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Making War More Lethal: Iroquois vs. Huron¹ in the Great Lakes Region, 1609 to 1650

by
Roger Carpenter

In the stillness of a July morning in 1609 near the lake that now bears his name, Samuel de Champlain, armed with an arquebus into which he “put four bullets,” approached to “within some thirty yards” of a loose formation of Mohawk warriors. He stopped, aimed, and “shot straight at one of the three chiefs, and with this shot two fell to the ground and one of their companions was wounded who died thereof a little later.” Another Frenchman then fired on the Mohawks from the cover of the woods, “which astonished them again so much that, seeing their chiefs dead they lost courage and took to flight, abandoning the field and their fort.”²

Many historians have portrayed this brief firefight as the genesis of the long-term enmity between New France and the Five Nations.³ But

¹ Both the Huron and the Iroquois are Iroquoian, linguistically and culturally. The Huron, however, were not part of the Five Nations Iroquois, which consisted of the Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Onondaga, and Cayuga. For the purposes of this article I will use the term “Iroquoian” when referring both to the Huron and the Five Nations Iroquois. Likewise I will use the term “Five Nations” for the Iroquois when referring to the Iroquois confederacy, unless I mention one of the constituent tribes.

² Samuel de Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. H. P. Biggar, 6 vols. (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1922-36), 2: 99-100.

³ For works that cast this skirmish as the source of near-perpetual Iroquois-French conflict, see Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations: Depending on the Province of New York in America* (1727 & 1747; reprint, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 6. See also nineteenth-century works such as Lewis H. Morgan, *League of the Ho-de'-no-saw-nee or Iroquois* (1851; reprint, with intro. by William N. Fenton, Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel, 1962), 11; and Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1865), 360. For a twentieth-century historian who adheres to this view see Robert A. Goldstein, *French-Iroquois Diplomatic and Military Relations 1609-1701* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 51. Alvin N. Josephy, *The Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of American Indian Resistance* (New York: Viking, 1958), 5, maintains the “Iroquois’ anger mounted steadily against the French” in the years after this firefight. For the views of historians who believe that entirely too much has been made of this clash, consult W. J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier, 1534-1760* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 25; Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies from its Beginnings to the Lancaster Treaty of 1744* (New York: Norton, 1984), 41-42; James Axtell, “Europeans, Indians, and the Age of Discovery in American History Textbooks,” in his *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992),

perhaps more significant—especially as other historians question this interpretation—was the vast shift in Iroquoian thought precipitated, or at least heralded, by this small clash. A new technology, one almost unrecognizably different from any possessed by the Iroquoian peoples, had been introduced.⁴ War, one of the most important aspects of Iroquois life because of its destructive and reconstructive properties, would now be transformed. Although the evidence for this vast technological shift should have been immediately visible when the Mohawk fled the battlefield in 1609, Champlain's native allies did not grasp the encounter's significance on this level. Rather than pursue their beaten foe, Champlain complained, they "wasted time in taking . . . [the Mohawks'] shields, which they had left behind, the better in order to run."⁵

Like other fighting men in different times and places, Champlain's Indian allies, despite the evidence of their own eyes, did not realize that their existing technology had just been eclipsed by another. Their interest in bearing off the Mohawks' abandoned shields indicates that they saw this engagement only in the immediate sense of a tactical victory. Apparently it did not occur to them that the gunpowder technology that routed the Mohawk could one day be turned on them, rendering such shields obsolete.

The Mohawks' clash with Champlain marked the beginning of a significant shift in the way that Iroquoian peoples viewed warfare. Their precontact mode of warfare had a dual nature, possessing both constructive and destructive aspects. On the one hand war destroyed enemy clans and peoples, not only through the loss of life but also by robbing them of tribal and clan members who were carried off as captives. These captives then fed into the constructive aspect of

208; Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 54; Matthew Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace: Iroquois–European Encounters in Seventeenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 72-74; Dean Snow, *The Iroquois* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), 79. For perhaps the most penetrating analysis of Iroquois–French hostilities, see Francis Jennings, "Iroquois Alliances in American History" in *The History and Culture of Iroquois Diplomacy: An Interdisciplinary Guide to the Treaties of the Six Nations and Their League*, ed. Francis Jennings et al. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 37-66.

⁴ For a discussion of the impact of western military technologies on non-European peoples, see George Raudzens, "War Winning Weapons: The Measurement of Technological Determinism in Military History," *Journal of Military History* 54, no. 4 (1990): 412-18. See also Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 160-61. For more on the effects of firearms on Native Americans in the early contact period, see Adam J. Hirsch, "The Collision of Military Cultures," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 4 (1988): 1194.

⁵ Champlain, *Works*, 2: 100.

Iroquoian warfare. After undergoing adoption rituals, many of them replaced the dead within their new clans and communities.⁶ In this way, the Iroquoian peoples strengthened themselves while weakening their enemies.

Although the acquisition of captives was the primary objective of Iroquoian war parties, the secondary goal of avoiding casualties nearly equaled this one in importance. Leaders of war parties tried to avoid sustaining excessive casualties or having their followers captured. If a war party inflicted casualties on the enemy, that was all to the good, but this was only a secondary concern. War parties that sustained many casualties, even those that brought home a significant number of prisoners, could only be considered failures.⁷ Joseph Lafitau, writing in 1724, noted that the Iroquois felt “very much the loss of a single person.” Thus, excessive casualties had “great consequences for the chief of a [war] party.” The Iroquois “expect a chief to be not only skilful but also lucky. They are so peculiar in this respect that, if he does not bring back all his people and if someone even dies a natural death, he is almost entirely discredited.” This fear of casualties, Lafitau concluded, “checks the chiefs and keeps them from exposing their people too boldly.”⁸

So strong was the imperative to limit casualties that, at times, leaders of war parties opted to engage in single combat with one another rather than risk the lives of their followers. One Jesuit recorded a tale in the *Relations* of such a bout between the leaders of opposing Montagnais and Iroquois war parties. As the two groups prepared for combat, their leaders discerned that their forces were evenly matched. Fearful of losing too many men, the Montagnais and Iroquois leaders parleyed and opted instead to decide the outcome of the battle by single combat, agreeing that the followers of the loser would return home unmolested. The two men grappled for some time. The Montagnais finally threw the Iroquois leader to the ground and “triumphantly carried him off on his shoulders to his own band,” presumably to a slow death by torture.⁹ Each of these

⁶ Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 36-38.

⁷ Gabriel Sagard, *Long Journey to the Country of the Hurons*, ed. George M. Wrong, trans. H. H. Langton (1939; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 158-63; Snow, *Iroquois*, 54-55.

⁸ Joseph François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. and trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, 2 vols. (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974-77), 2: 141-42.

⁹ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791; the Original French, Latin, and Italian Texts, with English Translations and Notes*, 73 vols. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901), 1: 269-71, cited hereafter as JR. For more on single combat, see JR, 5: 93-95.

two leaders thought it better to hazard his own life rather than risk losing the lives of his followers and earning the condemnation of his community. Excessive casualties would have diminished his status as a war leader; indeed, if he lost too many men, he might never have been allowed to lead another war party.

Precontact warfare seemed to follow a certain form. Opposing sides would sometimes parley before a battle and agree on a set of “rules.” This semiformal, agreed-upon mode of warfare was illustrated on the eve of Champlain’s first encounter with the Iroquois in 1609. After his native allies finished constructing a barricade, their Iroquois opponents “sent two canoes . . . to learn from their enemies whether they wished to fight, and these replied that they had no other desire.” Noting that it was too dark to fight, however, the two sides agreed to wait until daylight to begin their battle.¹⁰

The rest of the night passed with both the Huron and the Iroquois engaging in dances and hurling boasts and insults at each other. At dawn the next morning the Iroquois emerged from their barricade and began their attack as agreed the night before. The manner in which they advanced on Champlain and his allies suggested the formality of native warfare. “They came slowly to meet us,” Champlain wrote, “with a gravity and calm which I admired; and at their head were three chiefs. Our Indians . . . advanced in similar order, and told me that those who had the three big plumes were the chiefs.”¹¹

Champlain’s description of the measured pace and the sort of loose formation each side adopted demonstrates that the mode of precontact warfare had a formal, ritualized aspect. By design, this sort of warfare produced few casualties.¹² Without the presence of the Frenchmen and their arquebuses, this skirmish would have resulted in the shooting of arrows, the striking of clubs, and perhaps the taking of some captives by one side or the other. But there would have been few serious battlefield injuries because Iroquoian military technology emphasized the taking of captives as the primary objective of war.

Wood, stone, and animal or fish bone made up the business end of most native weapons. Occasionally, projectiles would be tipped with copper, some of which may have come from the upper Great Lakes region. Resin or sinew usually secured the projectile to the shaft.¹³ These

¹⁰ Champlain, *Works*, 2: 96-97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

¹² Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace*, 71-72.

¹³ JR, 11: 99; 15: 24; 38: 243. See also J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664* (New York: Scribners, 1909), 26, 57.

missiles were designed to be lethal, but native defensive capabilities, such as wooden armor and shields, largely neutralized them.

Personal armor, constructed of wood, bark, and reeds, provided a sufficient defense against native-made offensive weapons. Many observers described Huron shields as long, light, and large enough to cover the whole body. Usually made of hewn cedar and covered with animal skins, these shields were strong enough that “they may not be penetrated by spears and tomahawks.” Father Paul le Jeune described one as being “very long and wide. It easily covered my whole body, and reached from my feet to my chest.” He also expressed some puzzlement as to how these shields were made: “I do not know how they can plane so large and wide a plank with their knives.” In battle, these shields were carried “by a cord cast over the right shoulder, so that it protects the left side of the body; when they have cast their spears or fired their guns they slightly retire the right side and turn toward the enemy the left side, which is protected by the shield.”¹⁴

In the years after the Mohawks’ clash with Champlain, there was a brief technological interlude between the stone-tipped arrow and the explosively propelled leaden ball. Precontact wooden armor, which provided an Iroquoian warrior with sufficient protection against native-made weapons, consisted of “a sort of armor and cuirass . . . on their back and legs and other parts of the body to get protection from arrow-shots.” Iron arrowheads, produced for the fur trade by Europeans, made native arrows more lethal, however, and reduced—indeed, nearly eliminated—the protective properties of wooden armor. Recollect missionary Gabriel Sagard noted that native armor was “proof against . . . sharp-pointed stones, yet not against our Quebec iron heads when the arrows fitted with them are shot by the stout and powerful arm such as that of a savage.”¹⁵

The iron-tipped arrow merely echoed a familiar technology, albeit in an improved form. The firearm, although it served the same purpose as the bow and arrow, represented a shift in the military technology available to Iroquoian peoples. It killed loudly, introducing a new element of fear, and death by these weapons seemed to be instantaneous. But most important, firearms killed more men.

Although Champlain’s brief firefight may have led native warriors to begin discarding their armor, it still remained in use for at least three more decades. Dutch observers in the 1630s described Mohawk warriors

¹⁴ JR, 1: 271; 5: 95.

¹⁵ Sagard, *Long Journey*, 154.

wearing armor while fighting mock battles with each other.¹⁶ But armor was not used only in practice sessions. As late as the 1630s and 1640s Iroquois and Huron warriors continued to wear armor into battle. However, European technology made set-piece battles in which the participants went at each other toe-to-toe impractical. Stealth now became more important, and Iroquoian warriors stopped wearing the bulkier pieces of their armor. Some elements of armor were retained for use in battle, however. These pieces tended to be ones that the wearers hoped would still serve a purpose—such as shields, which were often useful in close combat. Although warriors realized they could encounter foes bearing firearms, armor could still offer them some protection from stone-tipped arrows, knives, and clubs. As late as 1637 the Jesuit François Joseph le Mercier observed Hurons making wooden shields to carry into battle against the Iroquois. In 1642 another Jesuit witnessed an Iroquois attack on a French redoubt during which a charging warrior “received seven leaden balls in his buckler, and as many in his body.” His companions “dropped their shields, trusting more to their feet for safety than their bucklers.” The same Jesuit took note of a small Huron war party setting out for “the country of the Hyroquois” in the winter of 1642-1643. Although some members of the troop carried firearms, others wore armor “stitched, and interlaced with small sticks” that covered the trunk of the body. Others carried “shields made of wood.” For the Huron this winter war party ended in disaster. Planning to attack the Iroquois during their winter hunt, the Hurons found themselves surprised and slain by their intended victims. The sole survivor, a woman, spent thirty days in the woods eluding the Iroquois. Clad in only half a blanket, and not daring to make a fire lest her pursuers discover her, she eventually made her way back to Montréal.¹⁷

The use of armor at such a late date by Iroquoian warriors indicates that it still may have been useful. Perhaps the enemy did not always have European weaponry. Another more likely explanation is that wearing armor or carrying a shield gave a warrior some degree of psychological comfort—a feeling that maybe, with some luck, his armor might stop or deflect the lead balls and steel blades that would otherwise penetrate his body.

Firearms were not the only European contribution to the more lethal battlefield that evolved in the American forests of the

¹⁶ Dean R. Snow, Charles T. Gehring, and William A. Starna, eds., *In Mohawk Country: Early Narratives about a Native People* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 6.

¹⁷ *JR*, 24: 207-9; 13: 265; 22: 279. The term “buckler” refers to a type of curved shield. See also *JR*, 24: 205.

seventeenth century. Metal axes and hatchets replaced the traditional war club, and made hand-to-hand combat more deadly. European-made axes also contributed to the elimination of wooden armor. Unlike native-made clubs of wood and stone, steel ax bits easily cleaved their way through native armor with one blow, inflicting grievous and oftentimes fatal injuries.

Although the steel ax nullified wooden armor as a form of protection, it facilitated another sort of battlefield defense. Native warriors discovered that steel axes not only made excellent weapons but could also be used as tools to build hasty battlefield fortifications. European observers, many of them military men, found the skill and speed native warriors displayed in constructing these redoubts impressive.

The Mohawk demonstrated their engineering abilities during a standoff with the French on the Richelieu River in the early 1640s. As daylight began to fade, the French force, aboard armed boats, waited tensely and tried to anticipate the next move of the Iroquois warriors on the shore. Just as night fell, there was “suddenly . . . heard so horrible and frightful an uproar and clashing of hatchets, a fall and wreck of so many trees, that it seemed as if the whole forest were being overthrown.” The next morning, the French found themselves facing an Iroquois fort on the shore, flying an Algonquin scalp as a flag. After a day of exchanging fire with the French, the Iroquois withdrew under cover of darkness. When the French went ashore, they discovered that the Iroquois had built not just one, but two solid forts. They found the second fort, which had also been abandoned, “hidden further in the woods, but so well constructed and so well supplied that it was proof against all our resources.”¹⁸ The next year there occurred yet another example of how the Iroquois used steel axes to construct hasty fortifications. A small group of Iroquois, cornered by a superior French force, “in four minutes erected a small fort.”¹⁹ Iroquois warriors also built forts in hostile territory, concealed them, and used them as bases from which to strike at their enemies.²⁰

Most, but not all, Iroquoian villages surrounded themselves with circular wooden palisades as protection from enemy attack. European axes and military advice made these palisades more secure and, in theory,

¹⁸ JR, 21: 59-63.

¹⁹ JR, 32: 19-21.

²⁰ JR, 34: 125-27.

rendered villages less vulnerable to enemy attack.²¹ Although the laws of the Society of Jesus prevented him from bearing arms, the Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf offered the Huron military advice, pointing out to them that they should stop building round palisades and “should make their forts square, and arrange their stakes in straight lines.” A square fort, with the addition of “little towers at the four corners,” would make it possible Brébeuf claimed, for “four Frenchmen . . . with their arquebuses or muskets [to] defend a whole village.”²²

The Huron also began to use larger saplings to construct their palisades, a change made possible, in all likelihood, by European tools such as steel axes. The Hurons also, apparently on their own initiative, modified French suggestions for fortifications and built some that were diamond-shaped, making it possible for two men with muskets to defend a village.²³ Although the layout of these fortifications was clever, it could have been necessitated by a lack of firearms. These innovations in village fortification created a false sense of security for their inhabitants, of which the Iroquois would eventually take advantage.

Far more than any other form of European technology firearms changed Iroquoian warfare. The shock they caused in terms of noise and casualties made a great impression on Native Americans. Although historians often cite the noise as a source of terror, more significant to native people may have been the power to cause seemingly instant death. Launching one or more lead balls ranging in caliber from .56 to .68, firearms caused battlefield injuries far more devastating than anything native warriors had previously experienced.²⁴ These slow-to-load weapons did not produce mass casualties, but they did increase the number of fatalities.

Although the Iroquois fled the field in terror at the conclusion of their 1609 confrontation with Champlain, apparently it did not take them long to determine what these new weapons could and could not do. In

²¹ Thomas S. Abler, “European Technology and the Art of War in Iroquoia,” in *Cultures in Conflict: Current Archaeological Perspectives: Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Conference of the Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary*, ed. Diana Claire Tkaczuk and Brian C. Vivian (Calgary: University of Calgary Archaeological Association, 1989), 276-77.

²² JR, 10: 53; Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, ed. and trans. George E. Ganss (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 159. See also Axtell, *Beyond 1492*, 156.

²³ Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, 2 vols. (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 2: 513-15.

²⁴ T. M. Hamilton, *Early Indian Trade Guns: 1625-1775* (Lawton, Okla.: Museum of the Great Plains, 1968), 21-27.

an attack on an Onondaga fort in June 1610, Champlain observed that the Onondagas “out of fear, thinking these shots to be irresistible . . . would throw themselves upon the ground when they heard a report.”²⁵ While an element of fear was probably present, the Onondaga may simply have been taking cover. They had doubtless ascertained that the flight of a ball from an arquebus followed a straight-line trajectory. If so, they may simply have done what soldiers on a modern battlefield do: drop to the ground to make a smaller target or place a good-sized tree or rock between themselves and the enemy shooting at them. A Dutch observer in 1624 noted that the Mohawks had no firearms and that “whole troops run before five or six muskets. At the first coming (of the Europeans) they were accustomed to fall prostrate on the ground at the report of a gun.”²⁶ Only two years later, however, firearms seemed to present no particular terror to the Mohawks. A party of seven Dutchmen from Fort Orange (present-day Albany, New York) set out to assist the Mahicans in their war against the Mohawks. The Mohawks, armed with bows and arrows, attacked the combined Dutch–Mahican force and killed four of the Dutch, one of whom they “devoured, after having well roasted him.” A few days after the incident, an official of the Dutch West India Company arrived at Fort Orange and, upon hearing of the conflict, set out to mend fences with the Mohawk. He visited the Mohawk who told him that “they wished to excuse their act, on the plea that they had never set themselves against the whites, and asked why the latter had meddled with them; otherwise, they would not have shot them.”²⁷

After this incident, the Dutch West India Company adopted a policy of noninterference with the Five Nations.²⁸ The official Dutch policy was

²⁵ Champlain, *Works*, 2: 129-30. By “irresistible” Champlain meant that the Onondagas believed that arquebus shots could not miss. Perhaps the Onondagas had good reason to assume that each shot was accurate. Champlain claims “we hardly missed a shot, and fired two or three bullets each time.” Then again, like many other marksmen, Champlain may have exaggerated his own abilities. Seventeenth-century arquebuses did not have a sighting mechanism. One prepared one’s weapon and then pointed it in the general direction of the target. See Brian J. Given, *A Most Pernicious Thing: Gun Trading and Native Warfare in the Early Contact Period* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), 15-19; Daniel K. Richter, “War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 40, no. 4 (1983): 528-59; Patrick M. Malone, *The Skulking Way of War: Technology and Tactics among the New England Indians* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1991), 57-58, 70.

²⁶ Jameson, *Narratives*, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

²⁸ Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 90; Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace*, 131.

to keep firearms out of the hands of native peoples.²⁹ However, once independent Dutch traders learned of the Mohawks' willingness to travel to the New England colonies and pay up to twenty beaver pelts for a musket, an illicit trade quickly developed. The Mohawks no longer had to travel as far and could obtain guns for roughly the same price—or lower—as they paid the English. By the early to mid-1640s, “the traders coming from Holland soon got scent of it [the trade], and from time to time brought over great quantities, so that the Mohawks in a short time were seen with firelocks, powder, and lead in proportion.”³⁰

Although Iroquoian warriors greatly prized guns, they would not buy just any firearm. They critically assessed the available weapons in light of their needs and found many European firearms lacking. In the early seventeenth century, European firearms used two basic types of ignition systems. One form was the matchlock, and the other was the flintlock, one of the several varieties of flint-activated guns. The matchlock received its name because it required a match—a lit piece of cord treated with saltpeter or gunpowder so that the match would burn slowly—to fire the weapon. The weapon had to be primed before firing and the match lit, and kept lit, by the musketeer. If an enemy suddenly came upon him, it is likely that he would not have had time to rekindle his match. A musketeer usually lit both ends of the match as a precaution against one end going out. Matches burned at a rate of approximately nine inches an hour, so if a musketeer took the precaution of lighting both ends he expended a foot and a half of the specially treated cord each hour. All of this meant that one had to carry a large quantity of match in the field. On top of all this, a man carrying a matchlock had to constantly check the match to ensure that it remained lit and to blow away the ashes. When it came time to fire his weapon, the musketeer clamped the match into a “serpentine,” a hammer that guided the match to the touchhole and set off the weapon. For Iroquois warriors the matchlock had too many drawbacks to be considered a primary weapon. If the match got wet, the weapon was useless, except perhaps as a club. The smell of burning saltpeter, as well as the glow from the match at night, gave away one's position. It also made the weapon less than useful

²⁹ See Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts: Being the Letters of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer 1630-1643, and other Documents Relating to the Colony of Rensselaerswyck*, ed. and trans. A. J. F. Van Laer (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1908), 426, 565-66.

³⁰ Jameson, *Narratives*, 274. See John R. Brodhead, E. B. O'Callaghan, and Berthold Fernow, *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols. (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1853-87), 1: 150.

for hunting. Game animals would smell the burning match and avoid the hunter's location. The fourteen separate steps required to load and fire the weapon made it impractical for Iroquois warriors. Moreover, the combination of a smoldering match in close proximity to volatile black powder made the process of loading a matchlock hazardous.³¹

The Iroquois found flint-activated guns to be far more useful. These weapons did not need a match in order to fire. To fire a flintlock one pulled the trigger, which thrust the cock (a hammer gripping a flint) forward, where it struck a piece of steel called the battery. The resulting sparks fell into the touchhole, igniting the powder and firing the weapon. Although flintlocks cost more than matchlocks, Iroquois warriors quickly recognized that the flintlock was the superior weapon. Indeed, few matchlocks or parts of them can be found in the archaeological record, but many parts of flint weapons have been found on Iroquois and Huron sites.³² The flintlock lacked the disadvantages that plagued the matchlock. It was also a much safer weapon, as firing it did not require a burning object be in close proximity to gunpowder. Based on the archaeological evidence, it appears that Iroquoians simply refused to trade for matchlocks because of their shortcomings, even though most European armies used them at the time. Indeed, Amerindian demands for flintlocks may have been a factor in spurring mass production of these weapons in Europe.³³

Just as Iroquoians refused to trade for cloth or metal goods that did not meet their needs, so too they refused to accept a form of European technology that they considered imperfect and impractical. Although the matchlock was impressive—it was loud and seemed to kill men instantly—it had too many drawbacks to be useful in war or on the hunt. For the most part Iroquoian warriors would continue to carry bows until flintlocks became available.

There has been a minor debate in academia over the effectiveness of European guns versus native-made bows. Although modern scholars noted that bows were very effective and had a higher rate of fire than

³¹ Given, *A Most Pernicious Thing*, 15-19; Malone, *The Skulking Way of War*, 32-33.

³² Malone, *The Skulking Way of War*, 35; Abler, "European Technology," 275. See James W. Bradley, *Evolution of the Onondaga Iroquois: Accommodating Change, 1550-1655* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 142-43; Joseph R. Mayer, *Flintlocks of the Iroquois, 1620-1687* (Rochester, N.Y.: Museum of Arts and Sciences, 1943), 18-31; Hamilton, *Early Indian Trade Guns*. Also one should note the absence of matchlocks, or parts thereof, during Kidd's excavation of the 1636 Huron ossuary. See Kenneth E. Kidd, "The Excavation and Historical Identification of a Huron Ossuary," *American Antiquity* 18, no. 4 (1953): 359-79.

³³ Jan Piet Puype, *Proceedings of the 1984 Trade Gun Conference*, Research Records no.18, 2 vols. (Rochester, N.Y.: Museum & Science Center, 1985), 1: 90.

muzzle-loading weapons, natives chose to replace them with guns.³⁴ Some years ago Francis Jennings placed the controversy in its proper perspective. Although twentieth-century scholars have argued that guns were not as efficient as bows, Jennings noted that “records clearly show Indians everywhere were demanding guns in trade, not only for war but for the hunt as well. It is not necessary to rely on argument. They were vocal and explicit about this demand.”³⁵

Although it is not known how many guns the Iroquois had at a given time, it is possible to make a guess based on various sources. An anonymous Dutch source claims that the Mohawk, in the early to mid-1640s, had four hundred firearms and a large quantity of powder.³⁶ In June 1641 a force of 350 Iroquois appeared at Montréal to treat for peace with the French. One of their captives, a French soldier, reported that in this party there were “thirty-six arquebusiers, as skillful as the French.”³⁷ This figure is at odds with other reports, and the Iroquois may have been short of, or felt they were short of, firearms. In exchange for this purported “peace” that the Five Nations offered the French, they expected to be supplied with arquebuses. Yet only two years later the Jesuits claimed that the Iroquois had three hundred guns. By the end of the 1640s the Iroquois had at least one thousand firearms. The thousand-man Iroquois army that devastated Huronia in the spring of 1649 had “mostly firearms.”³⁸

Not only did the Iroquois have firearms, but also they had acquired a degree of skill in handling them that sometimes surpassed that of Europeans. Iroquois warriors taught themselves to do one thing with firearms that Europeans did not teach their own soldiers: to aim. The Jesuit Isaac Jogues, writing from his captivity in Iroquoia in the early 1640s, warned his fellow missionaries that Iroquois war parties had muskets and that “they are skilled in handling them.”³⁹ A Dutch source in 1650 claimed that Indians were “exceedingly fond of guns, sparing no expense for them; and are so skilful in the use of them that they surpass many Christians.” Baron Lahonton, writing in the early eighteenth century, claimed that “the Strength of the *Iroquese* lies in engaging with

³⁴ See Given, *A Most Pernicious Thing*, 109-10; Ablar “European Technology,” 274.

³⁵ Jennings, *Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, 80-81.

³⁶ Jameson, *Narratives*, 274.

³⁷ JR, 21: 35-37.

³⁸ JR, 34: 137 (quotation); 21: 37-61; 24: 271, 295.

³⁹ JR, 24: 295 (quotation); Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 62-64.

Fire-Arms in a Forrest; for they shoot very dexterously.”⁴⁰ Despite Europe’s wars, few colonists had extensive training in the use of guns. Indeed, a recruit in a European army may have had only a few days of training in which he struggled to master the myriad steps required to load and fire a matchlock before his commanders sent him to war.⁴¹

The image of an unerring marksman—a Daniel Boone or Natty Bumppo—that many Americans have of early frontiersmen is a treasured piece of American mythology. Some early settlers owned weapons and some did develop considerable skill with firearms over time, but many of the first colonists came from cultures that restricted the use of guns. Few people in Europe hunted, and hunting laws were usually intended to preserve game for the upper classes. In the first half of the seventeenth century, an Englishman needed an annual income of at least one hundred pounds before he was permitted to own a firearm. Even if he met the income requirements and owned a gun, it was unlikely that an upper-class Englishman would fire his weapon very often. Guns were thought to be “unsporting.” It was far more respectable to use other animals—such as hounds or falcons—to hunt game. Nor did poachers use them; the sound of a gun would have given away their presence. Thus most colonists’ experience with weaponry was limited to any prior military service they may have had in the Old World or to the infrequent drills they participated in as part of the colonial militia.⁴²

Unlike the other European powers, the French were actually able to limit the sale of firearms to native peoples. In their attempts to control the gun trade, the Dutch promulgated no fewer than four laws during the existence of New Netherland. Most of these ordinances acknowledged an existing problem, usually noting in their preamble that there already was an active—albeit illegal—traffic in firearms. These laws usually specified the death penalty, but they seemed to do very little to dissuade Dutchmen from selling weapons to the natives.⁴³ The English and the Swedes, like the Dutch, were unable—or perhaps unwilling—to control the gun trade. In this respect the government of New France was unique. Geographic barriers prevented other European powers from making contact with the Hurons. And the Five Nations, sitting athwart the

⁴⁰ Jameson, *Narratives*, 303; Baron de [Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce] Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, 2 vols. (1703; reprint, Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1905), 2: 497. Italics in original.

⁴¹ Malone, *The Skulking Way of War*, 58.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 52-54, 58.

⁴³ E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638-1674* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1868), 18-19, 47, 101, 128.

routes that the Dutch, English, or Swedes would have had to use to reach Huronia, surely would have vetoed any such attempt. Whereas the Five Nations could always obtain firearms from one European trading partner or another, the geographic location of the Iroquois League denied Hurons and other native allies of the French access to Fort Orange. Initially, the French attempted to link firearms, as they did other forms of European technology, to conversion to Christianity. "The use of arquebuses . . . granted to the Christian Neophytes" one Jesuit wrote, "is a powerful attraction to win them."⁴⁴

Firearms probably did attract converts. But the realities of warfare quickly made the policy of trading arms only to converts obsolete. The Jesuit Barthélemy Vimot, having observed a 1642 skirmish between Iroquois and Algonquin Christians, believed that the Algonquins would have killed most of the Iroquois had they had enough powder. His remarks reveal much about the French attitude toward the Indian arms trade: "We have always been afraid to arm the savages too much. Would to God that the Hollanders had done the same, and had not compelled us to give arms even to our Christians."⁴⁵

Allies of the French continued to come up short in this colonial arms race that Vimot describes. It may have been a common attitude among the French that firearms should be difficult for Indians to acquire, but Vimot's remark also reveals something else. The French realized that in order for their native allies to be a match for the Iroquois, they must have European weaponry, even if the French had to give, rather than trade, muskets to their allies.

In theory, the Hurons should not have lacked firearms. But poor quality weapons, unreliable transport from the Old World, and steep prices posed problems in obtaining muskets. Equally important were frequent Iroquois attacks on Huron trading canoes that resulted in the loss of trade goods, and some of these goods may have been firearms. In a representative incident in 1642, forty Iroquois, all equipped with firearms, waylaid thirteen Huron canoes on the St. Lawrence River, near Montréal. The sixty Hurons defending the canoes had only bows and arrows, and the

⁴⁴ JR, 25: 27; Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 169; Allen W. Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century* (1960; reprint, intro. by William L. Starna, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 246. For a native view on the linkage of technology to conversion, see JR, 17: 49.

⁴⁵ JR, 24: 291. For other Jesuit accusations of the Dutch supplying the Iroquois with arquebuses, see JR 1: 269; 21: 119, 269-71; 22: 251, 269, 307; 24: 271; 25: 59; 32: 21; 34: 123; 36: 101, 38: 67.

Iroquois took twenty-three of them captive.⁴⁶ Because of their lack of firearms, the Hurons began encouraging armed Frenchmen to accompany them on their trading voyages. The protection that armed Europeans offered may have been a factor in lifting the previous Huron prohibition on allowing Frenchmen to travel with them along their trade routes.⁴⁷

Each year in the 1640s, as the Huron attempted to ferry their peltries to Montréal, they found themselves ambushed by the Iroquois who “now use firearms, which they buy from the Flemings. . . . A single discharge of fifty or sixty arquebuses would be sufficient to cause terror in a thousand Hurons.”⁴⁸ In the French sources, the Hurons tend to be portrayed as fearful of firearms, whereas the Iroquois, with the notable exception of their first encounter with Champlain, are not.

There are two possible reasons for these different responses on the part of the Hurons and the Iroquois. One reason may be that as late as the 1640s the Hurons had difficulty obtaining European trade goods, including guns, and were forced still to use lithic technology.⁴⁹ A second reason may be that the Iroquois made efforts—and had the opportunity—to familiarize themselves with firearms far more often than did the Hurons. In the 1626 clash with the Dutch, the Mohawks had only bows and arrows, but they still won. Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert, visiting the Oneidas and Mohawks in 1634-1635, noted that they had no guns, but they obviously knew of them. On two different occasions the Mohawks, and later the Oneidas, for no discernable reason implored van den Bogaert and his companions to fire their weapons.⁵⁰ Of course there may have been a novelty factor at work—perhaps the Iroquois knew of firearms, but most of them had not seen one in use—but this firing of guns might also have been analogous to modern military training. Present-day recruits crawl under machine-gun fire to familiarize them with the report of the weapons and the sounds of combat. This sort of training could have been true of seventeenth-century Mohawks as well. If they could familiarize their warriors with the report of firearms, in theory these fighters would not panic when they heard them in combat. Particularly if fired from an ambush, guns could still startle them, but recognizing the report, they would not flee the battlefield in terror.

⁴⁶ JR, 24: 275-77; Brodhead et al., *Documents*, 9: 408-9. See also José António Brandão, “*Your fyre shall burn no more*”: *Iroquois Policy toward New France and Its Native Allies to 1701* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 56.

⁴⁷ JR, 21: 99; Sagard, *Long Journey*, 262.

⁴⁸ JR, 22: 307. The term “Flemings” refers to the Dutch.

⁴⁹ Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 1: 408-9.

⁵⁰ Snow, Gehring, and Starna, *Mohawk Country*, 6, 8.

Another possibility is that the Mohawks could have observed the Dutchmen reloading their weapons after firing. This could have served two purposes. First it furnished a practical demonstration on how to reload the weapon, and second it gave them a sense of how long it would take a foe to bring his gun back into action after firing it.

These lessons took on added meaning for the Iroquois when European weaponry began to alter their traditional practice of warfare. European diseases and the need for European trade goods made war more frequent. Epidemics of diseases such as smallpox increased the number of dead in Iroquois communities. This necessitated taking more captives to replace them, which also led to more wars.⁵¹ Most disease epidemics no doubt went unreported, but some found their way into the record. When Harmen Meyndertsz van den Bogaert visited a Mohawk village in late 1634, he found a chief “living one quarter mile from the fort in a small cabin because many Indians here in the castle had died of smallpox.” In 1647 Jesuits learned of epidemics among the Five Nations from escaped prisoners.⁵²

European diseases and weaponry created a vicious cycle. Deaths from disease meant that the dead had to be replaced by captives, and securing captives remained the primary goal of war. But the use of firearms augmented the number of battlefield deaths, making the taking of captives less likely. The lethality of guns meant that men, and sometimes women and children, who could have been captured, instead died in battle. They could not be taken to Iroquois villages for torture or adoption. Guns also meant that when women encouraged their kinsmen to go to war and bring back captives, they must have realized that the odds of their male kin returning alive decreased as firearms became more available to their enemies. European weaponry created a cycle of increased warfare. Because of firearms, more men died on the battlefield. In turn, Iroquois clans sought to make up these deaths through adoption. But the primary mode of adoption, warfare, meant that men seeking captives were far more likely to be killed themselves, thus creating even more need for adoptees to replace the fallen.

The increased lethality of warfare meant that Iroquois warriors now had to fight in different ways. Tactics changed quickly. Champlain had encountered Mohawk warriors who chose to fight in the daytime and in the open, eschewing the use of cover and concealment. Champlain’s object lesson about the killing power of firearms changed all that. Ambush and

⁵¹ Richter, “War and Culture,” 544.

⁵² Snow, Gehring, and Starna, *Mohawk Country*, 3 (quotation); JR, 30: 229.

surprise now became staples of native warfare. Except for attacks on targets of opportunity, such as canoes bearing furs, attacking warriors now chose to initiate combat at night. Darkness helped an attacking force achieve surprise, and it reduced casualties because it gave the enemy no easy target. But it also created command and control problems for the leaders of war parties.⁵³

So well did the Five Nations Iroquois adopt these new weapons and tactics that a Jesuit priest wrote from Huronia in 1640 to beg Cardinal Richelieu to do something about the Iroquois and the Europeans who traded with them. Pointing to the effects that this trade had on the Huron, he noted that “in less than ten years they have become reduced from thirty thousand to ten thousand; so that if in the past, when their numbers were great, they were unable to resist their enemies, what can we expect for them in the future?”⁵⁴ Shortly after the Jesuit expressed these fears, the governor of Canada, Charles de Huault de Montmagny, rejected peace overtures from the Five Nations. Two concerns prompted the French to rebuff the Iroquois. If they negotiated a separate peace with the Iroquois, the French feared that the Iroquois would fall upon the Algonquins and Hurons, “who surround us on all sides . . . [and] should we abandon them, they would give us more trouble than the Hiroquois.” But the French had another, greater fear: that “if the Hiroquois had free access to our ports, the trade . . . would be entirely stopped.”⁵⁵

Although there were a few attempts to forge a peace between the French and the Five Nations in the first half of the seventeenth century, these agreements only lasted for a short time, if at all. Warfare is usually thought to be detrimental to trade, but in this case the governors of New France realized that for trade reasons they could not make a lasting peace with the Five Nations. Though the French probably wanted to trade with the Iroquois, a peace that did not include their native allies was out of the question. Any truce almost certainly would not have included the Hurons and Algonquins, whom the Iroquois would then have been free to attack without fear of French interference. Conceivably, the Iroquois could also have made peace with the Huron and Algonquin peoples who traded with the French and allowed them to pass through Iroquoia—for a price. This unlikely scenario would have given the Hurons and Algonquins access to

⁵³ Champlain, *Works*, 2: 97; Keith Otterbein, “Huron vs. Iroquois: A Case Study in Inter-Tribal Warfare,” *Ethnohistory* 26, no. 2 (1979): 141-53.

⁵⁴ JR, 17: 223. For the Five Nations’ superiority in weaponry and tactics, see Keith F. Otterbein, “Why the Iroquois Won: An Analysis of Iroquois Military Tactics,” *Ethnohistory* 11, no. 1 (1964): 56-63.

⁵⁵ JR, 21: 55-57.

Fort Orange and the superior quality trade goods available there. Had such a truce occurred the French would have lost a significant portion of the Huron and Algonquin fur trade. The third and most likely option for the Iroquois was to continue seizing Huron and Algonquin peltries and selling them to the Dutch. Thus during the first half of the seventeenth century the French could not consider a true peace with the Five Nations without undermining the economy of Canada. Indeed, the French saw the Five Nations as a barrier that kept their native trading partners from dealing with the Dutch at Fort Orange. And because their allies had no other source of European goods, they would have to go to Montréal.⁵⁶ As it was, there were no long-term peace agreements until after the destruction and dispersal of the Huron in 1649.

Within a year after the rebuff of the Five Nations' peace overtures, Vimot, reporting on the state of Jesuit missions to his superiors in France, warned that the "danger will not be averted from our colony, until the Hiroquois are either won over or exterminated." He also noted the continuing efforts of the Iroquois to wreck the French fur trade. "They block all roads leading to our great river; they . . . threaten to ruin our whole country."⁵⁷ Indeed, the Iroquois raids and pirating of Huron furs proved so costly that by the mid-1640s the Huron seriously considered "giving up the trade with the French, because they find it costs them too dear, and they prefer to do without European goods rather than to expose themselves every year."⁵⁸ This represents an unusual change in Huron views about European trade. Whereas other native peoples attempted to acquire more trade goods by expanding their roles in the fur trade, the Huron now contemplated dropping out of the trade primarily because of Iroquois aggression. This would have meant no more trade goods and more reliance on lithic technology. The Huron did not cease trading with the French, but it is significant that some of them at least considered it. Of course, it is possible that their threats about stopping the fur trade were an effort to gain French assistance against the Iroquois.

For the Huron, the acquisition of European technology and trade goods carried with it the threat of death at the hands of the Iroquois. But the lack of trade goods also meant that some material aspects of the

⁵⁶ Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, 169; Brodhead et al., *Documents*, 9: 408-9; *Collection de manuscrits contenant lettres, mémoires, et autres documents historiques relatifs à la Nouvelle-France*, 4 vols. (Québec: A. Cote, 1883-1885), 1: 476-77; Emma Helen Blair, ed., *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, 2 vols. (1911-1912; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 1: 31-36.

⁵⁷ JR, 23: 35.

⁵⁸ JR, 28: 57. See also Nancy Bonvillain, "Missionary Role in French Colonial Expansion: An Examination of the Jesuit Relations," *Man in the Northeast* 29 (1985): 4.

precontact world, such as stone tools, survived. At the same time this lack of trade goods, particularly weapons, placed the Huron at a severe disadvantage in their conflicts with the Iroquois.

The Five Nations however, linked the use of deadly new technologies such as firearms and steel axes to a traditional, but largely theoretical, strand of Iroquois thought. The extension of the Great Peace was one of the main precepts of the Deganawidah epic, the founding myth of the Iroquois League. Other peoples would be invited to join the league, which was often expressed metaphorically as the “longhouse,”—the traditional dwelling of Iroquoian peoples. If they refused to join, they should then be forced into the longhouse. Before they gained superiority in firearms, the Iroquois often got as good as they gave in battles with native foes, with the result that the hoped-for extension of the longhouse did not occur to any great degree. Firearms changed this. Although combat became more deadly in the 1640s, innovations in the way the Iroquois fought made the large-scale incorporation of other people into the Five Nations a reality.

By the late 1640s the Iroquois mode of warfare had undergone a drastic change. The destruction of Huronia in March 1649, and of other smaller groups of Iroquoian-speaking people in the 1650s, demonstrates that the Five Nations had created concepts of warfare that were mostly new to the natives of the northeast. Although the need to take captives remained the primary impetus for warfare and the Five Nations Iroquois were not taking territory in the European sense, they were effectively gaining control of previously contested areas.

The manner in which Iroquoian peoples regarded war underwent a radical change in less than half a century. War changed from open, highly ritualized, largely nonlethal skirmishes between warriors seeking honor and captives to large-scale campaigns that had strategic, economic, and military objectives. Warfare was also where the precontact and postcontact worlds of the Huron and the Five Nations blended. Elements of the postcontact world, such as the elimination of rival fur traders, came to be seen as strategic goals. Aspects of precontact warfare, such as honor and especially the taking of captives to replace the dead, remained an important and necessary goal of Iroquoian warfare.

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