

Do Not Write
On This Paper.

Biographical Briefing on Hiawatha

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Hiawatha and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Hiawatha was born in the Great Lakes region of what is now known as New York in the 1400's. He was a chief among the Onondaga tribe. Early in his life, there was much warfare between his tribe and related tribes—all known as the Iroquois. Hiawatha felt these tribes should come together in peace like family members rather than fight one another. He tried to persuade the Onondagas to accept his plan for peace and cooperation among the Iroquois. They rejected his idea, and, disheartened, Hiawatha left his tribe.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **Where was Hiawatha born?**
- **What happened among the Iroquois tribes early in his life?**
- **Why did he leave his tribe?**

Hiawatha then traveled to the Mohawk nation and proposed his plan for peace. Deganawidah, a leader among the Mohawks, accepted Hiawatha's ideas and joined his cause. Hiawatha was officially adopted into the Mohawk tribe. Together, these two men are said to have worked hard to convince the other four tribes—including the Onondaga, which was the last to join—to band together in what they called the Great Peace or Extended Family. Later, it became known as the Iroquois League. The original intention of the Iroquois League was to bring peace among warring tribes. However, eventually it was used to settle civil disputes among members and conflicts with the outside world, much like national governments today.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **What did the Mohawks think of Hiawatha's plan?**
- **How many tribes joined the Iroquois League?**
- **What was the purpose of the Iroquois League?**

Hiawatha modeled the Iroquois League after the extended family. Women were given great power. According to the organization, "The females of the family have the [ownership] right to the [sachem] title for all time to come..." The Iroquois League had a council of 50 leaders, known as sachems. This council made policy decisions affecting the Native Americans who were part of the Iroquois League. These sachems were chosen by the eldest woman in each tribe and could be removed by her if she was not pleased by their performance. Sachems had to represent the viewpoint of their tribes, not their own personal beliefs. Decisions by sachems had to be made unanimously. In addition to sachems, honorary members were chosen by each tribe to serve as "Pine Trees." These representatives—both men and women—couldn't vote on matters but were extremely influential. Finally, the Firekeeper was the central chief, much like our president.

Stop here
and discuss



- What kinds of power did women have in the Iroquois League?
- What were sachems and “Pine Trees”?
- What was the Firekeeper?

The Iroquois League was a powerful governmental organization for centuries after Hiawatha's death. However, during the American Revolution, the League could not agree unanimously on whom to side with. The majority of the tribes sided with the British; only the Tuscaroras and the Oneidas favored the American colonists. The League planned to fight on opposite sides. After the war, the British surrendered the land of the Iroquois. Some Iroquois settled in Canada, while others moved west. The legendary confederacy was forever split up. Before the League dissolved, however, colonial leaders met with members of the Iroquois League to get ideas on how to structure a government. Colonial leaders praised the ideas, and incorporated many of them into the Articles of Confederation, the first form of government in the United States. Furthermore, the structure of government provided under the U.S. Constitution today is very similar to the Iroquois League.

Stop here
and discuss



- Did the Iroquois League survive after Hiawatha's death? Explain.
- How did the Revolutionary War affect the Iroquois League?
- What impact did the Iroquois League have on the government of the United States?