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**Authors**

Johansen, Bruce E.  
Grinde, Donald A., Jr.

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## Robert L. Berner's "Howlers": A Reply

**BRUCE E. JOHANSEN AND DONALD A. GRINDE JR.**

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Robert L. Berner does not tell us whether he has actually read *Exemplar of Liberty* (1991), or whether he has merely fished through the book's index in search of debating points. Berner's latest rebuttal indicates that he has not read the book in its entirety. He complains, for example, that we have committed a "howler" by placing John Adams at the Constitutional Convention. The "howler" is actually Berner's, because on page 199 of *Exemplar of Liberty* we write: "Although Adams had been selected as a Massachusetts delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he chose not to attend, and published his lengthy essay, *Defence of the Constitutions of . . . the United States*, instead." Johansen's wording in his first reply to Berner (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24:2) stating that Adams discussed such things "at the Constitutional Convention" could be misread. Had he completely read *Exemplar*, Berner would have understood that this was a reference to Adams's book, not to his physical presence.

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. It was Franklin who printed treaty accounts from 1736 to 1762, and who started his diplomatic career by attending Iroquois councils during the early 1750s. Franklin was present at the Constitutional Convention, and published actively in the Philadelphia press on questions of political theory. Thus, Berner cannot dismiss the influence idea by dismissing John Adams's role. It was Franklin who merged European and Native American political precedents in his Albany Plan and Articles of Confederation.

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Bruce E. Johansen is Robert T. Reilly Professor of communication and Native American studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. His latest book is *The Global Warming Desk Reference* (Greenwood Press, 2001).

Donald A. Grinde Jr. is professor of history and director of ALANA (African-American/Latino/Asian-American/Native American) studies at the University of Vermont. He is author of over a dozen books on Native American history and is currently working on *A Political History of Native Americans*, which will be published by Congressional Quarterly Press.

What Adams said about the Iroquois polity was, in the context of its time, a reply to Franklin's advocacy of a federal system resembling that of the Iroquois. So while it is true that Adams knew something of the Iroquois polity, he was not in favor of replicating it in the Constitution of the United States. We say as much in *Exemplar of Liberty*:

Adams' *Defence* is clearly not an unabashed endorsement of native models for government. In the main, it is a refutation of the arguments of Franklin and Turgot, who advocated a one-house legislature resembling the Iroquois Grand Council. . . . Adams did not trust the consensus model. . . . He felt that without the checks and balances built into two houses, the European-American variant would succumb to special interests and dissolve into anarchy or despotism. . . . Adams was quite critical of the Mohawks' independence.<sup>1</sup>

The Iroquois model was a live issue at the Constitutional Convention, along with a number of other precedents from around the world. While Adams did not endorse the Iroquois model of government, he did discuss it in some detail. Adams knew enough to describe the number of sachems in the Iroquois Grand Council.

Berner focuses on only one aspect of Adams's *Defence*. He ignores Adams's observation that Indian governments observe separation of powers in three branches, as well as his observation that in Native polities, certain families (clans among the Iroquois) choose leaders. Adams also wrote that it would be productive to have "a more accurate investigation of the form of governments of . . . modern Indians," and that it would be "well worth the pains . . . to collect . . . the legislation of the Indians."<sup>2</sup> Adams's knowledge of Iroquois society is surprising at times for its degree of detail. Berner fails to mention, for example, Adams's detailed reference to the Iroquois' white-dog sacrifice. In this context, Adams's reference to the fifty families around one center must apply to the Iroquois, not the Greeks.

We do not knowingly falsify anything, despite Berner's assertion. His wording indicates that he believes we are conspiring to knowingly distort and falsify history, a type of intellectual malice that we simply do not possess.

We do not present Adams as an advocate of a system resembling that of the Iroquois. Berner's judgements concerning what we are doing seem to be derived from an incomplete reading of our text. He misses many of the nuances in our presentation. *Exemplar of Liberty* contains a lengthy chapter that includes historical data with respect to the Constitutional Convention, from marginal notes on the first draft of the Constitution, to newspaper editorials, including Franklin's public letter of June 30, 1787, which said that American government had a "Grand Council fire" and that in a few months "the coals will be rak'd out of the ashes and . . . be rekindled."<sup>3</sup> This is a clear reference to Iroquois practices at Onondaga.

Berner does have one valid point: we erred in the matter regarding Joseph Brant's meeting with John Adams. The same item was raised four years

ago by Philip A. Levy in *William and Mary Quarterly*, where we accepted the error and pledged to remedy it in future editions of the book.<sup>4</sup>

Johansen stands by his statement about objectivity that Berner seems to find so heinous. We could do without his sneering at those who do not accord "objectivity" the power he does. While we thank Berner for correcting a grammatical error, he cheapens his rebuttal as he stoops to personal denigration in his concluding paragraphs.

Is Johansen's "confession" so "extraordinary" when he asserts that different people can look at the same set of historical facts and come to divergent conclusions? Historians and traffic cops alike know that there is usually more than one "angle" to any given "fire." Berner seems secure in his assumption that we have "fabricate[d] historical events [and] manipulate[d] texts to make them mean whatever [we] want them to mean." The evident fact that he believes such a thing would seem evidence enough of his own subjectivity, especially because he rests his bombastic closing statement on one factual question which, by itself, has very little relation to the question of whether the Iroquois played an important role in the evolution of democracy. Berner's thunderous bill of indictment thus devolves to one minor factual error that we have already corrected in print.

It is paradoxical that someone so engrossed in the ethic of "objectivity" seems to abandon data in that quest. This is inconsistent according to Western logic. We are a multiracial team that seeks to open up the multiracial roots of American government. Along the way, we have noticed that people who ascribe monocultural and monoracial origins to the US Constitution tend to engage in ad hominem argumentation. They ignore much of the data we have amassed as they assert that we have no data or that we have fabricated it all, when we have over a 1,000 footnoted sources in *Exemplar of Liberty*.

We return, in the end, to Berner's assumption that he deals in data, while we carve our case from "postmodernist" dogma. Berner believes that there exists one paradigm of truth, and that he holds it. He furthermore seems to believe that it is useful, as a scholar, to isolate the Constitutional Convention from the rest of American political history. Placing the Constitutional Convention in such a box may serve Berner's intellectual design, but is of little use when examining the origins of democracy. Berner's biggest "howler," however, is his stated belief that we "have no right to demand 'data' from anybody," himself included. Now there's a blow to the notion of free and open academic debate, since Berner at the same time claims his right to demand "data" from us, even in cases where such "data" are freely available in our published work.

## NOTES

1. Donald A. Grinde Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1991), 203.

2. Quoted in Grinde and Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty*, 202.

3. Quoted in Grinde and Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty*, 206.

4. Donald A. Grinde Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, "Sauce for the Goose: Demand and Definitions for 'Proof' Regarding the Iroquois and Democracy," *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series LIII:3 (July 1996): 622 n1.