

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

A Final Word on Johansen, Grinde, and the Iroquois Example

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02k7m2p9>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 26(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Berner, Robert L.

Publication Date

2002

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

COMMENTARY

A Final Word on Johansen, Grinde, and the Iroquois Example

ROBERT L. BERNER

In “Robert L. Berner’s ‘Howlers’: A Reply” (in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25:1) Bruce E. Johansen and Donald A. Grinde Jr., responding to my commentary in the same issue on their long campaign to claim for the Iroquois League a significant influence on the writing of the United States Constitution, have written this sentence: “When Berner asserts that ‘No founding father knew what the Iroquois structure was,’ he commits a rather astounding ‘howler’ by writing out of the record Benjamin Franklin, who was probably the most influential founder of them all.”¹

As any reader of my commentary should notice, I assumed that in *Exemplar of Liberty* (1991) Johansen and Grinde claimed John Adams as a Founding Father significant in the introduction of Iroquois elements into the Constitution. Not so, we now learn. Adams “did not endorse the Iroquois system of government.” On the other hand, because he knew about the Iroquois white-dog sacrifice his reference to fifty Greek families in his discussion of the ancient society of Argos “must apply to the Iroquois, not to the Greeks.”² I can only refer those who might be mystified by this argument—or, as Johansen and Grinde put it, “[miss] many of the nuances of our presentation”³—to my quotation of the pertinent passage from Adams in my commentary, reinforced by my endnote citation of its source.

Robert L. Berner, Rosebush Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh before his retirement, first dealt with the question of Iroquois influence on the Constitution in *Defining American Indian Literature* (1999). He also is the author of *The Rule of Four: Four Essays on the Principle of Quaternity* (1996).

Their “quoting” of my language is from the following statement of purpose in my “Reply to Bruce E. Johansen’s ‘Data or Dogma’”:

My argument was only with the notion that the Iroquois example somehow served as a model for the Constitution, and I suggested that even if significant similarities could be found between the Constitution’s structuring of the federal government and the Iroquois model, particularly the way the League council formulated policy, those similarities would not mean much if no Founding Father knew what the Iroquois structure was.⁴

I have said repeatedly that significant Iroquois influence on the writing of the Constitution depends upon real similarities between the parliamentary procedure of the Iroquois council and the Constitution’s structuring of the federal government, and I do believe that no Founder’s knowledge of how the Iroquois council formulated policy can be documented. But the point is that people who brag about “a 1,000 [*sic*] footnoted sources in *Exemplar of Liberty*”⁵ ought not to quote out of context. Indeed failing to do so is as bad and, assuming they know what they are doing, as intellectually dishonest as tinkering with the words, which, as I have demonstrated in reference to their citation in *Exemplar of Liberty* of the 1785 John Adams letter to Rufus King, they also have been willing to do.⁶

I stand by what I have claimed. Johansen and Grinde say that “The Iroquois model was a live issue at the Constitutional Convention,”⁷ and in making claims for Franklin as “probably the most influential founder of them all” they presumably mean that his contributions to the convention were greater than any other member’s. The existing records of the convention indicate that Franklin said relatively little in its sessions and that neither he nor any other delegate uttered a single word about the Iroquois League. But Johansen and Grinde’s claims for Franklin as a contributor of Iroquois thought to the Constitution is that he “printed treaty accounts from 1736 to 1762,” that he attended “Iroquois councils during the early 1750s,” that he “published actively in the Philadelphia press on questions of political theory,” and that he “merged European and Native American political precedents in his Albany Plan and Articles of Confederation.”⁸

Leaving aside their implication that Franklin was responsible for “his . . . Articles of Confederation,” the truth of the matter is that if his editions of Indian treaties are relevant to this matter it ought to be possible to find in the language of those treaties evidence of some resemblance of the procedures of the Iroquois council to the Constitution’s structuring of the federal government. If he learned anything significant about the parliamentary procedure of the Iroquois council by attending its meetings it ought to be possible to say just when he did this, what he learned, where and when he wrote about it, and just what those writings say. If his writings “in the Philadelphia press on matters of political theory” reveal knowledge of that procedure it ought to be possible to cite and quote the relevant passages. Clearly something more is

required than Johansen and Grinde's citation of Franklin's employment of Iroquois metaphor in a public letter ("Grand Council fire" and "coals . . . rak'd out of the ashes")⁹ and certainly something more than further reference to the number of footnotes in *Exemplar of Liberty*.

The fact remains that neither the Albany Plan, which Franklin proposed, nor the Articles of Confederation, which he supported, were in any sense positive influences on the Constitution. The Albany Plan defined the relation not only of the colonies to each other (in terms very different from those of the Constitution) but also the relation of the proposed union to Britain. Not only was it irrelevant to the intentions of the Founders by 1787 but by that time the perceived inadequacies of the Articles of Confederation, particularly in those features which most resembled both the procedures of the Iroquois Council and the union defined by the Albany Plan—for example, state delegations voting *as* delegations—were the reason why the Founders rejected them to write a very different document. In other words, if the Iroquois did influence the writing of the Articles of Confederation—a dubious proposition in itself—the Founders, in rejecting the Articles, rejected the Iroquois example.

But this is not the only manipulated quotation in "Robert L. Berner's 'Howlers.'" Consider this: "Berner's biggest 'howler' . . . is his stated belief that we 'have no right to demand 'data' from anybody. . . ." Now there's a blow to the notion of free and open academic debate. . . ."¹⁰

Readers of my reply to Johansen will notice that the statement which Johansen and Grinde have chosen to skew in their favor referred not to the entire community of scholarship but only to Johansen. As I said, "I fail to see why anyone guilty of a howler like this has the right to demand 'data' from anybody. . . ."¹¹

For the record I wish to make three points: (1) An objective examination of Johansen and Grinde's inexact quotation of what I actually wrote reveals yet again their willingness to manipulate a quoted text to make it mean what they want it to mean; (2) I chose the word *howler* with a care apparently greater than any exercised by Johansen and Grinde in their repetition of it because the dictionary which I consulted indicates that knowledgeable people use the word to mean "an especially ludicrous blunder"; and (3) the especially ludicrous blunder to which I referred was Johansen's definition (in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24:2) of the impact of John Adams on the Constitutional Convention of 1787. I called this a howler because I assumed that when Johansen wrote that "The example of the Iroquois was discussed by John Adams at the Constitutional Convention"¹² he meant that the example of the Iroquois was discussed by John Adams at the Constitutional Convention. Not so, now says Johansen (or Grinde, or both): "[T]his was a reference to Adams's book, not to his physical presence."¹³

In "Berner's 'Howlers'" we are told that "Johansen stands by his statement about objectivity that Berner seems to find so heinous."¹⁴ The Johansen statement to which this refers was his claim that "'objective' [is] a rubber word defined by whomever [*sic*] speaks it."¹⁵

Any reference to any good dictionary would have informed Johansen and Grinde that *heinous*, derived from Middle French *haine* (hate), means “hatefully or shockingly evil.” When I accused Johansen of denying the very possibility of objectivity I intended nothing so theological. I only meant that though the *events* of the past are subject to interpretation the question of whether or not they occurred requires documentation. If we cannot determine that they did occur we have no right, no matter how worthy we consider our cause, to proceed from the premise that they *could* have occurred to the assumption that they *probably did* occur to the conclusion that they *certainly did* occur. In other words, I do not find Johansen’s rejection of objectivity heinous but only pathetic. What I called a howler—seeming to say, for all the documentary evidence to the contrary, that John Adams was not in London but in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787—was apparently only an indication of his admitted inability to say clearly what he means. I leave it to those readers who may have followed this series of replies and counter-replies to conclude for themselves the relevance of this inability to the presentation of his and Grinde’s argument.

As for me, I have made my point fully enough and am prepared to drop the subject. Certainly I can perceive no reason to attempt to persuade Johansen and Grinde of anything. Their replies demonstrate, if nothing else, that they are so committed to their claims that nothing can shake them.

A final note: In earlier replies these authors have employed a rather cheap rhetorical device—to extract from my commentaries a single word and then to use it in a form of “you’re another” argument. In the first the word was *dogma* (in effect, “I’m not dogmatic. He is.”). In the second it was *howler* (in effect, “We’re not guilty of howlers. He is.”). We must expect that if, responding to the desires of the editors of this journal to be fair, they reply yet again, one or more of the following will be the basis of their “argument”—*careless, intellectually dishonest, tinkering, evidence, dubious, manipulate, skew, knowledgeable, pathetic*, or perhaps some variation on *so committed to their claims that nothing can shake them*—though their demonstrated ingenuity may offer other possibilities (*ingenuity*, for example).

NOTES

1. Bruce E. Johansen and Donald A. Grinde Jr., “Robert L. Berner’s ‘Howlers’: A Reply,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25, number 1 (2001): 117.
2. *Ibid.*, 118.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Robert L. Berner, “A Reply to Bruce E. Johansen’s ‘Data or Dogma?’” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25, number 1 (2001): 113.
5. Johansen and Grinde, “Robert L. Berner’s ‘Howlers,’” 119.
6. Berner, “A Reply to Bruce E. Johansen’s ‘Data or Dogma?’” 115.
7. Johansen and Grinde, “Robert L. Berner’s ‘Howlers,’” 118.
8. Johansen and Grinde, “Robert L. Berner’s ‘Howlers,’” 117.
9. Johansen and Grinde, “Robert L. Berner’s ‘Howlers,’” 119.

10. Ibid.
11. Berner, "A Reply to Bruce E. Johansen's 'Data or Dogma?'" 114.
12. Bruce E. Johansen, "Data or Dogma? A Reply to Robert L. Berner," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24, number 2 (2000): 118.
13. Johansen and Grinde, "Robert L. Berner's 'Howlers,'" 117.
14. Johansen and Grinde, "Robert L. Berner's 'Howlers,'" 119.
15. Johansen, "Data or Dogma?" 118.