

OKA

Introduction

Canada's summer peace was exploded in Oka (Kanesatake) and Chateaugay (Kahnawake) as armed Mohawk Warriors confronted first the Quebec provincial police and subsequently the Canadian Armed Forces. The conflict quickly escalated from one in which the Mohawks attempted to prevent the expansion of a golf course into their territory to one of diametrically opposed views of law, land, and rights. When principles and beliefs collided, compromise became very difficult to achieve. As the conflict intensified, so too did the sense of frustration, bitterness, and anger on both sides.

The Oka dispute eerily echoes the saga of Louis Riel played out over one hundred and twenty years ago. When the Métis leader stepped on the surveyor's chain, saying "You go no further!" he was fighting for recognition of his people and their right to ancestral lands in the face of encroaching white settlements. So too, Oka is not about a golf course. It is a symbol for all the economic, social, political, and legal grievances of the native peoples. It is a plea for recognition and a demand that native rights be respected, so that all aboriginal people might become full and productive citizens.

To see the Canadian military authorities confronting their own citizens is disturbing. So too is the scene of a group of self-styled freedom fighters taking the law into their own hands. How the barricades come down will go a long way in determining the future relationships between native and other Canadians. The profound issues that Oka represents will remain long after the removal of the barricades. Until these concerns are addressed and satisfactorily resolved by both sides, the drama of Oka will be replayed elsewhere as surely as the spirit of Louis Riel will be remembered.

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Skill Exercise 1

Comprehension/Recall

1. The dispute at Oka originally started because of the aim of the town council to expand a _____.
2. In order to prevent the expansion, the Mohawks erected _____.
3. On July 11th, in attempting to enforce a court order, a Quebec police officer _____.
4. The number of Indians in Canada is approximately _____.
5. Most native people in Canada live on _____.
6. In treaties negotiated between the Indians and the Canadian Government, the Indians handed over land in return for _____.
7. Indicative of the appalling conditions on many reserves is the fact that the suicide rate is _____ times the national average.
8. In the eyes of the law, reserve lands belong to _____.
9. Many Indians believe that Canadian law _____ on reserves.
10. The writings of _____, advocating the use of violence to achieve goals, inspired the Warriors.
11. Mohawks in Kahnawake, in sympathy with their brothers and sisters in Oka, erected barriers on the _____.
12. This infuriated residents of _____, who, as a result, had to spend _____ hours commuting to Montreal, a trip that normally would take 15 minutes.
13. One of the toughest issues in the protracted negotiations between the Mohawks and government authorities was _____.
14. On July 27, 1990, Tom Siddon, the federal Minister of Indian Affairs announced that _____.
15. Eventually, _____ replaced police officers at the barricades.

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Skill Exercise 2

Fact, Opinion, or Interpretation?

In viewing a news item on television or reading an article in a newspaper or magazine, it is important to differentiate between what is fact, what is opinion, and what is interpretation. Classify the following statements from the video as either fact (F), opinion (O), or interpretation (I) by circling the appropriate letter in each case. Next, define the three terms in your own words. Finally, explain why it is important to be able to distinguish between the three concepts.

1. The biggest story this summer was the story of the confrontation between the Mohawk Indians in Quebec and two levels of government. **F O I**
2. It all started as an argument over a golf course. **F O I**
3. Indians on the Kanesatake reserve consider the land to be sacred. **F O I**
4. Oka's mayor asked the provincial police to enforce the judge's order. **F O I**
5. There was an explosion of violence. **F O I**
6. There are about half a million Indians in Canada. **F O I**
7. There are more than two thousand reserves in Canada. **F O I**
8. The Indians in Canada decided not to fight for their land, probably because they saw the inevitability of defeat. **F O I**
9. Conditions on many reserves today are appalling. **F O I**
10. Indians say that Canadian law does not mean anything on their reserves. **F O I**
11. Oka became a symbol for all Indian grievances. **F O I**
12. Mohawks on Kahnawake put up a barricade across the Mercier Bridge. **F O I**
13. The most difficult problem during the negotiations between Mohawks and the government authorities was amnesty. **F O I**
14. After July 27, 1990, the golf course dispute seemed like a tiny problem compared with the larger issues of self-government and land claims. **F O I**
15. Reporter Neil MacDonald watched the police lose control. **F O I**
16. The Oka dispute has started us down the road to a new relationship between native and non-native Canadians. **F O I**

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Simulation Exercises

1. The class will be divided into groups of two. One person will represent a Mohawk Warrior and the other will represent a Canadian army officer. Write a five-minute dialogue that takes place at the barricades. Be prepared to act it out.
2. The class will be divided into groups of three. One person will represent Alex Patterson, the chief Quebec negotiator. The second person will be Bernard Roy, the chief federal negotiator. The third person will be Joe Norton, the main Mohawk negotiator. Your job is to arrive at an agreement on the outstanding issues. Some possible issues are amnesty, Indian self-government, land claims, Indian poverty, and gun possession on the reserve.
3. It is July 14, 1990 and you are the priest officiating at the funeral of Quebec provincial police Corporal Marcel Lemay, who was killed on July 11 in a three hour battle between Mohawks and the police at the Oka barricade. Write and deliver a eulogy that attempts to appeal to reasoned thought.
4. It is August 27, 1990. You are Prime Minister Mulroney, and in a television broadcast to the nation, you are explaining to Canadians why the army has been ordered to engage in military action to dismantle the barricades.
5. It is August 27, 1990. A convoy of sixty cars carrying Mohawk women, children, and elderly people has left Kahnawake. An imminent assault by the Canadian army is feared. As the cars cross the Mercier Bridge, they are attacked by groups of angry white residents. Rocks are hurled and one has crashed through a car window, hitting an elderly man in the chest. You are a television reporter and you have witnessed the scene. Report the events in a live broadcast on CBC's *Newsworld*.

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Critical Analysis of an Editorial

1. Read Peter C. Newman's editorial "Haunted by history's lively ghosts."
2. Identify the thesis or main idea in the article.
3. List at least three pieces of supporting evidence that Newman provides to support his thesis.
4. An editorial, by definition, presents a particular point of view. Can you detect the bias in this editorial? If so, explain the position that Newman takes.
5. Research the Oka issue further and locate an editorial that takes a different point of view from Newman's. Who is the author of the editorial? When and where did it appear? Repeat questions 3 and 4 above for the second editorial you have found.
6. Locate and read three straight news articles that deal with the Oka situation. Define the thesis or main idea in each piece. Compare one of these articles with the Newman editorial. How does Newman's piece differ from a straight news report. What are the characteristics of a good editorial? What are the characteristics of a good news article?
7. The CBC strives to be unbiased and non-partisan in its reporting. Evaluate how successful we have been in this regard in reporting the events at Oka in this issue of *CBC-TV News in Review*.

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Research Activities

To increase your understanding and awareness of the roots of the Oka conflict and the grievances that this situation represents, research individually or in small groups one or more of the following key issues. Share your findings with your classmates.

1. Examine the print media's coverage of the Oka situation from the first week of July 1990 to the last week of August. Locate and read one article per week from magazines or newspapers. In compiling your "Oka Journal," try to appreciate the variety of ways in which this situation was reported.
2. Research native poverty in Canada. What is the per capita income of native people on and off the reserve? Do a provincial breakdown of your figures. In which province are natives worst off? Also try to divide your statistics into the following categories: age, gender, blue-collar workers, and white-collar workers.
3. Research unemployment levels among native Canadians. Divide the statistics into the following categories: age, province, gender, skilled workers, and unskilled workers.
4. Research the educational achievements of native Canadians. On a national scale, what percentage of native Canadians have a college or university education? What percentage have a highschool diploma? What percentage have graduated from elementary school? Divide these figures according to province and gender.
5. Research crime rates among native Canadians. Divide the statistics according to the following categories: province, violent or non-violent crime, alcohol-related crime.
6. Research alcohol abuse within the native communities. Divide the statistics into the following categories: province, age, gender.
7. Research suicide rates among native peoples and divide the statistics into the following categories: province, age, gender.

Summary

It is important to share your findings with your classmates, to attempt to analyze the statistics and to begin to understand the social conditions reflected in these statistics. In your research, have you discovered any steps that the Government has taken to improve the social conditions of native Canadians? In your opinion, what other steps should be taken?

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Discussion or Essay Questions

1. In a free and democratic society in which the rule of law prevails, is one ever justified in taking up arms to defend one's perceived rights?
2. Is a government ever justified in bearing arms against its people?
3. Brian Mulroney, Robert Bourassa, and Jacques Parizeau, among others, described the Mohawk Warriors as "terrorists" and "criminals." The Warriors have described themselves as "freedom fighters." Who is right?
4. Should the Warriors be granted amnesty? Should criminal charges be brought against them? Are there any historical precedents that might be referred to in deciding the issue?
5. Should all Canadian laws apply on all reservations? What should be the sovereign rule of law on reservations? Support your answer with evidence.
6. Should native Canadians be granted some form of self-government? Why or why not? If yes, how could such self-government be structured?
7. While visiting Canada, Desmond Tutu cautioned the Canadian Government to practise the same kind of policy with regard to human rights in Oka as it does internationally. In your opinion, how successful has the Government been in achieving this?
8. Evaluate the effectiveness of the following means of bringing about social change: petitions, lobbying, boycotts, passive resistance. Does the experience of Oka tell us anything about using arms to bring about change? What other group in Canadian history took up arms to achieve its aims? What was the result?
9. In the 10th Federalist Paper, a pamphlet written in the late eighteenth century by the American thinker James Madison, he warned of the inherent dangers of a "tyranny of the majority" arising in a democracy. To what extent do you feel his statement could apply to the situation in Oka? In your opinion, can minority rights be protected and preserved within the context of majority rule? If so, how can it be done and what are the difficulties?
10. George Santayana, an American philosopher, wrote that "a nation that forgets its history is fated to repeat the mistakes of the past." In your opinion, have Canadians learned "the lessons of history" when dealing with the native population? Justify your answer.

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Learn About the Mohawk Nation

Research the history and culture of the Mohawk people and present your findings to the class. In your research, locate native Canadian cultural organizations that will serve as major resources in the study of native peoples. (One such organization is the Assembly of First Nations, 47 Clarence Street, Suite 300, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 9K1.) Identify and examine key historical events and individuals in the history of the Mohawk people, such as the Iroquois Confederacy and Joseph Brant. Explore issues such as the role of women, rituals and customs, and language. Identify individual Mohawks who have distinguished themselves in various fields.

Haunted by history's lively ghosts

BY PETER C. NEWMAN

The war at Oka has as little to do with a golf course as Elijah Harper's obstruction in the Manitoba legislature had to do with Meech Lake.

The issue is dignity and pride, a retroactive attempt to compensate for centuries of neglect by white Canadians who have treated Indians like the unwanted residues of a geographical accident: they may have got here first, but they have ranked last in our national priorities.

Indians are the lively ghosts of Canadian history. They're always there, like the vegetation or the weather, but up to now, no one has taken their complaints or aspirations seriously. To be Indian in this country is to be dispossessed.

Canada's Indian tribes were not conquered like the American Sioux or massacred like the Andean Incas. Yet their lives were—and still are—torn apart by white people who refuse to acknowledge their distinctiveness and their rightful claims to parts of a continent that once was fully their own.

Having spent most of a decade researching and writing the history of the Hudson's Bay Co., which made fortunes for succeeding generations of British investors by trading pots, pans and blankets for valuable furs, I've documented many examples of injustice that took place in those early days. That's ancient history, and it may defy common sense that Canadians in 1990 ought to feel guilty and pay reparations when we had no hand in cheating Indians out of their original land and possessions. But Indians operate on a different calendar; yesterday's insults are only aggravated by the passage of time. They view the present as a prologue for the future; not to act now might snuff out the Indians' flickering hopes of justice ever being done.

One of the practical problems of settling land disputes is that, with some exceptions, only the whites can document the precise history of each claim. Because they had no written language, Indians have had to rely mostly on tribal myths and memories; their elders chanting

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long and detailed reconstructions of events to justify some of their more contentious demands. That's a great irony because the early Indian cultures were much more highly evolved than those of the invading whites. Bands would stage four-day-long miracle plays from memory and family heads could recite prayers by the hour without missing a syllable. Now, it will be for the courts to decide how legally valid memories can be.

A relevant example of how two cultures can misunderstand one another was the fur trade itself. The Hudson's Bay Co. could claim with considerable justification that its presence was a positive influence on the frontier, that Canada was one of the few places on earth where the white man's commercial ambitions had come to terms with an indigenous population without much bloodshed. Company traders took great pride in their unofficial motto: "We never shoot our customers."

The Indians, of course, were their customers and for that matter their free labor force, because they killed the animals, skinned them and brought the pelts into Hudson's Bay Co. posts to trade for goods that made their bush life easier. There are many instances of Company men keeping Indians (and later Inuit)

alive during periods of malnutrition and epidemics. But their motive was the simple realization that starving or sick Indians can't be out on the traplines, turning profit for the Company.

Still, it was a far more humane way to settle a country than in the United States, where the absence of any bureaucratic infrastructure like the Hudson's Bay placed the fur trade in the cruel hands of "the mountain men" and similar renegades. They killed the natives outright and sparked 69 Indian wars. "Sniping redskins to watch 'em spin" was a popular American frontier pastime.

But even in the relatively peaceful landscape of early Canada, a cultural gap pervaded the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Co. regarded the animals—and the natives, for that matter—as merely a factor of production. To Indians, however, hunting was a spiritual experience. They saw themselves as part of an interlocked universe in which animals were treated as their relatives. They meditated with sacred "keepers of the game," who told them where to hunt and later sought the animals' own permission to kill them. When the Hudson's Bay Co. factors demanded that the Indians slaughter virtually every furry beast in the forest, they destroyed the spiritual balance of Indian life.

The worst abuses occurred in the early 1800s when liquor became the currency of the fur trade. The booze itself was a primitive mixture of raw, 132-proof gin, flavored with a few drops of iodine or a squirt of chewing tobacco to make it look more like rum. ("I'll fix up some coffin varnish so strong, you'll be able to shoot an Injun through the heart, and he won't die till he's sobered up," boasted one Prairie whisky merchant.) The traders diluted this rotgut with water and Indians tested the mix by spitting out a swallow on a fire. If it flared up, it was okay; if it sputtered out, they demanded a stronger brew. (That, incidentally, is where the term "firewater" came from.)

The damage caused by the introduction of alcohol to Indian life, then and now, cannot be redeemed. But pretending that the Indian problem will go away or placing ineffective idiots like Tom Siddon in charge of Indian Affairs will only perpetuate the current crisis. (Siddon already proved his incompetence as fisheries minister, but unlike fish, Indians can talk back.)

Apart from the justice of their cause, dealing with the Indians at Oka—or the many other flash points across the country—will prove to be a new kind of experience for white negotiators. When you are dealing with people who have nothing left to lose, none of the existing arbitration rules apply. While it's true that we can't undo historical crimes against Indians, we can't pretend they didn't happen either. A price will have to be paid.

If the federal government was willing to compensate Japanese-Canadians for past injustices, that token compensation package—which could reach \$300 million—was nothing compared with what we owe our 700,000 Indians.

It's time we paid up.

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