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| The Era of the Middle Ground |
| Conceptual Information and Effects |
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The Era of the Middle Ground: 1650 – 1815

Throughout the early colonial era, there existed much development and change across the lands we know as the United States. The drastic effects would ripple across the land and end up shattering the area as its inhabitants knew it. Not only were the changes brutal and widespread, they were also intense, confusing, and stressful periods of time. The future was very uncertain and it certainly didn’t look bright for the natives.

The “Middle Ground Era” refers to the system and time where French settlers and Native American peoples attempted to negotiate and form peaceful treaties that benefitted both sides. This took negotiation and convincing from one side to the other in order to demonstrate the fair and justness of some mutual action. This process was enacted through everyday life wherein each side attempted to frame themselves into the shoes, or reference, of the other about actions and decisions.

A major driving force during this time was the effects of Iroquois attacks upon other Indiana groups and their attempt to drive them west. This prompted many group to consider any alternatives they had in order to survive, due to the Iroquois military dominance and cruelty. Eventually, “eight hundred Iroquois cornered their prey at Green Bay, one of the stops on this staggered flight west. Many of the besiegers were, it turned out, ‘the offspring of the people whom they had come to attack.’ Far from their home... eventually the two sides negotiated a truce.” (White 1996: 3). The terror in the so called Iroquoi Wars was exemplified by a raid upon a Miami village by the Seneca’s whom destroyed the village while the Miami’s had been out on a war march and then “marched the women and children east. Every night … they killed and ate a Miami child. And every morning, they took a small child, thrust a stick through its head and sat it up on the path with its face toward the Miami town they had left.”(White 1996: 4) but instead of the brutality ending here on this trip, the Miami ended up catching up to the Seneca and “killed all but six… the Miami’s killed two of their captives and beheaded them. They ran a string through the ears of the heads and hung the heads around the necks of the remaining two prisoners whose hands, noses, and lips they cut off.” (White 1996: 5). This is the kind of brutality that took place between native groups during the time period and pushed many of them west away from conflict. Instead of falling by the wayside, so to speak, many Algonquians did not disappear but instead, “with Frenchmen, they pieced together a new world from shattered pieces…” (White 1996: 2). They would use their developing relationship with the French to rebuild their world, and “this village world sustained, and was in turn sustained by, the French empire…” (White 1996: 2). This Allied period between the French and the Algonquians was about furthering each side’s interests while not hindering each other in the process. Trickery and deception were commonplace during these times, as the story of a man known as “The Baron” indicates an attempt, albeit failed, to convince both the French and Algonquians of the legitimacy of the story and its’ strange values. White explains that “each side had to attain cultural legitimacy in terms of the other… The Baron appealed to a Christian tradition of prophecy and put it to Indian purposes. He sought to validate it, in Indian terms, by a gift of beaver. Cadillac, appearing in an Indian council, followed Algonquian forms and, knowing what acceptance of the gift signified, refused it… He rejected an Indian adaptation of a Christian device through his own use of Algonquian-Iroquoian diplomatic forms…” (White 1996: 55)

Throughout the period, Europeans were increasingly in need of land and resources. Original treaties were made, then broken, and later remade. In between were cycles of violence and disruption, followed by another cycle. Both Miami and Europeans desired trade and Alliance with Indian groups, and “…the Miami developed a dependency on French trade goods, while the French could at times depend on Miami military support…” (Rafert 1996: 34). The British seemed to favor the Iroquoian peoples. The French remained in their tentative Middle Ground state with the Algonquian nations. In 1701, England and France brought their respective Indiana allies together and attempted to bring peace between the Iroquois and Algonquians of the Midwestern area.

Resistance- During this time, the Miami recovered from the Iroquois aggression and eventually attempted to move back into their home lands throughout upper Midwest and central Indiana. A major settlement of the Miami people was constructed around present-day Fort Wayne, called Kekionga. This settlement was fairly secure and secluded, thus allowing them relatively peaceful living for an extended period of time. At first, the Miami favored the French over the British, and thus the French were able to establish forts throughout Miami territory to protect against British uprisings. As time passed, however, the Miami began to see the better quality and cheaper goods produced by the British, which was a benefit for them. In addition, their geological location at the upper Wabash provided them an excellent place to play the diplomat between French and British traders, while gaining valuable goods for themselves in the process. New leadership, around 1765 slanted the Miami toward British interactions. However, the British faced leadership issues and many tribes began to rebel. The Miami joined the rebellion in 1756 with the aid of the French. However, the Treaty of Paris in 1763 won England all of Frances’ land east of the Mississippi. “The end of French political authority in the western Great Lakes eventually doomed the middle ground of shared understandings…” (Rafert 1996: 35). Now, the Miami and surrounding lands were forced to deal with the British influences, as well as growing American ones. At first, this appeared do-able as the British went so far as to forbid European settlement west of the Appalachians to quell distrust there. However, this rule was widely ignored and led to conflict. “After the war came briefly to the Miami in October 1780 when Augustin Mottin De La Balme attacked and destroyed Kekionga…” (Rafert 1996: 44), Miami parties and its leader, Little Turtle, “attacked the force, killing La Balme and thirty of his men and ending the threat…” (Rafert 1996: 44). After the British surrender to the Americans in 1781, Miami culture began to truly decline. However, they continued to fight the American influence and growth, and were “for a time … at the center of resistance to American intentions in the Old Northwest…” (Rafert 1996: 45) but were eventually overtaken at Fallen Timbers in 1794.

Changes were a major part of the Miami lifestyle during this time. Historically chiefs had been hereditarily chosen, based on visions and prophecies. However, there was a shift now by the early 1700’s wherein they were slowly being replaced by new leaders who showed themselves as able and capable of action. This was how La Demoiselle, also known as Piankashaw, earned a position of power. “Historian Richard White has pointed out that La Demoiselle’s rapid rise reflected the death of older leaders and a breaking up of older Miami leadership roles…[and] used the possibility of an Iroquois alliance and the Lancaster Treaty to challenge effectively Piedfroid and the French…” (Rafert 1996: 32). His rival, being of opposite French to British opinion, Piedfroid, was also appointed after he led the Miami during the smallpox epidemic and became a renowned medical shaman, and “it is likely that Piedfroid used his role in the Midewiwin and the power of various manitous to rise to political leadership ahead of hereditary leaders who lacked his curing powers…” (Rafert 1996: 32). On the other hand, cultural traditions still proved resilient as the successor to Piedfroid was most likely his nephew, Pacanne. Another leader, Le Gris, was also probably the nephew of La Grue who died during the smallpox epidemic as well. Because of this, it is apparent that while non-hereditary leaders were on the rise, traditions were still valued and continued. In regards to material usage, as trade increased so did Indian usage. “From the very beginning of contact trade goods quickly replaced many native items, particularly stone and ceramic tools…” (Rafert 1996: 33). Saddles and other horse related equipment became much more commonplace, thus leading to the Indian on horseback image we all experience growing up in grade school. The British textile industry also began to make an impact in Indian trade as the industrial revolution in Britain was booming during this time.

While the Middle Ground Era had not been peaceful, the natives could not say they hadn’t tried. There were times of trouble, most of them violent and extremely costly, but the future would not be so similar. The determination and will of the natives to work things out, even though they were getting ‘the short end of the stick’ is pretty astounding. They made do with what they had, and gained much knowledge, understanding, and ideas from a people that would rather use them as military fodder than friends.

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