

SPECIAL SECTION

TWENTY YEARS AFTER KANEHSATÀ:KE: REFLECTIONS, RESPONSES, ANALYSES

Then and Now, For the Land

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Abstract

Taiaiake Alfred is from Kahnawá:ke in the Mohawk Nation. He lived in Kahnawá:ke in 1990 and worked in the intergovernmental relations office of the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake during the crisis. In this piece, he reflects on the aftermath of the events at Kahnawá:ke and Kahnésatà:ke, reflecting on why this was the moment that the Mohawk people decided to make a stand.

Résumé

Taiaiake Alfred vient de Kahnawá:ke dans la Nation Mohawk. Il vivait à Kahnawá:ke en 1990 et il a travaillé dans le bureau des relations intergouvernementales du Conseil Mohawk de Kahnawake pendant la crise. Dans cette contribution, il réfléchit à la suite des événements à Kahnawá:ke et Kahnésatà:ke, analysant pourquoi ce fut le moment que le peuple Mohawk a décidé de saisir pour se revendiquer.

Keywords

• Oka • Kahnawáke • Kanesatake • anti-colonialism • Mohawks

Mots-clés

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A couple of years after the Oka Crisis I received a request from the Québec government to make a presentation at a meeting of their cabinet. They

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asked me, as a professor of political science in a public institution, to meet with them and answer some questions to help them understand the Mohawk view on sovereignty and our relationship with Québec, in the interest of resolving the still simmering conflict. I decided it was my responsibility as a Mohawk of Kahnawá:ke and as an Indigenous intellectual to do what I could to clear up the misunderstandings clouding our relationship, so I accepted the invitation.

Arriving at a Montréal hotel conference room, I was given a cordial reception and was asked to make a short presentation to the gathered ministers. I was to the point: my talk was a restatement of the historic and well-known Mohawk position on the nation-to-nation relationship between our people that we have always defended by all means necessary, and which, I made clear, needs to be respected if our people were ever going to enjoy peaceful co-existence like our ancestors had since the Great Peace of 1701 that ended the Mohawk war of resistance against French settlement in our homeland.

The cabinet ministers listened respectfully to me as I spoke, but once I finished speaking and they turned to question me, I sensed change in their tone. One of the ministers asked me what my thoughts were on the cigarette trade and its role in the recent conflicts between our people. I explained to him that my views were not 'expert' on this question so much as reflecting the general Mohawk opinion that we are a free and unconquered people with inherent rights to unimpeded trade between and within our territories. But before I could finish or explain myself fully, another minister - I believe the minister of public security - barged into the conversation, red-faced and violent, slamming an open hand on the conference table and shouting, 'What you are saying is nonsense. The problem is that you people are taking money out of our pockets. You are selling illegal cigarettes and stealing our tax revenue! You are stealing from the government. That's the problem!'

The crisis may have been about money to Québec politicians all along. In their minds, it must have seemed like a brilliant strategy guaranteed to provoke an armed conflict as justification for implementing a siege of Kahnawá:ke and Kanehsatà:ke to contain Mohawk movement and break the networks of trade and communication among communities supporting the tax-free cigarette trade. Mohawks had been generating huge profits from selling tax-free cigarettes brought in from the sister community of Ahkwesáhsne to willing Québécois consumers since the mid-1980s, and much of this money had been channeled into building the capacity of the Mohawk Nation to resist Québec and Canadian authority in

physical, legal and political ways. Attacking the economic base of such a resurgent Mohawk sovereignty in its midst must have seemed imperative to the government of Québec at the time. If the cigarette trade were only about money to Mohawks, Québec's strategy may have worked.

As it was, Québec seriously misunderstood us and the situation they faced in confronting our self-determination. Their strategy, as was proven by the events that followed, was fatally flawed. Québécois failed to understand that Mohawks were not involved in the cigarette trade simply for the money. This cigarette economy was a means to an end; the goal was the resurrection of our nation. It was a time of true nationalism when the economy served politics. Québec may have expected Mohawks to be intimidated and to surrender ground in the face of an armed attack by the provincial police. If Mohawks had been motivated by money, calculations and rationalities would no doubt have prevailed in our minds and we would have stood down and allowed Québec to assert its authority again on our lands and over our people. But our people did not respond rationally to the challenge, we responded with our hearts.

It was a real surge of anger and pride – I might even say a thirst for vengeance – that allowed our people to overcome initial confusion, political factionalism, personal jealousies, infighting, logistical nightmares, and straight up fear to stand collectively against Québec (and later Canada) during the summer of 1990. Mohawks were not only reacting to Québec's armed attack on a peaceful protest in the Kanehsatà:ke pines, we were remembering 300 years of being in the way of white society, and how the inconvenient truth of our being the Original People of this land had made us despised targets of hatred and conniving strategies of dispossession. When we heard the Québec police had attacked our relatives in Kanehsatà:ke early in the morning of 11 July 1990, no one was thinking about money. We were righteous in our rage at the lies of white society and being cheated out of two-thirds of our reserve. We were coming together in remembrance of all the police beatings and killings our people endured for many years. We were preparing ourselves for the worst, still hurting from the dismembering of our beautiful riverside village to make way for the St. Lawrence Seaway. We were forced into action by disgust at the thought of grown men yelling '*Maudit sauvage!*' at ten-year old kids and throwing stones at our bus after hockey games in French towns. On that summer morning and in the days that followed all of this was on our minds and in our hearts. And we were determined that 11 July 1990 was the day that shit ended.