

WORKSHEET 21**Multicultural Resources****Native American Forms of Government**

Read this passage and answer the questions that follow.

In 1787 Americans created a new plan of government—the Constitution. Delegates who drafted the U.S. Constitution had to decide questions such as how power would be divided and how leaders would be chosen.

The framers of the Constitution had many models in North America from which to choose. Several Native American groups were nations that governed themselves. Over the centuries, Native Americans had developed different systems of government. They found a variety of solutions to the questions of power and leadership.

When the Spanish arrived in the Americas, most of central Mexico was ruled by the Aztec empire. The Aztec king was both a political and religious leader. In Aztec society priests and nobles belonged to the upper class. Smaller states had to pay tribute to the empire in gold and silver, slaves, or luxuries such as feathers.

During the 1400s and 1500s, the Natchez, Creek, and other Indians in the Southeast lived in a similarly organized society. They were led by a king or “Great Sun.” They also had strict divisions between social classes. This kind of government could have come with settlers or traders from Mexico.

Elsewhere in North America, Native American governments were much more democratic. Among Woodlands and

Prairie Indians, nations commonly had a chief who inherited his position. (During wars, a military leader temporarily became chief). Decisions that affect the entire

nation, however, were usually left up to a council made up of elders. Women sometimes sat on the councils.

In a number of areas, Indian nations that shared the same language or customs banded together in an alliance—a federation or confederacy. There were different reasons for this. For example, the Creek Confederacy in the Southeast was formed mainly for defense. In Virginia, the Powhatan Confederacy brought together about 30 groups, who sent furs, pearls, and food to a central chief in return for protection.

The most powerful Native American alliance was the League of the Iroquois. It was made up of five Indian nations in northern New York and southern Canada. In the 1730s the Tuscarora became the sixth nation in the League. The League’s constitution guaranteed freedom of speech and religion.

It also granted political rights for women. The League of the Iroquois was formed to end warfare among its members. It would later work to bring peace among surrounding Indian nations.

Much of the League of the Iroquois’s ideas on freedom and democracy would influence American history. The Albany Plan of Union in 1754, the American colonies’ first try at unity, used ideas from the League. Some scholars believe that the League’s con-

stitution was a model for the U.S. Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights. A few historians argue that Iroquois ideals influenced the forming of the United Nations.



The Navajo Tribal Council meets at Window Rock, Arizona.

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1. In the Aztec society states had to pay tribute to the empire in gold, silver, and slaves.
2. In the southeast region a king called the “Great Sun” led the Native Americans.
3. Among the Woodlands and Prairie Indians decisions were usually left up to a council made up of elders.
4. Women were never allowed to sit on those councils.
5. In some areas different Indian nations formed alliances.
6. The League of Iroquois created a constitution that guaranteed freedom of speech and religion, but did not give those rights to women.
7. The League of Iroquois influenced American freedom and democracy.