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# The Politics of Survival: Indian and European Collaboration in Colonial North America

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# The Politics of Survival: Indian and European Collaboration in Colonial North America

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**research article**

## **The Politics of Survival: Indian and European Collaboration in Colonial North America**

—**Ian Pajer-Rogers**

Since Europeans first landed on the American continent, militaristic, economic, and social tensions have existed between European explorers and settlers and the indigenous population of the Americas. As British colonists established settlements along the Atlantic coast and French merchants established a small empire of trading posts throughout the land northwest of New England, each relied upon the Indians, in various ways, as a means of helping to build rival European-American powers. But the relationship between European transplants and Indians, traditionally labeled one of simple European exploit, was much more complex.

Given the constant clash between these peoples throughout the American colonial experience, it seems remarkable that the Indians and the Europeans would still collaborate in all of the same arenas in which tensions were borne: militaristic, economic, and social. It is hard to imagine why the Europeans would collaborate with the Indians, despite their possession of a distinct technological advantage and a belief that whites had a God-given superiority over the "savages." It is equally counter-intuitive that the Indians would work with the Europeans, by whom they not only suffered the hand of, but also had their own intellectual advantage over: the Indians were experts of wilderness survival and early colonial Europeans were far from adept in the bush. The reason for this unlikely collaboration is, simply, survival. The Europeans had no knowledge of wilderness survival; the Indians had neither guns nor horses. These relative needs led to a bilateral reliance and collaboration between the Indians and Europeans.

The Indians relied on the Europeans' relative strengths for survival at least as much as the Europeans relied on the Indians. Where Plymouth settlers relied on the Wampanoag knowledge of agriculture and game, the Wampanoag relied on the Plymouth Company as a military alliance against rival tribes and confederacies (1). Where the French merchants relied on Indian hunters to produce millions of furs, the Indians relied on the French to provide horses, guns, tools, and alcohol (2, 3). This pattern of bilateral reliance defines French and British relations with the plethora of North American Indian nations and tribes throughout the colonial period. Most American history textbooks brush aside the Indians as simply another facet of the "frontier" that European settlers had to "conquer" (4). This reasoning neglects the fact that Europeans were reliant on Indians and had to engage in political, military, and economic maneuvering in their relations with Indians: first to survive, then to thrive. Europeans did not merely conquer the frontier of North America. They had to learn wilderness survival, agriculture, hunting game, and guerrilla warfare before they could conquer anything. Many different Indians provided this knowledge, all of whom received some form of repayment after much political wrangling with the British and French.

## English—Indian Collaboration

Indian tribal or national leaders were not submissive, slow, docile adversaries, as they are often portrayed. All good leaders in the colonial period, both Indian and European, made calculated and careful decisions based on rational problem-solving skills. Indians and Europeans made war and peace at their necessity and sometimes choice. But most Euro-Indian political dealings within the colonial period were based foremost on what one party could get from the other. The Indians had information, tools, and talents that the Europeans needed; Europeans could offer the Indians the same. This led to a valuable sharing of knowledge. But crucially, this collaboration only occurred when both sides had something to gain from the relationship, in other words, when a bilateral reliance was present.

The first attempts at a permanent European colony in North America began on the Outer Banks of present-day North Carolina. England made at least three separate attempts to establish a permanent colony between 1585 and 1590. These colonies were rudimentary, at best, and English men and women starved every winter, mostly from ill-preparedness. The Roanoke colony is a perfect example of an English colony doomed by Indians who had no interest in collaboration. When the colony was first established, the local Croatoan Indians traded food and other amenities with the settlers for their iron tools or fancy clothing. But once these transactions occurred and no supply ship from England arrived to replenish the settlers' stock, the Indians lost all interest in helping the Roanoke colony find food or make shelter. When the overdue supply ship arrived on Roanoke in 1590, the settlement was deserted of all people and remains; the only clue was the single word 'Croatoan' carved into a tree at the abandoned site (5).

With reliance in mind, it is interesting to note that the Indian presence local to Roanoke, mainly Croatoan, did not help the settlers, and for good reason. After the small influx of trade, the settlers on Roanoke had nothing to offer the Croatoan and other neighboring tribes. They had no food, no flow of European goods, and they certainly were not going to give the Indians any guns. Because the Indians did not rely on the Europeans for anything on Roanoke, the colony was doomed to failure because of the settlers' ignorance of wilderness survival. As Alden Vaughan notes, "Indian trade and assistance had been crucial to the initial success of the [Roanoke] colony." The unwillingness of the Indians to assist the settlers in Roanoke "had almost certainly doomed the first English outpost" (6). When Europeans arrived at Roanoke without tangible or intellectual resources, the Indians had no reason to offer assistance to the struggling settlers. Though the settlers on Roanoke would rely on the local Indians or die, there was nothing to gain from the Indians' perspective, thus the colony perished.

Like Roanoke, the most notable examples of reliance on collaboration come in the early years of colonialism, when English settlers were still struggling to survive the harsh New England winters. The Plymouth colony, founded in 1620, was initially ravaged by starvation in the winter. But the colonists from Europe brought disease that killed all but ten percent of 21,000 Indians of the powerful Wampanoag tribe. Only one in two English settlers was able to survive the first winter by raiding abandoned Wampanoag shelter and food caches (1). This severe weakening of a once formidable Indian tribe put the Wampanoag as much at the mercy of the Plymouth settlers as the settlers were at the mercy of the Wampanoag. Unlike the Croatoan near Roanoke who did not need to help the struggling Europeans, the Wampanoag suddenly found themselves vulnerable to both the transplanted English and enemy tribes and nations. Thus, the Wampanoag and the Plymouth Company formed a military pact that would simultaneously ensure European safety from harsh winters and hostile Indians, and provide the Wampanoag security from enemy tribes, already partnering up with other European settlers. The Plymouth alliance was a direct response to a military treaty between the Wampanoag's traditional enemy, the Narragansett, and the Dutch (1). Military alliances with the English colonies were crucial for Indian nations and tribes because Europeans had a steady supply of firearms and horses. Thus, as Indian tribes and nations allied with various English companies against other similar alliances, Indian nations were embarking on their own rudimentary arms race.

## **French—Indian Collaboration**

Unlike the military alliances that so dominated English and Indian politics in New England, economics was the defining factor that built the French and Indian relations north and west of New England. Rather than seeking to establish permanent colonies in North America, the French were more concerned with exploiting the vast natural resources of North America. Again, the Indians proved valuable as experts on using these resources. By far the most important arm of France's economic imperialism in North America was the fur trade. The Indians, skilled hunters and adept at negotiating with the French for the best prices, relied on the French to provide the market for the furs by which they could obtain firearms, iron, and other important goods foreign to the Indians. The French, conversely, relied on the Indians to supply the furs that could be sold at exorbitant markups in Europe (3).

The fur trade had interesting implications in the context of reliance. The Indian nations that provided furs to the French had to protect their resources from other nations that sought to compete with or overpower them. The Huron were forced to trade for guns to protect themselves from certain nations in the Iroquois Confederacy. Some Iroquoian nations were very aggressive in their pursuit of land that was rich in beaver and other fur-yielding animals. The Iroquois thus embarked on a series of battles now called the Beaver Wars. By 1660, the Iroquois had effectively exterminated the Indian nations of the Huron, the Petun, the Neutral, the Erie, and the Susquehannock (1). But the Iroquois monopoly in the fur trade lasted only as long as the fur supply. Once the Iroquois' lands were exhausted of beaver, the French moved south and west in search of more fur. The Indians could not simply devolve back to a point where they no longer needed iron or horses or guns; they were hooked. Furthermore, the intensive focus on the fur trade led participant Indians to neglect the necessary agriculture that would allow their survival through the harsh northern winters. This put some Indians in the novel situation of relying on the Europeans for a food supply in the winter months. The fur trade also exacerbated historical tensions between nations and required that Indians intent on defending their part of the trade participate in an arms race similar to the competitive alliances found throughout New England and New York between the Indians and Europeans.

### **Collaboration in war**

The four major Imperial Wars, fought between the French and British for control of North America and sometimes referred to collectively in America as the French and Indian Wars, is another important example of reliance between Indians and Europeans.

The style of most Indian warfare was the sole advantage that Indians had over the Europeans, but it was a crucial advantage. The Indians used guerrilla tactics, a type of warfare that the Europeans had never before seen. The Indians' method of war was so effective that both the French and the British employed Indians, often through rewards for enemy scalps, to fight most of the ground battles in the Imperial Wars. The importance of having Indians fight the European war was recognized early on. In 1711, a governor in New France remarked at the outset of the Imperial Wars that, "The Iroquois are more to be feared than the English colonies," and years later a New York colonist reminded his governor that, "on whose side the Iroquois Indians fall, they will cast the balance [in the war]" (7). One colonist summarized the European military reliance on the Indians in 1755:

The importance of the Indians is now generally known and understood. A Doubt remains not, that the prosperity of our Colonies on the Continent will stand or fall with our Interest and favour among them. While they are our Friends, they are the Cheapest and Strongest Barrier for the Protection of our Settlements; when Enemies, they are capable of ravaging in their method of War, in spite of all we can do, to render those Possessions almost useless (7).

As for the Indians' reasons for this destructive collaboration, they simply relied on the hope that if the European power they backed won, they would be able to retain something of their former lives. For this reason, most

Indians sided with the French, who were typically more of a peaceful business partner in the fur trade than a colonist looking to expand settlement as the European population grew. The Indians local to New England had few choices but to fight for England or lose the opportunity to retain any of their former lands.

The Indians fighting Indians in these European wars led to consistent stalemates in the ground war. Battles were won and lost by both sides, but neither the French nor English won decisively on the ground. What this stalemate provided was an opportunity for the English to win the Imperial Wars with its far superior navy. The naval battles proved decisive where the ground wars were not, and in 1763, England had officially beaten out France for control of North America (1).

The American Revolution was a similar situation. Because many Indians realized the implications of a colonial victory over England, Indians primarily sided with England. The ground fighting was fierce and much more decisive than in the Imperial Wars; after all, the colonists had no real navy for England to overpower. It was this ground fighting that led Benjamin Franklin and General John Forbes to be the major proponents of colonial soldiers studying the "Art of War," how to fight in the woods, so mastered by the "Enemy Indians" (8). Indian regalia were used as symbols of the new America, independent from the tyranny of Britain. The perpetrators of the Boston Tea Party dressed as Indians, presumably to disguise themselves but also to symbolize their Americanism over their European roots. Colonists adopted Indian warfare, even though they often used the warfare against Indians fighting for the British. But this adaptation proved a crucial factor in winning the American Revolution.

## Conclusion

It is clear that without the presence of the Indians and the subsequent reliance that is consistently present through economic, social, and militaristic dealings, European settlers would not have been able to develop a working society as quickly or effectively as they did. They certainly would not have thrived without the introduction of corn and tobacco (staples of the Virginia economy) or the fur trade (mandatory for French development.) The reliance that so defined Indian-European political relations throughout the colonial period was a defining factor in the evolution of America and Americans. Historians should work to ensure that these important interactions are not relegated to the Euro-centric attitude of simple dominance over the "savages" that helped America and Americans to become what they are, even today.

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### ***Author Bio***

*Ian Pajer-Rogers hails from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and is a junior in the UNH political science program. An avid writer, he is also pursuing a minor in English. In the summer of 2004, Ian received a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) award. His Inquiry article is the (indirect) result of that research. When he learned that Inquiry was recruiting a student editorial board, Ian seized the opportunity, knowing that it would be a valuable way to improve his own writing skills. Though undecided about his future, Ian wants to take some time off from studies to write fiction and songs, as he is also a skilled guitar and piano player. In the meantime, he enjoys hiking, reading, and cheering for the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team.*

### ***Mentor Bio***

*Ian's mentor, Mary Fran T. Malone, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science where she specializes in comparative politics with an emphasis on Latin America. She has mentored students at Chatham College and the University of Pittsburgh, as well as at UNH, since her arrival here in 2003. "It is always difficult," she says, "to explain research design to newer students, as it involves creatively structuring one's own research inquiry."*