

# Negotiating with Empires: Native American Successes and Failures

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**What factors determined the success or failure of Native American communities in negotiating with European empires?**

The accidental discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492 was the beginning of what was to become one of the greatest culture clashes in history. Once the New World was discovered, many flocked from around Europe hoping for a more fortunate and prosperous life. Despite the Americas presenting new opportunities, it also immersed the newcomers in a new unknown world. A clash of civilisations was inevitable given that the Native Americans had developed their societies in complete isolation from the rest of the world. The colonists and settlers were quick to discover the vast cultural, political and social differences when interacting and negotiating with the Natives. Negotiations on trade, land and allegiances between Native Americans and Europeans varied throughout the New World, some ended in conflict and genocide while others ended in co-existence or even assimilation and integration.

This essay intends to illustrate the many factors in determining the success of negotiations from the Natives' point of view by initially focusing on the natural and political issues that impacted negotiations before focusing on the more case-specific factors.

One issue that occurs when analysing the success or failure of negotiations between Native Americans and Europeans is the definition of success. One might argue that survival alone is insufficient to count as a success, the preservation of the Native culture and possibly even society is also important.

Disease and conflict eradicated the majority of the Native population of the Americas but not all encounters between Indians and Europeans ended in death. Negotiations took place all

over the New World as Native Americans attempted to deal with the arrival of the Europeans, the success of these negotiations had many factors rooted in the nature of political confrontation.

The first of these factors was the power and size of the Native community in question; large Indian tribes with power and strong alliances were much less likely to accept European intrusion. These Native Americans frequently resisted the first colonists who were often weak in numbers and even forced greater powers into negotiations through warfare.

The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the League of the Iroquois was a powerful group of five allied tribes living in the north of the Americas between New York and Ontario. The Iroquois Confederacy was a veritable power in their region and had established a strong grip dominating most of the smaller tribes in Northern America<sup>1</sup>. Their power was the reason Europeans entered into mutually beneficial negotiations as they feared the Iroquois and preferred to settle for less rather than enter into conflict. The Iroquois' power was a direct deterrent, which allowed for the tribe to survive and live independently for a large part of colonization. Their power also granted them advantages indirectly when they allied with the English to fight the French when the former attempted to expel the latter from the fur trade<sup>2</sup>.

The Powhatan Confederacy is another example of power allowing for successful negotiations with the European Colonists. When the English first arrived in Virginia and started to settle, it didn't take long for tensions to break out. The Powhatans committed the Indian Massacre of 1622 in the Virginian town of Jamestown, killing 347 people, a quarter of the town's population. The massacre was followed by numerous attacks by the English forcing the

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<sup>1</sup> Jennings, F. (1984) '*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*' pp. 113-114

<sup>2</sup> Jennings, F. (1984) '*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*' pp. 7-8 & 47-49

Powhatans into negotiations. There are still 7 original tribes of the Powhatan Confederacy recognized today, living and even governing reservations established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. In comparison, the small Indigenous population of Quebec were not subjected to as much violence, as it was insignificant to the French<sup>4</sup>. These tribes were eventually, either relocated, assimilated into European Colonial society or exterminated. The smaller tribes found it much harder to negotiate with the settlers.

Another factor in determining the nature of negotiations between locals and colonists was the power of the settlers and their alliances with other local tribes. The ‘allegiance-game’ played by European settlers was a key factor, especially for the Spanish in Latin America. It is known that Hernan Cortes allied with several local tribes to attack the Emperor Moctezuma II. These tribes, most prominently the Tlaxcaltec, benefitted from their loyalty to the Spanish which allowed them to survive and to an extent live peacefully alongside Spanish rule. The Spanish allied themselves with thousands of Native Americans, using the local ethnic and historic divisions to further their conquest. This enabled the Spanish to overthrow the Aztecs in Mexico and completely annihilate certain other tribes<sup>5</sup>. Another example of the impact of allegiances would be the conquest of the Incas in Peru by Francisco Pizarro between 1532 and 1535. It is thought that Pizarro succeeded in his conquest thanks to over 40.000 Incan renegades<sup>6</sup>. Thus showing that one Native American’s success could be another one’s failure, adding to the sensitivity in defining successful negotiations.

More often than not, conflict was unavoidable as the Europeans were not only a direct threat to the Indians but also an indirect one as their consumption of natural resources repeatedly

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<sup>3</sup> Richter, D. (2001) ‘Facing East from Indian Country’, pp. 71-75

<sup>4</sup> DuVal, K. (2006) ‘The Native Ground’, pp. 63-65

<sup>5</sup> Gibson, C. (1964) ‘The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule’, p. 25-27

<sup>6</sup> DuVal, K. (2006) ‘The Native Ground’, p. 33

forced Native Americans to either fight or leave their lands. The interactions between Native Americans and Europeans therefore also depended on the colonists' interest in their land. The richer the land, the more tempted the Europeans were to take over. This led to conflicts and even wars as the Native Americans resisted the European intrusion. The Europeans generally left those tribes that were small in numbers, occupying 'poor land' in peace by negotiating land divisions or reservations that allowed for coexistence. When the land was thought to be potentially productive, the Europeans insisted on having full control, thus led to major conflict in places like Central America where the Spanish chased after the legendary El Dorado.

Despite these natural factors, it would be wrong to assume a common similarity in all interactions between Natives and Settlers. Francis Jennings points out that as the intentions, beliefs and methods of the 5 European powers differed, so did those of the thousands of Indian tribes. There are therefore many factors specific to the type of nation and type of interaction that affected negotiations<sup>7</sup>.

One major cause of tension was the initial opinions held by each side; the Indians often thought badly of the Europeans due to diseases that they had brought across the ocean, killing many Native Americans that weren't immune to them. The Europeans on the other hand had their own prejudices due to mixed reports brought back by the first settlers. Many had heard of the evil savages and beasts roaming the Americas and this obviously influenced their approach making them prone to hostilities. Though governments tried to advertise the

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<sup>7</sup> Jennings, F. (1984) '*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*' pp. 20-23

colonial world by painting a picture of the 'noble savage' most settlers thought badly of the Indians before even meeting them.

Another key factor was the problem of land ownership; Native Americans weren't acquainted with the concepts of owning land, which led to much confusion when colonists paid them for their land. Native Americans had previously only negotiated on things such as hunting and gathering rights; they thought the land belonged to everyone. This led to confusion and conflict when the Europeans thought they were buying land and tried to remove the Natives from it. The Europeans often owned the land despite living thousands of miles away leading the Indians to believe that they were free to cultivate the lands and hunt on them. The differing views on and ownership was one of the key factors in negotiations breaking down ultimately leading to violence and war.

Land tenure wasn't the only issue that saw Native Americans and Europeans disagree, the Swedes and the English were quick to find that the Native Americans had very different ideas concerning social customs, reciprocity as well as very different beliefs and values. Indian beliefs strongly affected the success of their negotiations as one can see when looking at Hernan Cortes, who managed to conquer a large part of Mexico thanks to the Aztecs believing he was their white god Quetzalcoatl. Indians were often in awe of the Europeans giving the colonists an upper hand in negotiations<sup>8</sup>. Upon the arrival of Francisco Pizarro in Peru, Incas referred to the Spanish as "Children of the Sun" due to their light skin and advanced technology. Europeans often took advantage of Indian beliefs and betrayed them during talks<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Gibson, C. (1964) '*The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*', pp. 115-117

<sup>9</sup> DuVal, K. (2006) '*The Native Ground*', p. 61

Possibly the most important factor in determining discourses between Indians and Europeans was trade. Direct trade allowed for cooperation and coexistence as demonstrated by the leader of the Algonquian Indians, Chief Powhattan, who helped support the newcomers with buffalo robes, dried meat, leather and other natural resources, especially vital to the Europeans during the winter. In exchange, Powhattan received weapons and horses, giving him a great advantage at consolidating his power over 25 Indian tribes<sup>10</sup>.

Indirect trade also permitted peaceful coexistence and negotiations. The Europeans wanted to make money and the Indians knew the lands, making them very useful to the colonists. If the Native Americans helped with trade, they became too important to be relocated or killed<sup>11</sup>. A good example of this is the peace negotiated between the Native Americans of Nebraska and the French, where Etienne de Veniers, Sieur de Bourgement came to an agreement with the indigenous tribes of the plains, that fur would be traded for weapons. The French supplied guns and steel weapons, which gave the tribes such as the Pawnees, Missouriias, and Wichitas a great advantage in fighting the Apache<sup>12</sup>.

Where the Europeans tried to establish a business and needed the Indians for trade, there was generally less tension and violence. This was most prominently the case for the French, English and Dutch who profited from the fur trade and mutual relations with Native tribes such as the Iroquois<sup>13</sup>.

One of the more overseen factors in determining whether negotiations between Indians and Europeans were successful was the impact of individuals. One example is that of William Penn who upon arriving at the Americas found that he would have to deal with the powerful

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<sup>10</sup> Mancall, P.C. & Merrell, J.H. (2000) '*American Encounters*', 187-188

<sup>11</sup> Mancall, P.C. & Merrell, J.H. (2000) '*American Encounters*', pp. 19-20

<sup>12</sup> Nebraskan Studies (2012) '*Geopolitical Power Shifts*'

<sup>13</sup> Jennings, F. (1984) '*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*' pp. 4-5

tribes of the Delaware. Penn had created a vision for his colony that would allow for integration and coexistence regardless of culture and belief<sup>14</sup>. Many have pointed out William Penn's approach for being different from the others. It certainly made for peaceful relations with the Delaware tribes. The relationship between settlers and Indians in Rhode Island was positive thanks to the friendship between Roger Williams and Miantonomi, chief of the Narragansetts<sup>15</sup>.

Finally one of the most important case-specific factors of successful relations between natives and settlers were the intentions of the colonists. One of these was the desire to convert the Indians to Christianity. This almost always led to violence and in the best case ended in Native Americans losing important aspects of the culture and identity. An attempt to convert the indigenous peoples was mainly made by the Spanish and Portuguese who believed they were on a 'Christian Mission', which drastically worsened relations with the Natives<sup>16</sup>. The French settlers were initially widely made up of religious refugees who were prepared to coexist with people of other persuasions.

The intention to settle usually determined the nature of the encounters between Native Americans and Colonists. The French and the Dutch had no initial desire to inhabit the Americas. They were there to make money with trade, especially furs. Both Europeans followed a 'live and let live' policy as they cared little for the beliefs and practices of the Native Americans<sup>17</sup>. As long as the Indians were useful to them and didn't pose a threat, they generally tolerated them. This changed when the French started to develop more permanent settlements. This once again highlighted the importance of trade as opposed to the Spanish

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<sup>14</sup> Jennings, F. (1984) '*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*', pp. 218-219

<sup>15</sup> Mancall, P.C. & Merrell, J.H. (2000) '*American Encounters*', pp. 180 & 344

<sup>16</sup> Gibson, C. (1964) '*The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule*', p. 98

<sup>17</sup> Jennings, F. (1984) '*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire...*' pp. 71-72

who focused on acquiring precious<sup>18</sup> metals and stones rather than establishing a new market. The Natives being of no use to the Spanish were often subjected to violence and massacres.

It is clear that there were many factors in determining whether negotiations between Native Americans and Europeans would be successful. A major cultural clash was always bound to cause tension, which is why power was such an important element at the time. These tensions were often exacerbated by Europeans trying to either exterminate the Indians or integrate them into a Christian society. Clearly much Native heritage has been lost over the centuries but it is still useful to look at what remains to determine how trade, resistance and cooperation allowed it to survive.

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<sup>18</sup> DuVal, K. (2006) *The Native Ground*, p. 58

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