

BASIC CALL to CONSCIOUSNESS

This impassioned vision of sovereign Native peoples calls for fundamental changes in the policies of developed nations and an end to the destruction of the Natural World. In clear, direct terms leaders of the Haudenosaunee—the Six Nations Iroquois—discuss the importance of honoring the sacred Web of Life, and describe the spiritual roots of their traditional lifestyle which pioneered concepts of peacekeeping and government later embodied in the United States Constitution.

These position papers, describing the conditions of oppression suffered by Native peoples in the Americas, were originally delivered to the Non-Governmental Organizations of the United Nations in Geneva in 1977.

John Mohawk's new introduction gives a first-hand account of events leading up to Geneva. Chief Oren Lyons has added a preamble offering a historical perspective on the struggle for self-determination by Indigenous peoples. An afterword by José Barreiro, "Indigenous into the 21st Century," looks to a new era of possibility for Native nations. Now expanded and updated, this revised edition includes endnotes, bibliography, and an index.

"The people who are living on this planet need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation, and begin to see liberation as something which needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all the things that support life—the air, the waters, the trees—all the things which support the sacred Web of Life."

Haudenosaunee Address to the Western World

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Akwesasne Notes



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Preamble ♦ Chief Oren Lyons
Introduction ♦ John Mohawk
Afterword ♦ José Barreiro



edited by Akwesasne Notes



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Introduction

John Mohawk



It was during the era of the administration of President John F. Kennedy, an era that saw some of the highest tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, that the issue of civil rights gained traction in American politics and opened the way for the U.S. civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

The Civil Rights Movement reverberated around the world. At about the same time, American Indians began demanding rights of a somewhat different nature. African-Americans had been denied full rights as citizens, were widely segregated in ghettos, had poor access to education or job training, and suffered discriminatory hiring practices. In many places, people would not sell them housing.

American Indian nations, on the other hand, once had owned the entire continent, but had been attacked and/or swindled out of most of their properties and most of the practical rights of nationhood. They demanded “Indian rights,” which were much more collective and probably even more unpopular in white America than were the African-American demands. By the late 1960s, however, they were beginning to make headway.

Indian tribes that had treaties guaranteeing them fishing rights in the Pacific Northwest challenged state laws prohibiting Indian fishing in violation of those treaties. The Columbia River became a scene of Indian demonstrations and arrests and eventually led to a court case in which Indian rights were at least somewhat upheld. This led to a backlash movement among some whites who wanted to pass legislation to end treaty rights, and the re-energized Indian movement mobilized to defend treaty rights. There was a historic demonstration at Alcatraz Island, at which

Indians called attention to the centuries of abuses of their rights, and demonstrations in California, Oregon, Minnesota, and other places about land claims.

In 1968 in Minnesota, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed. It initially became a force for the rights of urban Indigenous people, but soon it gained national attention. The stated goals of AIM were to defend Indian sovereignty and advance Indian rights causes. Their constituency included people in Indian Country and in urban settings. Richard Oakes, a Mohawk college student, helped organize a demonstration occupation of an abandoned prison complex on Alcatraz Island in northern California. It garnered considerable publicity and became a touchstone for Native activists from across the continent. The occupation began on November 20, 1969, and continued for approximately nineteen months.

Around the country, Indians mounted protests and demonstrations demanding treaty rights and land returns and opposing encroachment by non-Indians on Indian land. Some of these demonstrations reached the Haudenosaunee Country where people opposed non-Indian encroachment on a trailer court at Tuscarora and, more famously, opposed widening a road at Route 81 on the Onondaga Territory. The mood in Indian Country was that there would be no further loss of land, not even a little land for widening a highway.

American Indian Movement activists joined Indian rights activists nationally in raising an alarm that Indian ways were declining and Indian people were generally rendered powerless and in a state of abject poverty, especially on their lands. There was something of a national cultural revitalization and a concurrent complaint that there was a crisis in leadership in Indian Country, because the leaders had become co-opted by the U.S. government and non-Indian culture and could not see or act on Indian interests. Generations of colonization had taken their toll and had left Indian Country with leaders who seemed primarily interested in collecting federal grant money and not in exercising sovereignty. This was a message that came to resonate widely across Indian Country.

In 1972, a wide coalition of activists, including members of the American Indian Movement, organized a march on Washington to protest the treatment of Indians and to urge reforms of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The event was dubbed the “Trail of Broken Treaties,” and hundreds of Indians initially made their way to Washington in October 1972, days before the presidential election. When building security tried to evict the demonstrators while negotiations went on in the main offices, the security forces were driven from the building and an occupation of a federal

building in the capital—said to be the first since the War of 1812—ensued. The occupation lasted from November 3 to November 9, but the energy in Indian Country was rising, and during the winter of 1973, a small force of AIM supporters and local activists declared the historic village of Wounded Knee, site of a horrific massacre in 1890, as sovereign territory. The occupiers were surrounded by a military force, and an ensuing standoff lasted seventy-three days and resulted in Indian fatalities due to gunfire.

In 1974, the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) was organized and held its first national meeting at Wakpala on the Standing Rock Sioux Territory in North Dakota. IITC was organized to provide a platform to pursue the rights of Indigenous peoples under international law. After almost two hundred years, the United States, and most of the other nations of the Western Hemisphere, had failed to give meaningful recognition to the rights of a continued existence as a distinct people to any of the Indigenous peoples. Many who were involved in the Indian rights struggle felt that the nation states were hampered by a phenomenon known as the “tyranny of the majority” and would never be able to recognize even the rights bestowed by treaty. A partial remedy—but only one of many—would be the pursuit of the principles of indigenous rights under international law. It was acknowledged that international law had no enforcement powers, but it was felt that the so-called “civilized” nations of the world were generally embarrassed when their behaviors fell beneath the world standards for the treatment of individuals and peoples, and that the indigenous voice was an important and necessary part of the process of discussion around such principles.

The IITC was one of several groups that approached the NGOs—the Non-Governmental Organizations of the United Nations—with a proposal to explore the creation of a process to recognize the rights of Indigenous nations, peoples, and individuals. It was a historic undertaking. It wasn’t until early in 1977, when word reached the Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee, located at Onondaga in central New York, that the NGOs were willing to host a meeting. They had sent forward a request for response papers detailing the economic, legal, and social realities of the various Indigenous nations. Although the Iroquois Confederacy is composed of six member nations—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora—the Confederacy acts as a single nation in response to such international requests.

The call for papers was duly discussed. Three individuals were chosen and each was asked to author one of the papers. When finished, the papers would be presented to the Haudenosaunee Grand Council, which

would then make alterations and additions and produce a final draft. I was privileged to be chosen to write one of the papers. When the council reconvened, one of the other two individuals who had an assignment reported he would not be able to finish it. I had already finished the assignment I had, and the Council asked if I would be able to do the second paper. I did. The next meeting the third individual reported that he would be unable to complete his paper, and I was asked to write the third paper. Thus I authored the three position papers that appeared in *Akwesasne Notes* and later in *Basic Call to Consciousness*.

I did not go to Geneva in 1977 because we had a newspaper to run. Daniel Bomberry, the Cayuga-Salish man whose father came from the Grand River Country, attended the meeting and took photographs, many of which appeared in *Akwesasne Notes* and editions of *Basic Call*. José Barreiro, who was coeditor of the *Notes*, wrote an exciting account of some important moments at the meeting. When the meeting was over, and we looked at all the material we had, we realized that we had a small book. *Akwesasne Notes* had long before published a short pamphlet on the life of Deskaheh, the Cayuga chief who had gone to Europe to argue against the British military invasion and occupation and disgraceful overthrow of the traditional government at Grand River in 1924. We added the pamphlet to the other material, and a first edition of *Basic Call to Consciousness* appeared in 1978.

The book, or at least significant parts of it, has been translated into many languages. For me, the most edifying feedback was an account I heard from Indian rights activists who met in Washington, DC, in 1980. An individual approached me and explained that *Basic Call to Consciousness* had been translated into Portuguese, and a group had carried the book to Indian communities across Brazil and had read it to the rainforest Indians. He said these Indians thoroughly enjoyed hearing it and stated that it represented their own thoughts and feelings. Nothing that has happened before or since ever brought the satisfaction of that conversation.

John C. Mohawk

The Decade of the Indigenous Peoples

There were and continue to be many reasons for Indigenous peoples to be present in the halls of the United Nations. For North American Indians and other Indigenous peoples with treaties, the UN provides a forum for discussion, studies, and possible solutions to protect Native lands and territories. The UN provides a forum to finally do away with the effects of the racist “doctrine of discovery” foisted upon generations of Native peoples and secure a brighter future for the 300 million or so Indigenous peoples of the world.

We have made great strides in the international forums on human rights over these past twenty-seven years. From the first discussion in 1970 by the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities on the rights of Indigenous populations and the appointment of José R. Martínez Cobo of Ecuador as Special Rapporteur of this study, to the opening of the third session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (a subsidiary organ of the United Nations’ Economic and Social Council, known as ECOSOC) in May 2004, there can be no doubt progress has been made.

Much has taken place in between: in the halls of the United Nations; in the lands and territories of Indigenous peoples; and in world conferences on populations, social development, women, habitat, and treaties. There have been recommendations for ways to recognize and honor the needs of Indigenous peoples. Yet the central issues remain unresolved.

Basic Call to Consciousness is essentially the report brought to Geneva in 1977 by the Haudenosaunee. Sotsisowah, John Mohawk, a Haudenosaunee scholar, was given the task of drafting our message to the world. The draft was presented to the Grand Council of the Chiefs and examined word by word. After many changes, refinements, additions, and deletions, the draft became our report to the world. Whatever the outcome of this conference would be, the Haudenosaunee Council of Chiefs were satisfied that our report was what we wanted to present at Geneva.

I was given the task to deliver the opening statement at the UN. We had discussed the importance of that message, and we decided to speak for the Natural World since they could not speak for themselves. Our message reflected our concern for the life of future generations. Their welfare is predicated on the health of the Earth. Our observation is that the message we delivered twenty-seven years ago fell upon the deaf ears of authority.

Yes, our human rights have moved, almost imperceptively, forward. Yes, the Working Group for Indigenous Populations (WGIP) was a major step forward when it was created in 1982. It provided the platform for the

Study on Treaties, Agreements, and Other Constructive Arrangements between States and Indigenous Populations by Special Rapporteur Professor Miguel Alfonso Martinez. This important study was commissioned in 1989 and completed in 1994. But you will note the treaties are between states and “populations,” not peoples or nations. So the oppressive directives of the thirteenth century Papal Bulls live on.

During the early years of our travels to Geneva we became increasingly aware that not only were we not recognized as peoples, which precludes us from human rights, but we had little or no rights in the eyes of the world. We were politically invisible.

The Working Group on Indigenous Populations made it possible to begin the task of drafting our own declaration of our rights. This evolved, after years of work, into the *Draft Declaration on the Rights of the World's Indigenous Peoples*. The draft provides a benchmark of minimum standards for Native peoples around the world. The draft declaration was adopted by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1993. The Commission on Human Rights is now reviewing the draft. This review is dragging on; currently they have accepted only two of the forty-five articles. The draft is stuck on Article 3, which addresses self-determination:

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination and can freely determine their own political status and identity.

States, particularly the United States with support from Australia, have blocked the passage of this article at every session and have threatened to withdraw unless the wording is revised. So much for democracy.

The voices of Indigenous peoples were strong in Rio in 1992. At this United Nations' Earth Summit, which focused on Agenda 21, women, children, and Indigenous peoples were included for special concern. We fought hard to be included, but little came from it. As a matter of fact, in the ten year follow-up at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, we were virtually unmentioned in the final report. If it wasn't for a few Indigenous representatives, luckily still at the conference, lobbying hard at the last hour of the last day for our continued inclusion in the Convention on Biological Diversity, we would have been completely eliminated from any reference at all. So the conspiracy of 1492 and 1493 lives on.

In 1989 we began lobbying the United Nations to recognize 1992 as “The Year of the World's Indigenous People.” This was to coincide with the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of the Western Hemisphere by Columbus. We knew that countries were preparing big celebrations,

including the reconstruction of the Santa Maria. Spain and Italy were foremost in these celebrations, with the United States and Central and South America scheduling similar events. We, the Indigenous peoples of the North, Central, and South Americas, were just as determined to challenge the myths and lies that passed for the history of this event.

Spain, Italy, and other member states of the United Nations defeated our efforts to have the initial recognition of Indigenous peoples fall on the anniversary of the so-called “discovery” of the Americas. However, we had generated so much pressure that the United Nations proclaimed 1993 as the “Year of the World’s Indigenous People.” Ultimately this worked out for us, because, by my calculations, Indigenous peoples defeated Columbus in the international field of public opinion in 1992, and our issues continued to roll on into 1993 with great momentum.

The following year the general assembly proclaimed 1995 to 2004 as the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People. Great. We’ll take it, along with the observation that we are no longer “populations,” we are now “people,” not yet “peoples” with an “s,” but that will come if we persevere. After all, we are peoples, are we not? In the full international sense of the word. And in the eyes of the Creator.

The mandates of the Decade of the World’s Indigenous People have not been met, and by all assessments the decade is an abysmal failure. There seems to be no political will on the part of states to take positive action on these issues. It may take another decade for any of the mandates to be implemented.

Yet again a benchmark step was taken with the establishment of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as a subsidiary organ of ECOSOC in July 2000. Indigenous organizations may participate in the forum’s work as observers. With the establishment of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of the Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples, there now is an avenue for Indigenous peoples to register complaints with the Division of Human Rights, an avenue that previously did not exist.

Still, this is a forum on Indigenous “issues” and not peoples. So we’re here and not here. And the Inter Caetera Bulls of the Medieval Church of Rome continues to be the defining law for Indigenous peoples.

Throughout this outline of the international history of contemporary Native peoples there has been little or no discussion about nature, Mother Earth, and Natural Law, the ultimate authority regarding life on Earth. This is where “all the King’s men” will not prevail.

Some time ago, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years back, Indian leaders were sitting around a campfire in Lakota Country. It was night and the

stars were brilliant. A camp coffeepot was hot by the fire, and we were talking about our greedy brother from across the sea. It was the usual talk of what he was doing now to the Earth, to the people, and to himself. Louie Bad Wound stood up and cursed in disgust. He said, "You know what we should do? Look at how many medicine people are here. We should put our medicines together and call in the winds and storms. Flood 'em out! We should call in the fires and burn 'em out! Maybe then he'll listen."

We were surprised by Louie's outburst and we said, "Louie, maybe we ought to think that one over."

Louie answered and said, "Well, he's not going to listen any other way!"

We settled Louie down and talked about the damage being done to Mother Earth. I remember the sparks flying into the night and how we all grew silent thinking about Louie's words.

Louie has long gone to the "other side camp," but I think of his words often. Now I think if Louie were here he would see that that our greedy brother has brought the winds and fire himself. What Louie was asking for is here. Mother Earth is in the process of bringing balance back to herself, and we will begin to suffer the consequences. This is our opportunity to make him listen.

These elements will only increase in intensity, and it will be very democratic. We all live under the law of flesh, bone, and blood, and we are subject to that law. There is no place to run. Disease is on the move, outsmarting modern medicine. We're depleting the resources of the world. Water will fuel the next wars. Global warming is on the march and world leaders continue to ignore it.

Economies are so fragile that natural disasters will destroy national economies. We are so dependent on energy that we are helpless without it. Climate changes and weather patterns are now in flux, yet our leaders fight wars over oil, spending enormous sums of money for military arms that could be better spent for food, shelter, medicine, and education for our future generations.

We need to mobilize for peace with the same energy that we use to mobilize for war. We need to produce better leaders with values of community and sharing. We need to exercise common sense.

The Great Peacemaker came among our people a thousand years ago with a message of peace. He said people must have equity and good minds and health. He instructed our leaders on governance. He said, "When you sit in council for the welfare of the people, think not of yourself, your family, or even your generation. Make all of your decisions on behalf of the seventh generation coming, then you yourself will have peace."

We must look back and recognize those that sacrificed for us seven generations ago so that we may have what we have today. They set high moral standards and kept the laws that respected the Earth. We prosper today because of the work of those delegates and leaders who are no longer here. We must look forward and keep firm the standards they set for us, and continue to fight for the seventh generation coming. Our work represents peace for them. When they read and experience this *Declaration on the Rights of the World's Indigenous Peoples* and experience their right to self-determination, in the full sense of the word, equal to all under law, they will think kindly of us and sing songs about us, because they will know that we loved them.

Dhnyayto. (Now I am finished.)

Joagquisho—Oren Lyons
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