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THE LONG FALL OF THE MOHAWK WARRIORS

How a proud band of militants lost its ideals, grew corrupt, and undermined everything it had set out to achieve



BY JOHN C. THOMPSON

No society, including Canada, is free of restive elements. Our recent headlines provide plenty of evidence for this, of course, pointing in particular to the unrest associated with aboriginal militancy. Indeed, by May of 1996, a militant group of Oneida and Chippewa natives were still occupying Camp Ipperwash in southwestern Ontario, and armed teenagers had set up barricades to support a would-be chief on the Waterhen reserve in Manitoba. Even the confrontation at Gustavsen Lake last summer is a very recent memory. The leaders of these protests tend to be without real authority on their own reserves; often, they are not even from the local native community, but are outsiders who have seized a local issue and taken it as their own. Worse, the protestors have felt free to terrorize other natives and the surrounding community, to burn and vandalize, and to shoot at police. They have felt free to do so because they are simply following the example set by the Mohawk Warrior's Society.

The Mohawk Warrior's Society is the archetype for militant Canadian aboriginals. In less than twenty-five years, the Society emerged, armed itself, grew corrupt, and collapsed—an evolution which provides a near-perfect illus-

tration of the means by which an insurgent group can subvert itself. Sadly, the Society's legacy is to serve as a model for a combination of armed militancy and criminal behaviour that is easily copied by other troubled elements within Canada's native communities.

Even in the beginning, the Warrior's Society was not exclusive to Mohawks. Some Warriors came from the Oneida, the Tuscarora, and the Seneca member tribes of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. (The Haudenosaunee are better known as the Iroquois, an unflattering Algonquin name for the Six Nations Confederacy.) Still others were Cree or Micmac. The Mohawks, however, were the fiercest element of the Confederacy even in the days when the Haudenosaunee were generally British allies and a terror to New France (a strong Québécois-Mohawk antipathy remains alive today). Most of the Haudenosaunee remained allied to Britain during the American Revolutionary War, and many drifted north from their New York homelands as part of the Loyalist migration. The Haudenosaunee now live from southwestern Ontario to Montreal, and in the western New York homelands. Some Mohawks reside on the Six Nations Reserve in the Niagara Peninsula, but more make their home on the Akwesasne Reserve at the junc-

ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES WEISS

tion of Quebec, Ontario, and New York. Others live at Tyendinaga, near Trenton, Ontario, or at Kahnawake and Kanesatake outside Montreal.

The nineteenth-century history of the Mohawks was marked by a stubbornly resisted transition from warrior-allies of the British Crown to wards of Ottawa's paternalistic Indian Act. Never fully succumbing to the cultural shock that overwhelmed so many other aboriginal peoples, Mohawks were among the leaders in the 1960s Red Power Movement, during which a new generation of activists began to pursue various grievances.

Yet native society was not designed for modern-day activism. Like so many other aboriginal communities, the Mohawks have various factions: clan mothers and traditional chiefs, elected band councils and chiefs, and people with "standing" provide a plethora of opinion. A tendency to seek consensus among these factions means that decision-making can be slow. The activists of the 1960s, therefore, bypassed the Byzantine internal world of the Six Nations and presented themselves directly to the outside world as leaders of the entire community. This set an example that is still followed.

Like various movements in the 1960s, the Red Power Movement resulted in a degree of armed militancy. The more aggressive American Indian Movement materialized in 1968 and backed a 1973 attempt to form an independent Sioux Nation on the Wounded Knee Reserve. Natives on other reserves have since repeated the tactic, which runs as follows. A group of militant natives, many of them from different tribes, will take up arms on a reserve and declare themselves to be its leaders—usually intimidating traditional and elected leaders in the process. Then the militants will announce that federal and local authority has no place on the reserve. The situation soon worsens and police or troops move in, providing "evidence" of the cruelty of the system and galvanizing other militants elsewhere.

Wounded Knee had this precise effect on a number of Mohawk militants in Kahnawake. The reserve is close to Montreal, and many non-natives had taken up residence there. Starting in 1971, the militants clashed with the tribal council over efforts to remove non-natives from the crowded reserve, and soon evolved into a paramilitary organization. By 1972, they had become known as the Mohawk Sovereignty and Security Force; after Wounded Knee the following year they assumed a more traditional sounding name and became the Warrior's Society.

Militancy often attracts those who are on the margins of a society, and the Warrior's Society was little different. The Society "took the garbage and the throwaways and put pride into them", according to one of the Mohawks who trained the Warriors. The trainer, known as "Cartoon", had seen hard service in Vietnam with the U.S. Marines and was still trying to overcome the experience when he became involved with the Warriors in 1973. The original Warriors were also highly idealistic, seeing themselves as a disciplined force with a mission to protect traditional values and enforce native claims to sovereignty.

The Society left Kahnawake after losing its quarrel with the band council, and in 1974 the Warriors returned to their ancestral homeland in New York state, occupying a nature reserve and claiming it as their own. The resulting standoff with state police and nearby residents lasted until 1977, and had many tense moments. It finally ended when the state government provided 5,000 acres near Plattsburg for the use of the Warriors. This new enclave, Ganienkeh, was created over the objections of the Haudenosaunee chiefs, who vainly tried to tell New York that the Warriors represented none but themselves.

In Ganienkeh, some Warriors embraced the rugged lifestyle and hard training regime necessary to a pure elite. However, their self-image could not long withstand the relative isolation. When 1980 saw some residents of Akwesasne engaged in a protracted dispute with the band police, the Warriors joined the protestors, intimidated the police, and even took a number of them hostage. The police were eventually released relatively unharmed, but the Warriors did not leave Akwesasne and a subsequent attempt to arrest them rapidly escalated into the Racquette Point Siege of 1980-81. This affair marked the last time the Warriors would operate from purely political motives. It also marked the last time they would operate with the full support of the native activists of the 1960s.

Some Warrior's Society leaders participated fully in the Racquette Point affair. Cartoon, for example, designed the Warriors' fortifications and placed their machine gun, though to this day he remains vague about his whereabouts in the years immediately following the incident. Others played a much less direct role in the siege and so avoided arrest. They continued to control the Warriors, many of whom were enticed to stay in Akwesasne by the economic opportunities there.

Major economic opportunities, in fact. Haudenosaunee have dual American and Canadian citizenship and enjoy tax-free status. As Canadian "sin taxes" on tobacco and al-

cohol grew heavier throughout the 1980s, the profit margins on tax-free smuggled products climbed accordingly. Indeed, by 1993, the price of Canadian cigarettes was twice that of the same brand in the U.S., and three times as great as duty-free prices.

Inevitably, the Warriors soon caught the attention of a variety of criminals and hucksters. In their early years, the Warriors had argued that the Haudenosaunee were sovereign allies of the British Crown, and that this status had never been changed with the consent of the Six Nations. Thus, they said, Canadian and U.S. laws had no real force on the Haudenosaunee, who could do as they pleased. Further, the Warriors had demonstrated a willingness to use force to support this argument. So entered the Silkshirts.

"Silkshirt" is a derogatory term used by former Mohawk activists to describe a certain breed of "entrepreneur". Some were self-styled businessmen who returned to Tuscarora, Akwesasne, and Six Nations when sovereignty arguments began to be used to justify and protect smuggling operations and unlicensed casinos. Other Silks had been involved in the Warriors' earlier actions, but now saw an opportunity to make money. Warriors agreed to provide security, which let the Warriors earn a living from the new enterprises.

The argument was straightforward. If the reserves were to be independent, they needed to be self-sustaining. The Warriors, meanwhile, needed to earn a living and also wanted more arms. This, they succeeded in; Warrior arsenals grew in the 1980s to include 50-calibre sniping rifles and machine guns, grenade launchers, plastic explosive, and probably anti-tank rockets. All of these things were achieved by protecting the Silks, and by compromising the Society's high moral standards.

The full transformation of the Warriors took about eight years. As of 1981, Silks were backing the first high-stakes bingo parlour on Akwesasne. By 1985, Canadian police



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knew of white narcotics traffickers operating from the reserve under Warrior protection. By 1987, casinos and bingo halls were operating on Akwesasne, and police had become very wary of the halls' Warrior guards. The rot had spread to other communities by 1988. One Silk, "Smokin' Joe" Anderson, became the kingpin of the Tuscarora Reserve, and the RCMP unearthed a speed laboratory in Kanasatake. In that year, a bingo hall operated by the New York Oneidas was torched by Warriors from other reserves. Apparently, the example of a band-run bingo hall was viewed as a direct threat to the Silks.

It should be noted that the Mohawk Warriors are by no means alone in allowing their insurgent ambitions to be completely overtaken by organized criminal behaviours. In Ulster, the IRA and their Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force counterparts pay for their activities with bootlegging and smuggling. The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka have become notorious heroin smugglers and counterfeiters, while

Columbian Marxist and Peruvian Maoist guerrillas are now deeply involved in the cocaine trade. It is also worth noting that two of the most deeply rooted organized criminal societies in the world, the Sicilian Mafia and the Chinese Triads, began as secretive rebels against the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Manchu Dynasty, respectively. Criminality long outlasts original grievances.

The nadir of Warrior corruption is related by Cartoon. By 1988 he was back in Mohawk life and had married the sister of Doug George, a former Mohawk activist. He was deeply disturbed by the lost purity of the Warriors, and by the deep divisions in the community over gambling and smuggling. The worst point came when he was invited back to Ganienkeh in 1989 to run training sessions. This time, one of the Silks offered him \$10,000 a month and a free home "to train children to act as a hit squad". Cartoon renounced the movement.

The Warriors disturbed many other Mohawks as well:

indeed, a majority of Mohawks were strongly opposed to the Warriors' new activities. Tensions were building in Akwesasne over the illegal activities, and a large "Anti" faction was trying to halt them. On Tuscarora and Akwesasne, the Warriors had long used violence to intimidate their own community and outside police. By now they were going too far: the band police had been frightened into non-action, kids were dropping out of school to work as smugglers, and the authority of traditional leaders and family heads was being flouted on a daily basis. In the face of the growing violence, the Antis took up arms and blockaded traffic to the casinos in April 1990. The Warriors came out to attack the Antis, and Akwesasne soon echoed with the sound of massive gunfights. Unfortunately for the Antis, a contest between assault rifles and hunting arms usually has a foregone conclusion. In four days, three men died and the last Antis on the reserve found themselves besieged. On the fifth day, five police forces stormed the reserve. Ironically, the Sûreté du Québec arrested the remaining Antis on the basis of complaints laid by the Warriors.

At the end of the affair the Warriors' standing was low. They had attacked other Mohawks to protect their criminal activities. The Haudenosaunee chiefs denounced the Warriors in the strongest terms and denied that the organization had any role in the Confederacy. But the Warriors weren't listening—and neither were the media. A dispute over a golf course at the Kanesatake Reserve provided the Warriors and their supporters with a motherhood cause that almost every Mohawk could support. This was especially true because the opposition was made up of the Quebec government and the much disliked Sûreté du Québec. By late May of 1990, Warriors were trickling into the area. By the time the Oka crisis exploded in July, the Warriors had brought enough guns to capture the issue for themselves, while several Silks threw money and influence behind them. Oka became a protest



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While Oka seemed to many people to be a defining moment in Canadian-Native relations, it wasn't so for the Mohawks. Traditional leaders throughout the Confederacy squirmed in irritation throughout the protest, but since they were not wearing masks or brandishing arms, neither Ottawa nor the media were interested. Native opposition to the Warriors was also muted because of the justice of the cause they had usurped. Still, many Mohawks recall that the Silks and Warriors faded away when the Army moved in (taking advantage of the Army's willingness to let people out), leaving excitable teenagers and unstable expendables like "Lasagna" to hold the fort.

The post-Oka Warriors are not actually militants anymore. Conflict and tension remain useful for them in the long run, as a means of achieving their real aim: self-government or sovereignty on *their terms*, these being the freedom to pursue any enterprise without interference from

any native, federal, or provincial authorities. It is significant that there were no major violent confrontations between the Warriors and Canadian authorities from the end of 1990 until 1995. This is because the Warriors had actually won the Oka crisis.

When the Oka affair had died down, the Silks and most of the Warriors went home, having won a significant victory. Affairs had become so sensitized that Ottawa and the provinces were subsequently reluctant to send the police into any Warrior-controlled reserve; the Warriors could now do as they pleased. This combined with the apogee of sin-tax prices to create unparalleled prosperity for the Silks and Warriors. By the end of 1993, about \$3.6 billion in cigarettes was flowing through Akwesasne, along with alcohol and firearms.

In return, counterfeit money (from the Middle East), illegal aliens, and narcotics went south. In these enterprises, the Warriors had help. Although they had links with the Mafia before 1990, they were now in the big time and had

many new friends—bikers, the Montreal underworld, Vietnamese gangsters and the Chinese Triads, the Russian *mafia*, Jamaican posses, and East Indian gangs. According to a senior police officer in the nearby town of Cornwall, the area had become a "Klondike of organized crime"; a local resident sarcastically described the situation as "multiculturalism's finest hour".

The easy money's corrupting influence terrified the Haudenosaunee as the death rate climbed due to the inevitable result of interaction with so many criminals. Even more lethal to young Mohawks was the combination of easy money, plentiful narcotics, and the suppression of legal and traditional authority. Social pathologies increased under these circumstances. Fortunately, Ottawa had begun to notice plummeting tax revenues from tobacco and alcohol, and the pleas for tough policing began to sink in. In February 1994, the boom collapsed with Ottawa's drastic tax cuts on cigarettes.

Within months, the Mohawk community rebuilt itself. Akwesasne itself had endured the Warriors' climate of fear for long enough; now the reserve would tolerate it no longer. Elders and family heads reasserted their authority and band police again trod in long forbidden areas. By early 1995, the atmosphere from the Oneida reserves near London to Akwesasne had also changed, although the relief was somewhat limited by the presence of some of the toughest Warriors on the reserves near Montreal and by the continuing universal dislike of the *Sûreté du Québec*. Another sign of the times was the March 1995 shoot-out on the Seneca reserves near Buffalo. A Warrior/Silk attempt to dominate that community ended when a number of Senecas shot several Warriors to death. Dozens of Silks, meanwhile, have been arrested since September 1995, and American authorities are closing in on others over an illegal banking scheme.

Still, the example of the Warriors and their supporters has spread across Canada. Like the early Warriors, none of the leaders in the Miramichi, Ipperwash, or Gustavsen Lake protests in the summer of 1995 had real standing in their own community, but once the protest began, Ottawa and the media paid more attention to them than they normally would to any other native leaders. The Warriors' talent for inventing tradition to suit their own ends was also imitated. The Gustavsen Lake protest was over a "sundance site", a Plains native tradition never practiced in the British

Columbian Interior before 1989. Similarly, the main instigator of the Ipperwash protest invented a tale on the spot about Ipperwash being a "sacred healing centre"—despite the fact that the main attraction of the site is really a combination of anarchy and free housing.

The Warrior tactics used at Oka have been refined. Some Warriors still seek to promote unrest without unduly risking themselves, and this pattern was repeated at Gustavsen Lake and the Ipperwash protest. Teenagers and unstable middle-aged men take the risks, and "disposable" leaders do the talking to the media. Meanwhile, the Warriors offer tactical advice and send the expendables out to confront the police. Indeed, the death of the amiable Dudley George at Ipperwash Camp in September 1995 appears to some to have resulted from this sort of tactic. One observer inside the camp noted that Dudley was repeatedly goaded by the protest's leaders into "proving" himself. Soon after, he was shot by the OPP.

Some Warriors and Silks still have the means to travel to other potential trouble spots, and the connections to provide prohibited weapons. Submachine gun fire has been heard at Ipperwash, and assault rifles have been supplied to Manitoba's most troublesome street gangs—the Manitoba Warriors and the Indian Posse. These last two gangs were heavily involved in a recent prison riot, and started the 1996 protest season with the blockade at Waterhen Reserve in the north of the province. They also have a strong hold on the narcotics industry in the province. These street gangs, unlike the Mohawk Warrior's Society, did not begin as militants who devolved into criminals. Instead, they appear to have adopted their ideology in the process of sliding from troubled children to full-fledged criminals.

The Warriors have come a long way from the inspired militants of 1973. In the process, they have terrorized their own communities, facilitated a multi-billion dollar smuggling industry, and frightened Ottawa into tiptoeing around native lawlessness. Instead of promoting native traditions and strengthening responsible leadership, they have had the opposite effect. Indeed, the Manitoba Warriors and the Indian Posse are the true legacy of the Mohawk Warrior's Society: armed teenage drug dealers who believe they need respect neither Canadian laws, the traditional authorities of the First Nations, nor the peaceful intentions of their own people.

"Our bitterest wine is always drained from crushed ideals."

—Arthur Stringer