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The Bering Strait Theory

IMAGINE YOU ARE PART of a small group of nomadic hunters, compelled for some unknown reason to leave your territory and drift to the northeast. Your group's journey may take decades to complete and might even continue long after your death. It began in the middle of a vast continent and involves moving toward a barren land of high mountain ranges marked by long, brutally cold winters.

While hunting was a challenge in your former region, it proves much more difficult as your band heads deeper into the frigid north. Finally, after seasons of deprivation and starvation, the scouts ahead of your group come to the shore of a great salt sea, the other side of which is lost in heavy fog. Ahead of you unfolds a vast plain of treacherous bog across which no large mammal can pass. Because this marshy land lies stretched between two polar oceans, it is swept by hurricane-force storms that drive the temperatures so low skin turns to ice wherever it is in contact with the air.

Superhuman effort is needed to endure the horrors of your journey, but the ever-dwindling band presses on, driven to the east by a strange compulsion that defies understanding.

Most of your group dies of hunger on the bogs, but a few manage to stumble forward until they reach a new land, void of human habitation. Once again there are unceasing mountain ranges to climb without any expectation the arctic atmosphere will end.

Finally, there is a glimmer of hope. Far ahead you spot a bright band of blue and white shimmering in the distance. Perhaps these are low-lying clouds covering a sheltering valley where you might once again shed your heavy animal pelt cloaks and bask in the warm sun.

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As you get closer to the area your spirits are crushed, for directly before the company is a tremendous glacier two miles high and stretching beyond sight from the north to the south. Some of your band want to return across the bogs but others insist there is a way through the ice. As if by magic they find a chasm in the glacier. They eagerly enter and walk its entire 1,500-mile length without food of any kind while contorting their frail bodies through a narrow wind tunnel marked by 200-mile-per-hour tempests.

They emerge from the glacier to discover a fertile land of woolly mammoths, giant bison, and vast herds of horses. Your group is overjoyed by what they find and quickly populate the continent. Mysteriously, they ignore the smaller game creatures and risk their lives to exterminate the largest animals.

In time, your descendents will drift apart and within an astonishingly short period develop over 500 languages and dialects to communicate across hundreds of nations spread over two continents.

As strange as the above sounds, it is the basis upon which many otherwise intelligent scientists have determined the Western Hemisphere was first populated by human beings. Anyone with a shred of common sense will come to the conclusion that the Bering Strait migration theory is irrational. It is a theory only, for no true physical evidence exists that supports this concept. It is also illogical, for the only time a land bridge connected Asia and the Americas was during the ice age of 10,000 years ago, when human life in that region was impossible.

Then there is the other serious problem with the Bering Strait theory: it collapses when archaeologists find evidence that humans were here long before the end of the last ice age. Such evidence has been uncovered in South America, New Mexico, and California.

But if Indians did not come from Asia, where did they originate? The answer lies within Native oral histories for those willing to listen, learn, and believe.

Origins of the Iroquois

Central to the beliefs of every culture is the story of where they came from and how they arrived at their current time and place. While many origin stories are almost mythical in nature, others are surprisingly consistent with hard physical or linguistic data. Oral traditions inevitably contain valuable insights into the culture and mannerisms of any people, and none more so than those people who, because they lack a method of writing, rely exclusively on collective memories passed down through the ages by the sacred act of storytelling.

Such is the case with the Iroquois, a people who until recently passed on all their history by the spoken word. How accurate are these legends? I contacted my friend Dr. Dean Snow, an archaeologist at the State University of New York at Albany who has spent many years collecting material from various Mohawk settlements in central New York.

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I asked Dr. Snow specific questions as to where he thought we came from, based solely on the evidence he had collected. His conclusions largely substantiate what I had been told by the elders of the Mohawk Nation, namely that we were originally a people from the desert area of the American Southwest who had gradually moved into this region over a period of many generations.

When our people tell a story they do not refer to specific years but recall special events, exceptional people, a specific land form, or an unusual celestial phenomenon. Eclipses of the sun are remembered and passed on, as are political and social upheavals. All of this is brought together in the form of a story to be told by our oral historians—men and women who traveled from one Iroquois village to the next during the winter cold, carrying with them the legends of our nations.

We are told our story began with the coming to earth of the Sky Woman, a person from a world beyond the stars who was drawn to this planet by curiosity. Instead of firm land, she found endless water because a great flood had covered the earth. Only through the intervention of certain animals was she able to avoid drowning in this endless sea.

By a series of miracles, she was able to have mud dredged from the ocean floor and placed upon the back of a giant turtle. By dancing upon it, she caused this muck to grow until it became the continent of North America, which the Iroquois call Turtle Island. Heavy with child, the Sky Woman gave birth to a daughter. When this daughter grew up, she was impregnated by the western wind with male twins.

Through another series of adventures, which take many hours to tell, this new land was given form and populated with plants and animals by the grandsons of the Sky Woman, one of whom was good and the other very bad. The good twin made humans in his image but his jealous brother corrupted these early people, giving them characteristics such as greed, hatred, and anger.

In time, after a great struggle, which took place on the southern shores of Onondaga Lake, the evil twin was defeated by his brother, but his deeds could not be undone. From that day to this, life on earth has been a constant struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

Our elders tell us we first grew to become a distinct people in the Southwest, in the land where the Hopi live. Indeed, to this day the Iroquois refer to the Hopi as our cousins, relatives whom we remember even after the passing of thousands of years.

For some reason, the Iroquois began to wander away from the Southwest and eventually settled at the eastern edge of the Great Plains where the Missouri and Mississippi River meet, near current-day St. Louis. It is said we were close allies with the Wolf Nation, now called the Pawnee. (In the movie *Dances With Wolves*, they are shown as the Indians with the Mohawk haircut attacking Lt. Dunbar's Lakota friends. It is entirely possible they borrowed their hairstyles from us, given that the Iroquois were a very important political and economic force in the Midwest throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.)

After many generations, the Iroquois again moved, this time toward the north-east following the Ohio River. During the course of this journey several small bands split off to venture north, where, over time, they grew into the Tobacco, Neutral, Huron, Petun, Wenro, and Erie nations. Another group went to the southeast and became the Cherokees, while a large number settled in central Pennsylvania and were known as the Susquehannas or Conestoga Nation.

Undeterred by these divisions, the main Iroquois party continued on, paddling their canoes along the shores of the Great Lakes and down the St. Lawrence River until they were stopped at a place near Three Rivers, Quebec, by the Algonquins. It is said the Iroquois were enslaved by the Algonquins and spent many years laboring for a people we called the Adirondacks, or "bark eaters," because they had the habit of flavoring their food with shredded bark.

After many years had passed, the Iroquois managed to escape. They retraced their steps along the St. Lawrence and into Lake Ontario. As they were about to land near the mouth of the Oswego River, they spotted the Adirondacks coming fast in an effort to recapture them. In a scene reminiscent of the "Divine Wind," or kamikaze, said to have protected the Japanese against invasion, a great storm came from the west and upset the canoes of the Adirondacks, drowning many of their men and driving the rest far into the lake.

Having landed safely, the Iroquois liked what they saw. Within a few years their population had grown so quickly that it was necessary to expand further into that territory. One group decided to set up their villages along the Mohawk River and became known as the People of the Flint because of the flint quarries in this eastern area. In the Iroquois language, they are the Kaiienkehaka, but are also called the Mohawks.

To the west of the Mohawks were the Oneidas, followed by the Onondagas, the swamp-dwelling Cayugas, and along the Genesee River, the People of the Great Hill or Senecas. Another group went far to the south to what is now North Carolina, but eventually retraced their steps to this region in the early 1700s. They are called the "shirt-wearers" or Tuscaroras.

This is a very abbreviated summary of the Iroquois story of our beginnings, of how we came to be in New York State. Nothing has ever been found that contradicts this story. In fact the physical and linguistic evidence supports what our elders have been telling us all along, namely that we are a people with roots in distant lands far to the west, but as a nation and a people we are of this land and no other.

The Great Law of Peace

The Iroquois people have lived in the North American Northeast from time immemorial, our language, culture, and lifestyles interwoven with the powerful rivers, great forests, and fertile valley bottomlands that compose our ancestral homelands.

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Long ago, when the Iroquois lived as one family on the southern shore of Lake Ontario, we were given a series of moral teachings by a messenger sent to us from the spirit world. These instructions formed the basis of the many elaborate rituals that define our religious beliefs and practices. The messenger told our ancestors how to honor the Creator and give communal thanks for the many blessings of life by holding a series of gatherings inside our longhouses each lunar month. At these gatherings, one person was to recite the Thanksgiving Address, a prayer spoken on behalf of the people in which earth, water, sky, wind, insects, plants, and animals are specifically addressed with words of gratitude.

In addition, the messenger affirmed the ceremonies as a way of preserving the human-earth relationship through music and dance. These ceremonies brought much happiness to the Iroquois, but as the centuries passed the teachings became obscured as the Five Nations entered a time of fear and violence. It is said this era in Iroquois history was a terrible one during which the nations were controlled by merciless warlords and evil sorcerers, each of whom used terror to keep a firm grip upon the people. Each day brought new suffering, until the Iroquois began to doubt any goodness was left in the world.

It was then, when all hope had been abandoned, another messenger was sent by the Creator to the Iroquois. This prophet was conceived of a virgin woman among refugees who had fled the Iroquois homelands to seek sanctuary north of Lake Ontario. The messenger came in the form of a male child whose life mission was to bring peace to the world by forming a World League of Nations with the power to banish warfare as a means of resolving human disputes.

Called Skennenrahawi, or the Peacemaker, his greatest challenge was to convert the Iroquois to the ways of peace, no simple task given their notoriety for cruelty. Nonetheless, Skennenrahawi left his place of refuge, crossing Lake Ontario in a gleaming white canoe made of stone. He crossed the waters as rapidly as an arrow fired from a bow. Arriving on the far shore, he met a group of Mohawk hunters. He told them peace was coming to the Iroquois and they should go about and tell the people of the new way.

Skennenrahawi traveled throughout Iroquois territory teaching those who would listen about the rules that would bring peace. These rules, referred to as the Great Law of Peace, were to serve as the guiding regulations for all the Iroquois.

In time, Skennenrahawi met Jikonsasay, a female leader from the Neutral Nation west of the Senecas. Jikonsasay took great delight in provoking disputes from which she profited by supplying all sides with food and arms. However, she was persuaded to abandon her evil ways once she listened to Skennenrahawi explain how the Great Law would work.

In exchange for her assistance in spreading the Law, Skennenrahawi decided all Iroquois women would have a decisive role in selecting male leaders and would serve as clan leaders in their own right, as well as holding the power to participate actively in the political and spiritual lives of their respective nations.

Skennenrahawi also met Aionwatha, a Mohawk-Onondaga man who was searching for an alternative to the chaos within Iroquois society. Aionwatha (also referred to as Hiawatha) was articulate and courageous in his determination to bring Skennenrahawi's ideas to fruition. He met considerable resistance to his efforts. When his seven daughters were killed at Onondaga, he experienced such great despair that he wandered throughout the land, inconsolable.

It was Aionwatha who devised the powerful condolence prayer recited before the elevation of a clan leader, words that were marked by the use of wampum, a device invented by him to record important events in Iroquois history.

The Onondaga wizard Tadodaho, a grossly deformed man whose head was capped by a nest of writhing snakes, opposed the work of Skennenrahawi, Jikonsasay, and Aionwatha to establish a great league of peace. Tadodaho's refusal to relinquish his control of the Onondagas prevented the creation of the League. He was finally persuaded to change his mind when confronted by the other Iroquois nations at a great assembly on the southern shore of Onondaga Lake. Tadodaho was also given the position of chairman of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and his successors have continued to carry his name as their title of office.

The initial Grand Council of the Confederacy established a permanent format for all subsequent sessions. Fifty male leaders, called *rotiiane* (pronounced lo-di-yane), sat in council as representatives of their respective nations. Every *rotiiane* carried a title name, which was passed on from one generation to the next.

Every one of the 50 *rotiiane* was chosen by the female clan leaders (clanmothers), approved by their individual clans, sanctioned by the national councils, and finally acknowledged by the Grand Council of the Confederacy.

The Founding Date of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy

The precise date for the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy has been a matter of speculation for many years. Historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, theologians, and amateur sleuths have placed the raising of the Great Tree of Peace anywhere from the early 1600s to the middle decades of the fifteenth century.

Most of these "experts" point to various factors that, they argue, compelled the Iroquois to join forces in the face of external threats ranging from European-borne diseases to fierce competition over the fur trade. Some have gone so far as to excavate ancient Iroquois village sites to examine physical clues that might indicate when the Iroquois abandoned their palisaded hilltop communities to build new towns closer to the natural trade routes along rivers and lakes.

Few of these professionals have taken the time to listen to the oral traditions of the Haudenosaunee, but it is these stories that might offer the best evidence as to the date when the Grand Council was first summoned by the Peacemaker and his disciples Jikonsaseh and Aionwatha.

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Like all Native people in the Americas, the Iroquois have endured academic paternalism, which discounts as quasi-fantasy our history as passed across the generations by word of mouth. Yet it is these same social scientists who aggressively seek out Native "informants" to enlighten them as to the spiritual and social practices that define Iroquois life.

These professionals grudgingly acknowledge the Haudenosaunee were the most influential indigenous people in North America, yet they dig in their heels at the thought that the Iroquois might have sparked the democratic ideals of the founders of the infant United States. They seem determined to debunk any notion that the Haudenosaunee actually created and sustained complex, sophisticated nation-states capable of exercising active jurisdiction over a territory stretching from the Hudson River to the Mississippi.

Some of the Iroquois critics will go so far as to argue that the founding of the Confederacy was heavily influenced by the Europeans, inferring that such a political system was beyond the intellectual capacity of a primitive, warlike, and stone age people. After all, how smart can a people be if they don't have gunpowder, professional armies, or the religious heritage that placed European man at the center of the universe?

Fortunately there are scientists capable of marrying hard physical data with Iroquois oral history in determining an actual day when the Great League of Peace was established. Dr. Barbara Mann, Ph.D., an American Studies instructor at the University of Toledo, and Jerry Fields, an astronomer-mathematician at the same institution, examined evidence from a number of sources, the results of which were published in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (Mann and Fields 1997).

Because there have been 144 Tadodahos since the founding of the League, they estimated an average number of years that a person would have been in office and subtracted that from the present date. Through oral history, they also knew the League was created during the month when the corn was ripe and the grass was knee high, clearly indicating the month of August. The scholars realized that the League and the introduction of corn to the Iroquois took place at the same period, which is, according to the physical evidence, around the year 1100. Corn had been brought into Iroquois territory from the Southwest and quickly became the Iroquois' most important source of food. With corn as a staple and in great abundance, the Iroquois population increased, along with its political and economic influence throughout the Northeast.

Fields and Mann were aware there was a solar eclipse during the Confederacy's birth that took place directly above the Seneca town of Ganondagan. They calculated there were eight eclipses in that region within nine hundred years, but only one that took place directly above central New York, during the time of day stated in the oral histories and in the corn-harvesting moon.

That day, according to Fields and Mann, corresponds to both physical data and Iroquois traditions. Given what the two scholars describe as "an unprecedented mass of evidence," we may safely set the ratification of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy as having taken place during the afternoon of August 31 in the year 1142.

Iroquois Sacred Places in New York

For those planning to spend vacation time in New York State, there are a number of places to consider that have special significance to the Iroquois. These sites are not known to most people and are rarely marked by plaques, yet to this day the informed Iroquois will stop for a few moments to reflect and remember.

North of Albany in the town of Colonie, where the Mohawk River meets the Hudson, is the Cohoes waterfall. The Iroquois believe this is the place where the prophet we call the Peacemaker performed one of his miracles some 800 years ago.

The Peacemaker was sent by the Creator to put an end to war by joining all nations in a league of peace. The Mohawks liked his plan but they had their doubts. In order to test the Peacemaker's powers, they had him climb a tall pine tree, which grew above Cohoes Falls. While he was perched near its top, they chopped it down and watched it tumble into the churning waters far below. When the Peacemaker did not immediately appear, they believed he had drowned and they sadly returned home. When they got to their village, they found the Peacemaker calmly sitting next to a fire, smoking his pipe, completely dry. It was then the Mohawks agreed to become the first nation in what was to become the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

All along the Mohawk River are the ancient village sites of the Mohawk Nation. Such contemporary towns as Schoharie, Ft. Hunter, Fonda, and Canajoharie were originally Native communities. A visit to the Jesuit shrine at Auriesville is also of interest to learn about the Catholic experience among the Mohawks.

Just east of the city of Oneida is the hamlet of Oneida Castle, so called because the old-time Iroquois towns were surrounded by palisades that from a distance looked like castles. The Oneidas lived in Oneida Castle until the 1820s, when most of them moved to Wisconsin.

South of Canastota, near the junction of Oxbow and Alene Corners Roads, is a seldom-visited county park called Nichols Pond. At this site the Oneidas constructed a large town that was attacked in 1615 by Samuel De Champlain. The park is a most pleasant corner of Madison County and has a large sacred turtle rock upon which the Oneidas would meet and pray.

An important place for the Onondagas is the south shore of Onondaga Lake. Here the Peacemaker joined forces with the chiefs, clanmothers, and faithkeepers of the Confederacy to confront the sorcerer Tadodaho. Using the power of the good mind, they persuaded him to join the League as its chairman. Also important to the

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Onondagas is their old town located just north of Nedrow on South Salina Street. At this meeting place, the Onondagas greeted ambassadors and dignitaries from many nations.

No visit to central New York would be complete without a tour of St. Marie Among the Iroquois, a museum on the eastern shores of Onondaga Lake just north of Syracuse, in the town of Liverpool. The museum is connected with a recreated fort, similar to the one constructed by the Jesuit priests in the seventeenth century. Reenactors dressed in the clothing of that era provide instruction as to the lives of the mission residents, while the museum has admirable displays on Iroquois life and culture of 300 years ago.

A drive along Cayuga Lake gives the tourist an idea of why the people of the Cayuga Nation fought so valiantly to keep their land. Its gently rolling hills, sheltered valleys, and pure waters provided the Cayugas with an abundance of food, while the area that is now the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge, with its plants and herbs, served as a pharmacy for the Iroquois.

South of Canandaigua Lake, just off State Route 364, is a prominent hill that has great meaning to the Senecas. They call it simply "the Great Hill" because they believe they sprang from the earth at this magical place.

Finally, there is Ganondagan, at the junction of State Routes 41 and 3 south of Victor. Upon this site lived Jikonsasay, the first Iroquois clanmother. It served as the capital of the Seneca Nation and currently has a nature trail, small museum, and learning center. A 60-foot longhouse in the ancient Seneca style, opened in 1997, provides Ganondagan's visitors with an opportunity to walk through the traditional domestic dwelling of the Iroquois.

There are, of course, many other sites of significance, but these few serve as an appropriate introduction to the sacred geography of the Haudenosaunee.

Legend of Two Serpents

There are many Iroquois stories passed down over the generations concerning the anticipated coming of the Europeans to North America and the attendant social, environmental, and political changes. When the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy was formed many generations before 1492, the Peacemaker, teacher of the Great Law of Peace, gave the people predictions as to what would happen once he was gone.

He told the assembled Five Nations a story they were to tell their children across the generations. It was of events he said would come to pass. This epic would begin with the Kaiienkehaka people, called by some the Mohawks.

It was said two young men had left the territory of the Mohawk Nation on a hunting expedition far to the east where the salt water meets the land. For some unknown reason famine had struck the villages of the Mohawk people. The crops

were few and poor in quality, while the deer and moose had disappeared. The many rivers that flowed through Mohawk territory were empty of fish, while the skies were strangely void of birds.

Hunger compelled the hunters to search in all directions for food to feed the people. These two men spent many days paddling down one river after another in hopes of finding game, but their luck was very bad. No animals were to be found.

Finally, they reached the ocean. Not having been in this region before, they were amazed at the many different types of wildlife in the area. But when they looked to the eastern skies toward the rising sun, they saw something glowing in the distance. Curious, they decided to paddle their canoe into the swelling sea to find out what this shimmering light might be.

They were far from shore before they reached the light, which turned out to be two small snake-like creatures, one a pulsating silver and the other a luminous gold. Fascinated by the serpents, the hunters took them from the water, placed them in their canoe, and headed back to the shore.

Believing the Mohawk people would find the serpents to be of great value, the two men abandoned their hunt and headed directly toward home. When they arrived back in the Mohawk territory, it was just as they had expected. The people were quickly enchanted by the serpents. They prepared a special cage for them on the edge of the village and would sit for hours watching the bright colors emanating from the snakes.

Soon they discovered that the serpents had great appetites. To keep them satisfied, the Mohawks had to feed them all the time. They ate everything—corn, meat, fish, grass, roots, leaves. Everyone was busy trying to find enough food for the snakes, and soon stripped the village bare of anything edible.

As they ate, the creatures grew ever larger, causing the Mohawks to build bigger cages. Finally, when there was no more food left, the serpents rose in anger, broke free from their cage, and attacked the people. The snakes ate many of them before the people managed to flee in terror into the forest.

Brave hunters decided to kill the beasts and attacked them with spears, clubs, and arrows. But the animals were by then too large and too strong. The Mohawks were beaten back and defeated.

As the serpents searched for more food, they devastated the surrounding area. Soon very few animals were left alive to feed the Mohawks. Almost all had been consumed by the serpents. Driven by their insatiable hunger, the serpents left Mohawk territory, slithering their way west.

The Mohawks discovered that wherever the serpents went they left behind polluted waters, desolate lands, and millions of destroyed trees. No Iroquois nation could stand up to the serpents. As they searched for new hunting grounds, the golden snake went south while the silver crawled north. The Iroquois could tell

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By this time, they had grown so large they could knock down trees whenever they passed. They were powerful enough to bore through mountains and drink up entire lakes. They had also grown to love the act of killing and would slay any living thing in their path.

After many generations had passed, the Mohawks felt safe since the serpents were said to be far to the west of Turtle Island. However, while on a hunting journey in that direction, a Mohawk man saw the golden serpent, now taller than a mountain. It was heading back to Iroquois territory.

In great fear the hunter raced back to Iroquois lands, shouting warnings as he went. As he paddled his canoe east, he learned the silver serpent was also making its way back to Mohawk territory.

What were the people to do? Faced with this crisis, they could not decide. Heated arguments confused and consumed the Mohawks. Some wanted to stand and fight, others to run and hide. Still more thought the only way to survive would be to try to feed the serpents as they had done hundreds of years before. So bitter was the debate that fighting broke out among the Mohawks, causing some to be killed.

Some remembered the old stories about how the great snakes had eaten Mohawk children. Rather than have this happen once again, they tried to warn the people, but only a few listened. It was just as they feared. The serpents struck the Mohawks with hatred and fury, scattering the people and hunting them down one by one. Only those who had fled the village to a safe place near a certain mountain survived. The serpents, however, knew their hiding place and continued to attack.

It was at this time, when it appeared the Mohawks had no chance of defeating the serpents, a Mohawk boy stood forth. He said he had a strange dream, one that told him how the snakes might be destroyed.

The Mohawks followed the instructions the boy had received in his dream. A very special bow was made from a willow tree with a string woven from the hair of the clanmothers. Arrows were carved and on their tips stones made of sharp white flint were placed. When the serpents appeared, the surviving Mohawk people gathered together around the boy as he pulled back on the bow and let the arrows fly. His aim was good, his heart strong. The arrows pierced the hides of the gigantic beasts, killing them.

Mohawk elders say the story has been handed down over the generations as a warning to the Iroquois about the great suffering they would endure at the hands of the Europeans. It is believed the gold serpent is the United States of America and the silver one is Canada.

It is said another grave threat to the Haudenosaunee would come from within,

when the Iroquois would be torn apart by internal divisions caused by greed, spiritual differences, and the loss of our ancestral values. There may well be, it is told, a time when the Iroquois doubt they will survive until the next day, but if the people hold true to the Great Law of Peace and follow the teachings of Handsome Lake, they will prevail.

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