


1989

Speeches Before the Tribal Chiefs of the Iroquois Nation

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Recommended Citation

Kendall, Robert D., "Speeches Before the Tribal Chiefs of the Iroquois Nation" (1989). *Communication Studies Faculty Publications*. 8.
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"Speeches before the Tribal Chiefs of the Iroquois Nation"

The following scripts were written by Dr. Robert Kendall impersonating SA-GO-YE-WAT-HA (aka Red Jacket) and Missionary Brother Cram speaking before the tribal chiefs of the Iroquois Nation in Western New York in 1805.

Impersonation speaking was developed by Dr. Robert Kendall who taught in the Communication Studies Department at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota between 1971 and 1992. Dr. Kendall described impersonation speaking in this way: "Each student chooses an historical character, does independent research on that person, writes a speech, locating it in a particular year of that person's adult life, making it interesting and relevant to a [contemporary] audience, assumes that character through costume, attitude, worldview, and mannerisms, and delivers the speech to an open-invitation public."

THE YEAR IS 1805. THE PLACE: WESTERN NEW YOURK STATE, THE HOME OF THE PROUD SENECA TRIBE, PART OF THE IROQUOIS NATION, FOR MANY YEARS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL, FAR-ROAMING, POWERFUL, AND RESPECTED INDIAN PEOPLE ON THE ENTIRE CONTINENT.

HERE STANDS MISSIONARY CRAM, A RELIGIOUS EMISSARY FROM BOSTON WHO HAS ASKED FOR A HEARING BEFORE THE TRIBAL CHIEFS.

HERE STANDS SA-GO-YE-WAT-HA (in English, "He Who Keeps Them Awake."), THE NOTED SENECA CHIEF AND ORATOR, WEARING THE BRITISH RED MILITARY COAT WHICH IS THE BASIS FOR HIS BEING CALLED BY THE WHITES: "RED JACKET."

MISSIONARY CRAM:

My friends, I am thankful for the opportunity afforded us of uniting together at this time. I had a great desire to see you, and inquire into your state and welfare. For this purpose I have travelled a great distance, being sent by your old friends, the Boston Missionary Society.

Brothers, I have not come to get your lands or your money, but to enlighten your minds, and to instruct you how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to His mind and will, and to preach to you the gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ. There is but one religion, and but one way to serve God, and if you do not embrace the right way you cannot be happy together. You have never worshipped the Great Spirit in a manner acceptable to him; but have all your lives been in great errors and darkness. To endeavor to remove these errors, and open your eyes, so that you might see clearly, is my business with you.

Brothers, I wish to talk with you as one friend talks with another. I want you to speak your minds freely; for I wish to reason with you on the subject, and, if possible, remove all doubts, if there be any on your minds. The subject is an important one, and it is of consequence that you give it an early attention while the offer is made you.

You have now heard what I have to propose and give me an answer before we part.

RED JACKET:

Friend and Brother, it was the will of the Great Spirit that we should meet together this day. He orders all things, and has given us a fine day for our Council. He has taken his garment from before the sun, and caused it to shine with brightness upon us.

Brother, this Council Fire has been kindled at your request. We have listened with attention to what you have said. You requested us to speak our minds freely. This gives us great joy; for we now consider that we stand upright before you, and can speak what we think.

Brother, you say you want an answer to your talk before you leave this place. It is right you should have one; as you are a great distance from home, and we do not wish to detain you. But we will first look back a little, and tell you what our fathers have told us, and what we have heard from the white people.

Brother, listen to what we say. There was a time when our forefathers owned this great island. Their seats extended from the rising to the setting sun. The Great Spirit had made it for the use of Indians. . . But an evil day came upon us. Your forefathers crossed the great water and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. They found friends and not enemies. They told us they had fled from their own country for fear of wicked men, and had come here to enjoy their religion. They asked for a small seat. We took pity on them; granted their request; and they sat down amongst us. We gave them corn and meat; they gave us poison (rum) in return.

The white people, Brother, had now found our country. Tidings were carried back, and more came amongst us. Yet we did not fear them. We took them to be friends. They called us brothers. We believed them and gave them a larger seat. At length their numbers had greatly increased. They wanted more land; they wanted our country. Our eyes were opened, and our minds became uneasy. Wars took place. Indians were hired to fight against Indians, and many of our people were destroyed.

Brother, our seats were once large and yours were small. You have now become a great people, and we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets. You have got our country, but are not satisfied; you want to force your religion upon us as well.

Brother, you say you have not come to get our land or our money, but to enlighten our minds. I will now tell you that I have been at your meetings, and saw you collect money from the meeting. I cannot tell what this money was intended for, but suppose that it was for your minister, and if we should conform to your way of thinking, perhaps you may want some from us.

Brother, continue to listen. You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and, if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do we know this to be true? We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was intended for us as well as you, why had not the Great Spirit given to us, and not only to us, but why did he not give to our forefathers, the knowledge of that book, with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agreed, as you can all read the book?

Brother, we do not understand these things. We are told that your religion was given to your forefathers, and has been handed down from father to son. We also have a religion, which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us their children. We worship in that way. It teaches us to be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love each other, and to be united.

Brother, we know that the Great Spirit is pleased that we follow the traditions and customs of our forefathers---for in so doing we receive his blessing. The Great Spirit has provided abundance---when we are hungry we find the forest filled with game---when thirsty, we slake our thirst in the pure streams and springs that spread around us. When weary, the leaves of the trees are our bed---we retire with contentment to rest---we rise with gratitude to the Great Preserver. Renovated strength in our limbs, and bounding joy in our hearts, we feel blessed and happy.

Brother, listen to us. No luxuries, no vices, no disputed titles, no avaricious desires, shake the foundations of our society, or disturb our peace and happiness. We know the Great Spirit is better pleased with his red children than with his white, when he bestows upon us a hundredfold more blessings than upon you.

Perhaps, Brother, you are right in your religion---it may be peculiarly adapted to your condition. You say that you destroyed the Son of the Great Spirit. Perhaps this is the merited cause of all your troubles and misfortunes. But, Brothers, bear in mind that we had no participation in this murder. We disclaim it---we love the Great Spirit---and as we never had any agency in so unjust, so merciless an outrage, he therefore continues to smile upon us, and to give us peace, joy and plenty.

Brother, we pity you---we wish you to bear to our good friends our best wishes. Inform them that in compassion toward them, we are willing to send them missionaries to teach them our religion, ~~habits and customs~~. We would be willing they should be as happy as we are, and assure them that if they should follow our example, they would be more, far more happy than they are now. We cannot embrace your religion. It renders us divided and unhappy---but by your embracing ours, we believe that you would be more happy and more acceptable to the Great Spirit.

Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while, and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again of what you have said.

Brother, as we now part, we will come and take you by the hand, and hope the Great Spirit will protect you on your journey, and return you safe to your friends.

HAVING SAID THIS, RED JACKET EXTENDED HIS HAND TO MISSIONARY CRAM AS A GESTURE OF PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD; BUT THE MISSIONARY REFUSED TO TAKE IT, "There being," HE SAID, "no fellowship between the religion of God and the devil!"