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**Author**

Berner, Robert L.

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COMMENTARY

## A Reply to Bruce E. Johansen’s “Data or Dogma?”

ROBERT L. BERNER

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In “Notes from the ‘Culture Wars’: More Annotations on the Debate Regarding the Iroquois and the Origins of Democracy” (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23:1), Professor Bruce E. Johansen asserted the general proposition that the Iroquois influenced the development of American democracy and the particular claim that this development therefore must have included an Iroquois influence on the writing of the United States Constitution.

When I replied to Johansen—in “Iroquois Influence: A Response to Bruce Johansen’s ‘Notes from the ‘Culture Wars’” (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24:2)—I neither denied nor affirmed the general proposition. 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.

In his reply to my reply—“Data or Dogma? A Reply to Robert L. Berner” (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24:2)—Johansen demands that I match his “data” with my own and suggests that I have ignored *Exemplar of*

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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 is also the author of *The Rule of Four: Four Essays on the Principle of Quaternity* (1996).

*Liberty* (1991), in which, he says, he and Donald Grinde Jr. have amassed “the historical evidence Berner complains we lack. . . .”<sup>1</sup> His reply itself contains only one specific historical fact which, if it occurred, would be significant: “The example of the Iroquois was discussed by John Adams at the Constitutional Convention.”<sup>2</sup> But unfortunately for his argument, the statement is false. John Adams did not discuss the Iroquois example or anything else at the Convention. He was not there. He was serving in London as envoy to Britain.

I fail to see why anyone guilty of a howler like this has the right to demand “data” from anybody, but since he has brought up John Adams, it is worth examining *Exemplar of Liberty* to see just what Johansen and Grinde say about Adams in their discussion of his *Defence of the Constitutions of . . . the United States*: “The *Defence* was a critical survey of world governments, which included a description of the Iroquois and other Native American governments in its analysis.”<sup>3</sup>

The *Defence* was written in response to Anne Robert Jacques Turgot’s published criticism of the constitutions that established state governments during the American Revolution. Those governments, Turgot charged, resembled too much the English model, and the *Defence* is Adams’s most detailed justification for the principle of the balance of powers in the executive and the upper and lower legislative houses. Because its first volume was published in time to be available to members of the Constitutional Convention the claim that it includes a discussion of the Iroquois could be significant.

Unfortunately Adams says little about Indian government in the *Defence* and almost nothing about the Iroquois. His one clear reference to the Iroquois is in the conclusion of his sketch of the history of Argos, a sorry record of how an ancient Greek society, unable to maintain its government’s balance of powers, permitted its nobles to establish an aristocracy which “accordingly extinguished monarchy, but did not secure the rights of the people.”<sup>4</sup> His final remarks on Argos are savagely ironic:

Is it not sublime wisdom, to rush headlong into all the distractions and divisions, all the assassinations and massacres, all the seditions, rebellions, and eternal revolutions, which are the certain consequence of the want of orders and balances, merely for the sake of the popular caprice of having every fifty families governed by all the authority in one centre? Even this would not satisfy; the fifty families would soon dissolve their union, and nothing would ever content them short of the complete individual independence of the Mohawks, for it may be depended on, that individual independence is what every unthinking human heart aims at. . . .<sup>5</sup>

The honest reader of this passage will be startled by the uses to which Grinde and Johansen put it:

While discussing the Mohawks, Adams referred to "fifty families governed by all authority in one centre." This statement reflects the extent of his knowledge of the structure of the Iroquois Confederacy. In fact, he noted . . . the same number of Iroquois sachemships as were delineated by Lewis Henry Morgan . . . more than sixty years later. Adams's insight indicates that the founders knew a great deal more about the Iroquois governance system than has previously been acknowledged. . . .<sup>6</sup>

The truth of the matter, of course, is that this falsifies what Adams wrote. The passage is not at all a "discussion" of the Mohawks. The fifty families are not Mohawk sachems but Greek nobles. And Adams only mentions the Mohawks at the end of his long discussion of Argos and then only as an example, fair or not, of that anarchy—"complete individual independence"—that is desired only by "unthinking human heart[s]."

But this is not the worst of it. A page later Johansen and Grinde, in quoting the above passage from Adams, not only omit with an ellipsis his examples of "distractions and divisions" (assassinations, massacres, sedition, rebellions, etc.) but also imply in a bracketed phrase that the entire passage deals with the Mohawks: "Is it not sublime wisdom [according to the Iroquois system], to rush headlong into all the distractions and divisions . . . which are the certain consequence of the want of orders and balances."<sup>7</sup>

And as if this were not bad enough, their discussion of Adams is annotated with an endnote which includes a simple misstatement of fact: "Just a year before he wrote *Defence*, Adams received a visit from the Mohawk leader Joseph Brant at his residence in Boston; perhaps they talked of the Iroquois system of government."<sup>8</sup>

And perhaps they didn't. Anyone who wonders about this will be astounded by the nerve of these authors when, as if to dare the reader to look it up, they actually cite the source of this historical "fact" in the correspondence of Rufus King. A 1785 letter from Adams to King includes this paragraph: "Joseph Brant was yesterday at the Drawing Room. The Ministerial Runners give out that he is come to demand Compensation, for the Indian hunting Grounds ceded by the English at the Peace of the United States, and to get something for himself as half pay as a Colonel."<sup>9</sup> Johansen and Grinde are apparently committed to the idea that this source is significant evidence that Adams knew a lot about the Iroquois League because they actually quote it in another endnote, though they alter the original phrase "at the Drawing Room" to "in the Drawing Room," perhaps to imply that the drawing room was in the Adams home.<sup>10</sup> But the letter is clearly dated "Grosvenor Square, Decr. [sic] 23, 1785" and the letter's references to "my frequent audiences of the King, . . . my visits to Windsor, and . . . the Prince of Wales' Suppers at my house" make it clear that when Adams refers in another place in the letter to "this Country" he means England.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore the drawing room is royal, as we can see in other references in Adams's letters and diaries, as for example, in a diary entry, also written in London from March 30, 1786: "Presented

Mr. Hamilton to the Queen at the drawing-room.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the letter was written while Adams was serving in London, and a careful reading of the paragraph leaves the reader suspecting that if Brant and Adams were in London at the same time there is no reason to assume that they met there. In any case, Adams certainly did not receive a visit from Brant at “his residence in Boston” in 1785.

Given these manipulations it may be no coincidence that in “Data or Dogma?” Johansen makes a confession which is extraordinary not only for its grammatical blunder but for an astounding definition: “I have never contended that my work is ‘objective,’ a rubber word defined by whomever [*sic*] speaks it.”<sup>13</sup>

In the present state of academic scholarship we probably should not be surprised at so frank a dismissal of even the possibility of objectivity, but I at least am tempted to wonder if what Johansen really means is that a scholar who considers his cause noble enough has the right to fabricate historical events, to manipulate texts to make them mean whatever he wants them to mean, and to accuse anyone who objects to such practices of being just as subjective as he is and, presumably, too dumb to understand the conventional “post-modern” assumption that objectivity is only a pipe dream anyway.

#### NOTES

1. Bruce E. Johansen, “Data or Dogma? A Reply to Robert L. Berner,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24:2 (2000): 118.
2. Ibid.
3. 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), 200.
4. *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles F. Adams, vol. 4 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1851), 509.
5. Ibid., 511.
6. Grinde and Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty*, 202.
7. Ibid., 203.
8. Ibid., 295n.
9. *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, ed. Charles B. King, vol. 1 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 118.
10. Grinde and Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty*, 280 n5.
11. *Rufus King*, 118.
12. *Works of John Adams*, vol. 3, 393.
13. Johansen, “Data or Dogma,” 118.