

Anarchy in the Midwest

What the European Invaders Discovered

Rob Blurton

When 17th century Europeans arrived in the Great Lakes region, they discovered Native Americans living in what today we would call an anarchist society. These Lake natives had horizontal social relationships governed by kin obligations and employed consensus decision-making.

A frustrated missionary called them “strangers to civil power and authority.” Another observer noted that “no chief dared to rule over the people, as in that case he would immediately be forsaken, and by the whole tribe, and his counselors would refuse to assist him.”

In other words, if a Great Lakes chief tried to command anyone, the issue instantly became his imperious attitude rather than whatever he wanted done. Indian taskmasters were considered an unacceptable social malignancy. They rapidly found themselves without followers, and quite possibly killed.

Inspirational natives that whites called chiefs were not overlords, but instead highly respected men and women that had shown competence and good sense in the past. Civil leaders (ogimaag in the Algonquian language) were accomplished orators with wisdom and experience who tried to keep the peace. War ogimaag were combat veterans with a record of low-casualty military success. Villages often formed around gifted ogimaag, but such influencers remained peers, and none had any capacity beyond rhetoric to compel obedience.

This world view reflects strong dedication to what we call anarchist principles, though not the peace-and-love variety. Call it instead a live-and-let-live ethos, underwritten by occasional brutality.

Anthropologist Pierre Clastres suggests that strife among modern Amazonian hunter-gatherers previously attributed to resource competition is actually part of a deliberate effort to thwart state formation. Chiefs are closely monitored by their tribes, and Clastres assures us that those who visibly lust after power are quickly abandoned or worse.

Along this same line, primatologist Christopher Boehm posits that edged weapons provided a significant leap forward for hunter-gatherer egalitarians, permitting weaker individuals to combine and assassinate bully bosses. his capacity restrained arbitrary actions by potential tyrants. (Think GIs fragging their officers in Vietnam: Awareness of a violent practice can make its threat alone sufficient to achieve the desired outcome.)

Not all Native American cultures were organized in anti-authoritarian ways, of course. Southern Indians such as the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans practiced intensive maize cultivation that spawned imperial cities. This made their empires coercive hierarchies.

Corn-fueled Mississippian culture also had an elite class that extracted food by force from those who were considered social inferiors. Penetrating deep into North America, their largest city at Cahokia, near modern day St. Louis, topped out at about 40,000 people in 1100 CE, twice that of contemporary London. Big permanent populations need lots to eat, requiring gang bosses to organize scaled-up farming activity.

Things evolved differently around the Great Lakes. Cooler climates restrict agricultural surplus. Cold-weather resource scarcity makes aboriginal societies more decentralized, as they must separate into microbands every winter to follow their seasonal round. Evidence indicates that hunter-gatherers with broad-spectrum diets had to be

forced to settle down on farms. Given the food facts, this is a rational choice. Mississippian mortuary data verify that Native Americans shifting from a hunter-gatherer lifeway to an agrarian one saw their health decline significantly.

To this nutritional stress can be added slavery, since mass-agriculture's bounty of cheap calories establishes a "class of social parasites who grow fat on food seized from others," according to historian Jared Diamond. No wonder that unfettered hunter-gathers, even those doubling as horticulturalists, tended to stay out of the city-building business.

Great Lakes natives recognized high-status ogimaag, but they knew no bosses. Rejecting coercion among themselves, they naturally resisted any imposed from without. Prior to European contact, some Indian nations had already started forming inter-tribal alliances, such as the Iroquois Confederation along the southern shore of Lake Ontario.

As whites pushed relentlessly westward, similar borderland combinations arose in New England, the South, Ohio, and around the Great Lakes. These east-of-the-Mississippi resistance movements came together in waves that lasted until the Black Hawk War in 1832, resisting enforcement of the ethnic cleansing 1830 Indian Removal Act.

The most ambitious native armed struggle during this period was an earlier surge of resistance known as Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763 through 1764. This asymmetric attack against British troops traversed hundreds of miles of territory, and forced the Crown to acknowledge Indian independence following the Seven Years War that spanned the globe beginning in 1756. A resulting royal proclamation curtailed white settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. Predictably, American impatience with London's restriction on land larceny from native people soon became a leading cause of the 1776 colonial revolt.

More historically obscure than Pontiac's Rebellion was another confederation episode twenty years later that faced off against now-independent America in 1783. This particular self-defense movement reached its apotheosis inside the Maumee Valley and along the Sandusky River in the 1790s. While based in Ohio, the majority of its warriors came from Michigan's Three Fires nations, the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi.

These confederated militants refused to cede any more land to the U.S. Recruiting more comrades was easy as relentless territorial pressure created ever more irreconcilables. Native military victories against U.S. invasions of Ohio in 1790 and 1791 further increased their numbers. Sympathetic British agents supplied the alliance with munitions, and urged them on with promises of Redcoat assistance against the land-hungry Yankees.

In this way, the theft of Ohio became the United States' first imperial war of aggression. It was orchestrated by the slave republic's cunning president, George Washington. Dubbed the Town Destroyer by natives, Washington was a narcissistic, real-estate scammer and white-supremacist sociopath who assumed office in 1789. Always the sharper, he feigned interest in negotiation while launching three military assaults on the Ohio borderlands. Each was larger than the last, and all were aimed squarely at the Maumee Valley.

U.S. forces first targeted Kekionga, in present day Indiana, the confederation's nerve center at the Maumee's headwaters. Once that inter-tribal nexus was incinerated, American soldiers then burned and looted their way downriver through a series of multicultural villages and expansive cornfields concentrated around the confluence with the Auglaize River.

The Glaize, as this area was known, was 50 miles southwest of what is now Toledo, Ohio, home to several tribes in permanent residence and included a sub-village of European traders and artisans who were part of the alliance. It had hosted a huge 1792 pan-Indian council attended by thousands of natives from over twenty nations. The Glaize's lush gardens and sprawling maize cultivation could support such gatherings, and made it the movement's breadbasket.

After annihilating this remarkable polyglot community, U.S. forces led by Major-General "Mad Anthony" Wayne's horse-drawn genocide machine then rolled down the Maumee Rapids, torching everything that would ignite. U.S. Army howitzers blasted through a thin Indian defensive line at Fallen Timbers in August 1794, but forward progress then stalled before a British fort located at the foot of the rapids. Since neither the United States nor Great Britain wanted war in 1794, Americans declined to assault the fort, and its Redcoat garrison refused to fight alongside desperate natives.

Indian defeat at Fallen Timbers was only a minor military setback, but it had major psychological consequences. Outnumbered tribesmen now understood that their British allies would not mobilize to help them, which collapsed warrior morale and fragmented the alliance. Moving into the breach, Wayne's victorious troops quickly built forts at Kekionga and The Glaize, allowing the gout-ridden general to dictate terms to Ohio's hungry and demoralized natives at the Treaty of Greene Ville.

Indian militants not neutralized at Greene Ville regrouped in Michigan, Indiana, and Ontario, and from there emerged the most famous Great Lakes confederation inspired by the legendary Tecumseh in 1805 through 1813.

Smaller than its 1790s predecessor, Tecumseh's entente still required artillery assistance from Great Britain, which finally happened during the War of 1812. In that forgotten conflict's crowded first year, allied natives supported by British cannon enjoyed much military success. They captured two strategic U.S. bases at Detroit and Mackinac Island, and partially reoccupied the Maumee Valley. Then, the iron hand of logistics took hold. An American naval victory on Lake Erie in September 1813 cut off Crown supplies to Michigan, causing a precipitous British-Indian retreat into Canada.

This military catastrophe crumbled the alliance. Anguished warriors watching their families starve chose to cut deals with arrogant American conquerors.

Tecumseh fought on with his last diehard cohort against a U.S. invasion of Ontario, and there he was martyred in October 1813. His death in combat against The Empire provides closing punctuation for millennia of anarchistic freedom in the Great Lakes Basin.

Rob Blurton has written often for the *Fifth Estate*. He lives in the Detroit area.

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