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MY VIEW

Land acquisition means a great deal to Senecas

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The recent criticism in this paper of the Seneca Nation's land purchases in Buffalo and Niagara Falls misses an important point about Seneca history - that we were once the original owners of the land. Reacquiring these lands has profound meaning to me as a Seneca.

From day one in our history with the European settlers, we have fought efforts to take our lands and eliminate us as a distinct people. In 1794, we tried to end the hostility by entering into a peace treaty with the United States. Three years later, we gave up almost all of our land in another effort to secure the peace.

But it didn't happen. Our remaining lands fell under the eagle eye of the land speculators and state officials. In 1838, our chiefs were defrauded into relinquishing all of our remaining territory in exchange for new lands in Kansas.

The state began to tax our lands before we had even moved away.

In 1842, our Allegany and Cattaraugus territories were secured and we gained an important promise that our lands would never again be subject to state taxation. In 1857, the Tonawanda Seneca Territory was secured. The cost was that we were forced from our Buffalo Creek Territory and our lands along the Genesee River, our birthplace.

The threats have never ended. Over the years, we have lost leases, rights of way and jurisdiction over our lands. Only 40 years ago, the United States took 10,000 acres of our Allegany Territory for the Kinzua Reservoir, a shameful violation of the 1794 treaty.

History changed when the Salamanca leases were renewed in 1990. For the first time, the Seneca Nation began to receive fair rental value for our leased lands. Even though we had lost \$350 million in rent, we settled with the state and the United States for \$60 million so we could move on. The Seneca Settlement Act ratified the new leases and provided the nation with the unique right to reacquire lands anywhere in our aboriginal territory in the state. Why did Congress do such a thing? In my view, to atone for past wrongs.

This act never would have happened but for the leadership of former Rep. Amo Houghton. Motivated by an innate sense of justice, he was able to bring together the disputing parties and move the entire U.S. government to do the right thing. Which is why comments from him and former Rep. John LaFalce critical of the nation's recent land purchases carry such sting.

As a sovereign, the Seneca Nation has the inherent right to chart its own course. Who would have guessed that the promise in 1842 that the state would never tax us would have an impact today, when the state is again trying to tax the commerce in our territories?

And who would have guessed in 1990 that the Seneca Settlement Act would be used to reacquire lands in Niagara Falls and Buffalo so that the Seneca people could have the land to allow us to remedy the aftereffects of colonialism?

Dec. 11 was a great day for the Seneca Nation and the United States, when nation officials and the mayor and mayor-elect of Buffalo assembled at our Buffalo Creek Territory. Over the din of protestors worried more about preserving their colonial legacy of grain silos than real people with real needs long on the short end of justice, I was filled with emotion when I heard the recitation of our Ganonyo - our thanksgiving address.

For maybe the first time in 163 years, our language was being spoken at Buffalo Creek. To me, it meant we were back.