



“Liberty or Death” Background Guide

Chair: Cael Lee
Co-Chair: Atharva Ladwa

NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

Dear Delegates,

My name is Cael Lee, and I am a junior at Wissahickon High School. I have participated in Model UN since my freshman year, and I'm looking forward to being your chair and meeting all of you!

At Wissahickon, I am vice-president of our Model UN club and have participated in the Washington Area Model United Nations Conference. At WAMUNC, I was in a general assembly called "Association of Southeast Asian Nations" (ASEAN), where I played the role of the organization's environmental chair. It was some of the most fun I've had, and I made friends I still actively speak to, to this day. Even outside of new relationships, I was able to spend time with some of my favorite people at my school.

Besides MUN, I compete in debate and mock trial (I talk a lot) and serve on my school's student council. Outside of school, I work for an organization called "Make Us Visible," which advocates for Asian American history to be taught and incorporated into K-12 education so Asian Americans can learn more about their own history.

Since the Revolutionary War is one of the most well-known historical events in America, I'm excited to see all of you put your knowledge to use and see your responses to the prompts laid before you. Most of all, Model UN in and of itself is meant to be a lot of fun, so I hope in researching, speaking, and interacting with others you have a great time.

Sincerely,

Cael Lee
USG of Administration
KNIGHTMUN 2026

A NOTE ON HISTORICAL LICENSE

The Onondaga Summit never happened. No such council was ever convened, and the assembled delegates in this committee never sat in the same room together. Everything else is built from the real record. Every delegate in this guide is a real historical figure; every document, proclamation, speech, and organization referenced is real and independently documented. The committee asks a single question that no one at the time was ever forced to answer aloud, in front of everyone whose future it would decide: what do you mean by liberty, and what are you willing to pay for it?

Because this is alternate history built on real people, delegates should research their assigned figure's actual life, writings, speeches, and public positions up through early 1776, then use that research as the foundation for a character who has been placed, fictionally, in a room they never actually entered. The further the committee moves from the historical starting point, the more delegates should rely on what they know of their figure's convictions, temperament, and interests to improvise credibly, rather than on a script this guide could ever provide.

THE PATH TO ONONDAGA

A Decade of Grievance

Following Britain's victory in the French and Indian War in 1763, the British government sought to recover its enormous war debt by imposing new taxes and regulations on the American colonies. The Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, and the Tea Act were each met with growing opposition from colonists who argued that Parliament had no right to tax them without representation. Organized boycotts, public demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience, most famously the Boston Tea Party of December 1773, deepened tensions between the colonies and the Crown. Britain responded with the Intolerable Acts, which convinced many colonists that their traditional rights as British subjects were being stripped away.

Lexington, Concord, and the Line of Blood

The outbreak of fighting at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, marked the beginning of open warfare. The Second Continental Congress established the Continental Army under George Washington while still pursuing diplomatic efforts to avoid a complete break with Britain, sending the Olive Branch Petition to King George III in the hope of reconciliation. The King refused even to receive it, and on August 23, 1775, declared the colonies to be in open rebellion. That same autumn, Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* began circulating through the colonies, arguing bluntly for complete independence and reshaping how ordinary colonists spoke about their own loyalty.

On November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation offering freedom to any person enslaved by a rebel who would take up arms for the Crown. Within weeks, hundreds of enslaved men and women had fled to his lines. It was the first mass emancipation offer of the war, made not by the Congress that spoke of liberty, but by the King's own governor.

The Council Fire at Onondaga

Long before the Revolution, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, known to the British as the Six Nations, had maintained the Covenant Chain: a centuries-old diplomatic relationship with European powers, renewed and polished at regular councils so that it would not rust. Onondaga, seat of the Confederacy's central council fire, had hosted these negotiations for generations. The Six Nations had no formal stake in a quarrel between the King and his colonial subjects, but by the autumn of 1775 that quarrel was no longer staying within its own borders.

Patriot militia and Loyalist irregulars, each seeking to secure the frontier before the other could, had begun skirmishing along the edges of the Mohawk Valley. Raids meant for one another burned Haudenosaunee crops and drove Haudenosaunee families from their homes. The Grand Council at Onondaga, invoking the Confederacy's ancient authority to summon parties to the fire and guarantee their safe passage while there, issued an unprecedented demand: representatives of the Continental Congress, the Crown, the Loyalist community, and other interested parties would come to Onondaga and account for themselves, or they would fight their war without Haudenosaunee blood, land, or complicity.

Dunmore's Proclamation (November 7, 1775) offered freedom to enslaved people owned by rebel Patriots who escaped to British lines and bore arms for the Crown. Historians estimate that roughly 800 to 2,000 people reached Dunmore's forces within weeks, forming the core of what became known as the Ethiopian Regiment. It was met with fury across the southern colonies and cited by Congress as evidence of British tyranny, even as it exposed how few Patriot leaders were willing to make the same offer themselves.

The Covenant Chain was a real, longstanding diplomatic framework linking the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to the British Crown and, earlier, the Dutch. It was renewed through periodic councils at which grievances were raised and gifts exchanged, understood by both sides as necessary maintenance of a living relationship rather than a one-time treaty. Sir William Johnson, the real Crown official who had managed this relationship for decades, died in 1774; his successors inherited a Confederacy whose patience for outside war was already wearing thin.

THE COUNCIL AT ONONDAGA

The Six Nations Grand Council

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy convenes the summit and controls its terms. By late 1775, the Confederacy's famous unity was already under real strain: some member nations leaned toward the Crown, which had at least nominally limited colonial expansion onto Native land, while others saw greater long-term advantage in the colonists. The Grand Council's central task is not to pick a winner in someone else's war, but to extract, from everyone at the fire, honest answers about land and consequence.

The Continental Congress

The Congress delegation arrives divided against itself before it ever reaches Onondaga: some members still hope reconciliation with Britain is possible, while others are already certain independence is the only remaining path. All of them need the frontier quiet, need Haudenosaunee neutrality or support, and are acutely aware that the Crown has already made an emancipation offer of its own.

The Crown and Loyalist Interest

Britain's representatives at Onondaga are not a single voice. Crown officials answer to London and to military necessity; Loyalists answer to their own communities and their own vision of what continued union with Britain could still look like. All of them share an interest in keeping the Confederacy, and its warriors, out of Patriot hands.

The Formerly Enslaved

No one at Onondaga can discuss liberty honestly while ignoring the people to whom neither side has yet offered it consistently. This delegation is not a debating bloc so much as a standing challenge to everyone else's rhetoric.

Individuals Beyond the Thirteen Colonies

Not every party at Onondaga has a stake in who governs the colonies. Some are watching to see what the colonies are worth as an investment, or whether this argument about liberty even needs an ending.

CHARACTERS

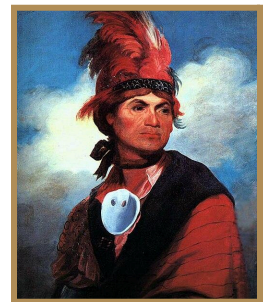
I. **Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea)**

Educated at Moor's Charity School in Connecticut and fluent in English, Brant was emerging as one of the sharpest political minds in the Confederacy and a committed advocate for a formal alliance with the Crown, which he saw as the only power capable of guaranteeing Haudenosaunee land against colonial expansion. In history, he departed for London within weeks of this period; delegates researching him should study his actual writings and later wartime record closely.



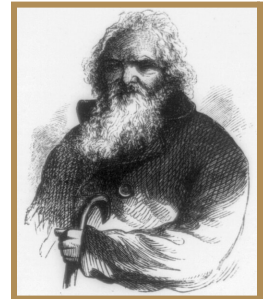
II. **Molly Brant (Konwatsi'tsiaienni)**

Joseph Brant's elder sister and the widow of Sir William Johnson, the Crown's late Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Molly Brant held political authority in Mohawk society independent of any man's title, and her counsel carried significant weight in the Grand Council. She was a firm and outspoken supporter of the Crown.



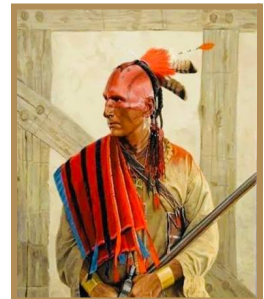
III. **Skenandoa**

An elder Oneida leader whose real sympathies, encouraged by the missionary Samuel Kirkland, ran toward the Patriots, Skenandoa represents the beginning of a fracture inside the Confederacy: the Oneida and Tuscarora would, in real history, ultimately break from the other four nations to support the colonies.



IV. **Sayenqueraghta (Old Smoke)**

One of the most respected war leaders among the Seneca, the westernmost and most populous of the Six Nations, Sayenqueraghta favored the Crown and viewed the colonial land hunger pressing on Seneca territory as the far greater long-term threat.



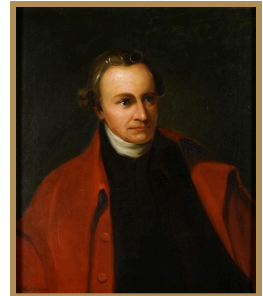
V. **Cornplanter**

A younger Seneca leader who would rise to prominence later in the war, Cornplanter gives the Council a voice still weighing its position rather than one already committed. Well suited to a delegate seeking a role with room to define their own arc.



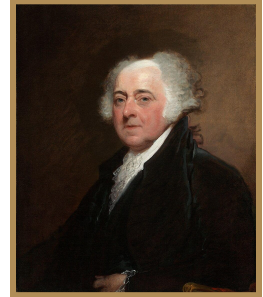
VI. **Patrick Henry**

Famous for declaring, in a speech to the Virginia Convention in March 1775, "give me liberty, or give me death," Henry arrives as the delegation's most committed voice for independence and its most natural spokesman for the summit's central question, though delegates should research how his actual convictions about liberty coexisted, uneasily, with his ownership of enslaved people.



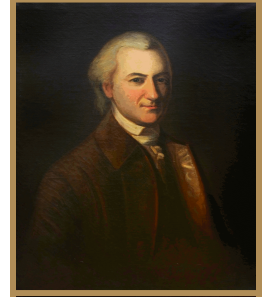
VII. **John Adams**

A tireless advocate for independence within Congress and a sharp legal mind, Adams has little patience for delegates still clinging to reconciliation, and even less for a summit he privately regards as a distraction from the war Congress actually needs to fight.



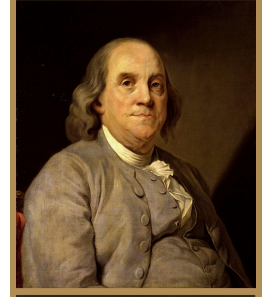
VIII. **John Dickinson**

The author of the Olive Branch Petition, Dickinson still believes, even after its rejection, that some negotiated settlement within the British Empire remains possible, and resists being pushed toward independence faster than he believes the colonies are ready for.



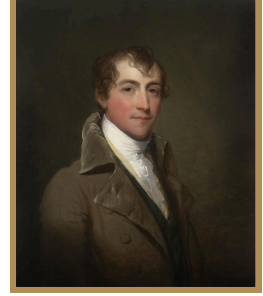
IX. **Benjamin Franklin**

Franklin brings decades of personal diplomatic experience with the Six Nations, dating back to his role organizing the Albany Congress of 1754. Elder, pragmatic, and difficult to read, he is as likely to be brokering a private arrangement as speaking in open session.



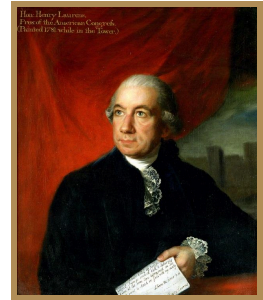
X. **Philip Schuyler**

Appointed by Congress to head the Northern Department and its Indian affairs commission, Schuyler had direct experience negotiating with the Six Nations at councils in Albany earlier in 1775, and represents Congress's actual military and diplomatic stake in keeping the Confederacy neutral or friendly.



XI. Henry Laurens

A wealthy Charleston merchant and slaveholder who would later serve as President of Congress, Laurens gives the delegation a voice deeply resistant to matching Dunmore's emancipation offer, and a useful role for a delegate willing to argue the uncomfortable position plainly.



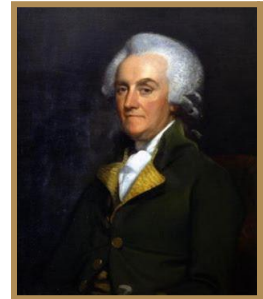
XII. Guy Johnson

Nephew and son-in-law of the late Sir William Johnson, Guy Johnson inherited responsibility for Crown relations with the Six Nations and fled with many Mohawk allies to Canada in 1775 rather than accept Patriot authority. He has the clearest institutional claim of anyone in the room to speak for Britain's relationship with the Confederacy.



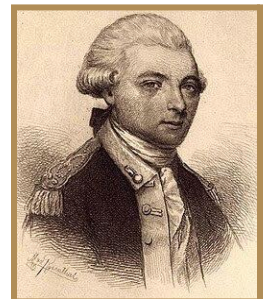
XIII. William Franklin

Benjamin Franklin's own son and a committed Loyalist, William's painful estrangement from his father over the Revolution gives this delegation a built-in personal fault line that delegates researching both Franklins should use directly.



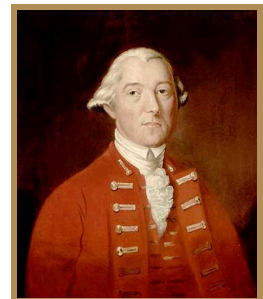
XIV. Joseph Galloway

The author of a 1774 Plan of Union that would have created an American legislature under the Crown with a veto over Parliamentary acts affecting the colonies, a proposal that lost in the First Continental Congress by a single vote. Galloway arrives with a genuine, specific alternative to independence, not just an objection to it.



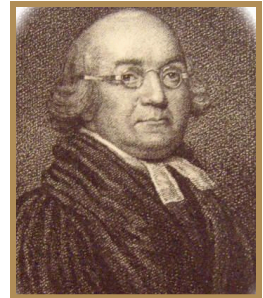
XV. Guy Carleton

Responsible for the defense of Britain's northern frontier and accustomed to working directly with Native allies, Carleton offers a military and administrative perspective distinct from the political Loyalists in the delegation.



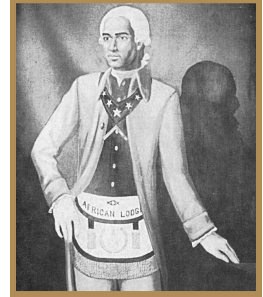
XVI. **Jonathan Boucher**

An Anglican minister known for sermons defending obedience to lawful authority as a moral and religious duty, Boucher gives the Loyalist a voice grounded in conscience rather than calculation.



XVII. **Prince Hall**

A free Black Bostonian who would go on to found African American Freemasonry and to petition the Massachusetts legislature against slavery, Hall presses Congress on whether it will offer emancipation for military service before Britain's offer becomes the only one on the table.



XVIII. **Thomas Peters**

Peters, who escaped slavery in North Carolina and joined British forces before rising to prominence as a Black loyalist leader later in the war, sits in the room as living proof that the Crown, not Congress, made the first credible offer of freedom.



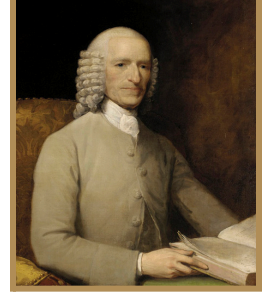
XIX. **Julien Achard de Bonvouloir**

A French agent secretly dispatched to assess the American cause and, weeks after this period, to open contact with Congress's Committee of Secret Correspondence, Bonvouloir has no authority to promise anything, and every reason to listen carefully to what independence would actually cost France to support.



XX. **Israel Pemberton Jr.**

A prominent Philadelphia Quaker who would later be exiled by Congress on suspicion of disloyalty for his refusal to support the war, Pemberton speaks for colonists who want no part of anyone's war and see violence itself, not just the wrong side of it, as the failure.



THE QUESTION BEFORE THE COUNCIL

Whose Liberty?

Lord Dunmore's Proclamation is only weeks old when the Council convenes, and its consequences are already visible: enslaved people are leaving Patriot plantations for British lines, and Congress has offered nothing in return beyond condemnation. The Grand Council does not require any delegate to resolve slavery itself. It requires them to say, plainly, whether liberty as they define it extends to the people currently being denied it, and if so, at what price they are willing to pay to extend it.

In 1779, later in the real war, John Laurens (son of delegate Henry Laurens) would propose arming enslaved men in exchange for their freedom, a plan his own father and the South Carolina legislature rejected.

That future tension already exists, in embryo, inside the Laurens family in 1775, and inside this committee.

Whose Land?

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 forbade colonial settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains, a line the Crown claimed protected Native land and one that land-hungry colonial elites, including prominent Patriots, had been quietly working to erase for over a decade. The Grand Council wants to know whether a Congress fighting in the name of liberty will commit, in terms the Confederacy can hold them to, to any limit at all on colonial expansion, or whether liberty for the colonies simply means the freedom to take what the Proclamation Line currently denies them.

Colonial land speculation companies, including the Ohio Company and the Vandalia scheme, had prominent Patriot leaders personally invested in opening the trans-Appalachian west to settlement. The Six Nations were not a uniform bloc on this question either: the Oneida and Tuscarora would, in real history, ultimately side with the Patriots, while the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga leaned toward the Crown, in significant part over exactly this issue.

What Government?

King George III did not merely ignore the Olive Branch Petition; he refused to receive it and declared the colonies in open rebellion. For delegates like Dickinson, that door is closing but may not be fully shut. For delegates like Henry and Adams, it already is. Galloway arrives with a real, specific alternative on the table, an American legislature inside the Empire, not outside it, that lost by one vote in 1774 and has never been formally revisited. The Council wants to know what kind of government, if any, actually deserves the loyalty either side is asking for.

Questions to Consider

On Whose Liberty

- I. What does liberty require of the person claiming it, when others remain unfree?
- II. Is a partial or conditional offer of freedom better than none, or is it its own kind of injustice?
- III. Should military service be the price of freedom, or should freedom be owed regardless of service? Who gets to set that price?
- IV. Does Congress risk more by matching Dunmore's offer, or by refusing to? What, if anything, do the delegates at this summit owe to people who have no delegation of their own?

On Whose Land

- I. Can a colonial government that intends to expand west of the Proclamation Line ever be a credible guarantor of Haudenosaunee land?
- II. What would a credible guarantee look like?
- III. Is Confederacy neutrality possible, or does the war's spread onto Haudenosaunee territory make neutrality a fiction?
- IV. Should the Six Nations negotiate as one Confederacy, or does the emerging split between member nations mean each should be free to choose separately?
- V. What obligations, if any, follow a promise made under wartime pressure, once the war is over?

On What Government

- I. Is reconciliation with the Crown still meaningfully possible after the rejection of the Olive Branch Petition, or has that door already closed?
- II. Does Galloway's Plan of Union, or something like it, offer a real middle path, or is it simply independence delayed?
- III. What makes a government worth risking one's life for, as opposed to merely preferring it?
- IV. If the colonies do declare independence, what do they owe the people, colonies, and nations who never got a vote in that decision?

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