocated north of the new border into Canada rather than stay in New York and deal with the Americans. Joseph Brant and his followers settled on lands set aside for them by the British government on the Grand River in

Ontario, the genesis of the Six Nations Reserve. Others—Senecas at Tonawanda and Buffalo Creek, for example—remained on their ancestral homeland. Formerly masters of the region, they now struggled to survive in a new world dominated by Americans.

Between the Cherokees and the Iroquois, in the territory drained by the Ohio River, Indian peoples lived in a perilous situation. The Ohio Valley had been virtually emptied of human population because of intertribal wars in the seventeenth century. But it had become a multi-tribal homeland again by the eve of the Revolution. Delawares, Shawnees, Mingos, and other tribes had gravitated toward the region, attracted by rich hunting grounds and growing trade opportunities, and pressured by colonial expansion in the east. European settlers were not far behind. Shawnee warriors were fighting to keep pioneers like Daniel Boone out of their Kentucky hunting grounds before the Revolution, and they fought in Lord Dunmore's War against Virginia in 1774.

The Revolution turned the Ohio Valley into a fiercely contested war zone. Henry Hamilton, the British commander at Detroit, and George Morgan, the American agent at Fort Pitt, competed for the allegiance of the tribes. Most tried to remain neutral but neutrality was not a viable option. The Shawnee chief Cornstalk, who had led his warriors in Lord Dunmore's War, now counseled a neutral stance and cultivated peaceful relations with the Americans. But Cornstalk was seized under a flag of truce at Fort Randolph and murdered by American militia in 1777. Most Shawnees made common cause with the British, who had been telling them they could expect nothing less than annihilation at the hands of the Americans. However, Cornstalk's sister, Nonhelema, continued to work for peace and assisted the Americans. Kentucky militia crossed the Ohio River almost every year to raid Shawnee villages. About half of the Shawnees migrated west to present-day Missouri, which was claimed by Spain. Those who remained moved their villages farther and farther away from American assault. By the end of the Revolution most American Indians living in Ohio were concentrated in the northwestern region.

Like their Shawnee neighbors, the Delawares were initially reluctant to take up arms or support the British. In fact, the Delaware chief, White Eyes, led his people in making the Treaty of Fort Pitt in 1778, the first Indian treaty made by the new nation. The Delawares

and the United States Congress agreed to a defensive alliance. But American militiamen murdered White Eyes, their best friend in the Ohio Indian country. American authorities put out that he had died of smallpox but the damage was done. Like the Shawnees, Delawares took up the hatchet and made Britain's war their own.

Americans struck back—blindly. In 1782 a force of American militia marched into the town of Gnadenhatten. It was a community of Delaware Indians who had converted to the Moravian faith. They were Christians and they were pacifists. But all that mattered to the militia was the fact that they were Delawares. The Americans divided them into three groups—men, women, and children. Then, with the Indians kneeling before them singing hymns, they took up butchers' mallets and bludgeoned to death 96 people. Gnadenhatten means "Tents of Grace." Delaware warriors, now fighting as allies of the British, exacted brutal revenge for the massacre when American soldiers fell into their hands.

In the east, the fighting between redcoats and rebels effectively ended after Lord Cornwallis surrendered to Washington's army and their French allies at Yorktown in 1781. In the west, Indians continued their war for independence and there things did not go so well for the Americans. In 1782, for example, Shawnee and other warriors ambushed and roundly defeated Daniel Boone and a force of Kentuckians at the Battle of Blue Licks. But the British had had enough. At the Peace of Paris in April 1783, Britain recognized the independence of the United States and transferred its claims to all the territory between the Atlantic and the Mississippi and between the Great Lakes and Florida.

There were no American Indians at the Peace of Paris and Indians were not mentioned in its terms. They were furious and incredulous when they learned that their allies had sold them out and given away their lands. Fully expecting another war with the young republic, the British in Canada maintained alliances with Indians for years after the Revolution, but tribes south of the new international border now had to deal primarily with the United States. At the start of the Revolution, despite American entreaties and assurances, the Indians had worried and the British had warned that the Americans were only interested in taking their land. The worries and warnings were well founded.

Although George Washington, his secretary of war Henry Knox, Thomas Jefferson, and other good men of the founding generation wrestled with how to deal honorably with Indian peoples, the taking of Indian land was never in doubt. After the long war against Britain, the United States government had no money; its only resource was the land the British had ceded at the Peace of Paris—Indian land. Acquiring actual title to that land and transforming it into "public land" that could be sold to American settlers to help fill the treasury was vital to the future, even the survival, of the new republic. Having won its independence from the British Empire, the United States turned to build what Jefferson called "an empire of liberty." In this empire, all citizens shared the benefits. But—and this was a question that plagued the nation and the national conscience for generations—who qualified as citizens? Did African Americans? Did women? Did Native Americans? And how could Americans claim to deal honorably with Indian peoples at the same time as they built their nation on Indian lands?

The Declaration of Independence provided answers and justifications: hadn't Indians fought against American rights and freedoms at the moment of the nation's birth? They could not now expect to share those rights and freedoms that had been won at such a cost. The United States had no obligation to include Indians in the body politic or to protect Indian lands. But, the Declaration had also made clear that Indians were "savages," and Washington, Jefferson, and others believed that the United States did have an obligation to "civilize" them. The United States must and would take the Indians' lands; that was inevitable. But it would give them civilization in return, and that was honorable.

For Native Americans, this translated into a dual assault on their lands and cultures, which were inextricably linked. In the years following the Revolution, American settlers invaded Indian country. So too, at different times and places, did American soldiers, Indian agents, land speculators, treaty commissioners, and missionaries. Indians fought back: they disputed American claims to their homelands, killed trespassers, and sometimes inflicted stunning defeats on American armies. Not until General Anthony Wayne defeated the allied northwestern tribes at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 did the Indians make peace at the Treaty of Greenville and cede most of Ohio to the United States. Then, Indians turned to more subtle forms of resistance in what remained of

their homelands, compromising where they had no choice, adapting and adjusting to changes, and preserving what they could of Indian life and culture in a nation that was intent on eradicating both.

The American nation won its war for independence in 1783. American Indian wars for independence continued long after. In their ongoing struggles for their rights, and their tribal sovereignty within the constitutional democracy that grew out of the American Revolution, some would say, Native Americans are still fighting to realize the promise of that revolution.

Colin G. Calloway *is John Kimball, Jr. 1943 Professor of History and Professor of Native American Studies at Dartmouth College. His latest book is* The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America *(2006).*