Colonel George Morgan at Fort Pitt

By Walter R. Fee

One of the most troublesome problems which confronted the American Continental Congress in the early days of the Revolutionary War was the determination of a proper policy to pursue with respect to the Indian tribes along the frontier. In mid-summer 1775, the Continental Congress established three departments for Indian affairs. Each department was to be under the direction of an agent and three or more Commissioners selected by Congress. The agent was the most prominent official in each department for upon him devolved the responsibility of meeting the Indians on every possible occasion and under every imaginable condition in order to insure peace between them and the frontier settlers.

On April 10, 1776, nine months after the establishment of the Indian departments, Congress found it necessary to elect a new agent for the Middle Department with its center at Pittsburgh. George Morgan, a member of a wealthy Philadelphia family, a graduate of Princeton College, and for several years an Indian trader in the Illinois country, was chosen for the position. He was instructed by the Continental Congress to establish early contacts with the western Indians and to convince them of the friendship and good will of the American people. Especially was he to urge upon them the advantages of peace.

The new agent, immediately after his arrival in Pittsburgh on April 29, 1776, began to make preparations for an Indian treaty. He selected messengers and interpreters, dispatched runners to the Indian villages and entered wholeheartedly into the work of familiarizing himself with the conditions existing in the Indian country. Morgan soon learned that many of the tribes were restless and discontented. He feared that the Six Nations under British influence might be incited to attack Fort Pitt. In order to counteract British influence, Morgan wrote, on May 31, to the British governor at Detroit. He informed his Excellency that no American attack would be made against Detroit unless the Indians were incited by the British to ravage the colonial frontiers. He assured the British commander that the Americans were easily able to defend

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themselves from an Indian attack, a situation by no means as certain as Morgan would have his opponent believe.

Because of British influence over many of the western tribes, Morgan decided that the maintenance of Indian neutrality demanded more energetic action. Plans for the Indian treaty were progressing too slowly. He decided, therefore, to undertake a journey to the Shawnee and Delaware villages to convince them of American friendship and to urge upon them the importance of meeting him at a treaty council at Fort Pitt. Morgan set out on this difficult mission in the early part of June, 1776. He passed through the Delaware and Moravian villages on the upper Muskingum River, and toward the end of June arrived at the Shawnee villages along the Scioto River. He spoke to the chiefs and warriors and urged them to keep peace with the white people. He invited them to the treaty council which he hoped to convene at Fort Pitt in the near future. The Shawnee gave no answer but referred him to the Wyandots, who, they said, were the Indians of greatest influence. When Morgan was ready to return to Fort Pitt, he sent a message to the Wyandots who were then living along the south-western edge of Lake Erie. They were to be given a special invitation to the Indian Council.

By the end of July, Morgan had made considerable progress in his preparations for the proposed treaty. He had bought most of the necessary provisions before he began his expeditious trip into the Indian country. In addition, he had made arrangements for the purchase of presents, an ample supply of which was a necessary prerequisite to the success of any Indian meeting. With the aid of several messengers and frequent messages, he had become very familiar with the domestic conditions of the many tribes west and north of Fort Pitt. As a result of his own efforts in the Delaware and Shawnee towns, those tribes had been disposed toward the maintenance of friendship with the American people. With all this activity however, Morgan was unable to bring the Indians to Fort Pitt by July 20, the day which Congress had set for the treaty Council. It was probably near the close of October when the Chiefs and warriors of the Six Nations, Delawares, Munsies, Mohicans and Shawnee met the white men at Fort Pitt and gave, according to Morgan's report, "the strongest assurances of their Resolutions to preserve inviolate the
Peace and Neutrality they have engaged in with the United States.”

The completion of an Indian treaty, however, in spite of the time and enormous expense entailed, did not necessarily mean peace and security for the frontier. In the early months of 1777 Morgan was brought face to face with the prospect of a serious Indian War. The Iroquois Indians, located on the upper Allegheny River and in western New York, were under the direct influence of the British commandant at Niagara, and many acts committed by them against the frontier were apparently directed from that source. Morgan had become aware of the enmity of these Indians by a message which they had left beside the body of one of their victims. In this message, so effectively delivered, the Iroquois chiefs accused the white people of stealing their lands and warned them that failure to leave their dishonestly acquired homes immediately would cause disaster. In an effort to improve the situation Morgan sent a message to the dissatisfied Iroquois in which he chided them for their foolishness in leaving their message beside a dead man when they might have brought it directly to him. The latter method, according to Morgan’s argument, would have made possible a settlement of the troublesome problem between the Indians and white people, and justice would have been done to both parties. Morgan concluded his mild reproof by indicting the British with the responsibility for the past troubles.

Morgan struggled persistently against the forces which were leading to an Indian war. He was strongly impressed with the idea that peace on the frontier was the essential condition. Especially was this true, in his opinion, as long as war continued in the East. He felt that he could render no greater service to his struggling country than to keep it free from Indian attack.

In his work for frontier peace, Morgan had the invaluable aid of the Delaware Indians. The close bond of friendship which held this tribe to Morgan’s interests was created and continually strengthened by his fair and considerate dealings with them. They had always found him to be a man of truth. They had great faith in his friendship and in his ability to protect them on all occasions. In 1776, as a mark of their affection and respect, they had made him a chief of their people. He was called Tamenend, in honor
of their greatest warrior, and in recognition of his admirable qualities as the Indians’ friend.

Morgan was greatly handicapped, in the maintenance of Indian neutrality, by the activity of the Pluggy’s Town Mingoes. These Indians were mostly Senecas, but had slightly increased their number by intermarriage with the Wyandots, Delawares and Shawnee. At most however, they did not include over 60 families with an estimated fighting force of 80 warriors. Their town was located on the upper Scioto River near the present city of Delaware, Ohio. These Mingoes, under their leader, Pluggy, were a constant source of irritation to the entire line of frontier settlements in Virginia and Pennsylvania. Throughout 1776 Morgan had sent messengers to them in the hope of converting them to peaceful activity. They were not amenable, however, to messages of good-will, presents or even threats of attack. Morgan, therefore, on March 9, 1777, suggested a plan of action which he felt would solve the problem satisfactorily. He wrote to the agent for Indian Affairs in the Northern Department and urged that the Iroquois Confederacy be induced to send a deputation to remove the Mingoes from the Scioto valley. For if this “Embassy could be set on foot in earnest,” he wrote, “and thereby the quiet of this Country be restored, no expense or trouble ought to be too great to attain so desirable a Blessing at this critical time, . . . . . . if the Deputies should be sent, and are directed to call on me, I will afford them every assistance; and either accompany them to the Mingo Towns or send some proper persons with them.”

While Morgan was busily engaged in planning for the peaceful settlement of the Mingo problem, a project, in direct opposition to his peace at any price policy, was started by Congress and carried forward by Virginia. On February 27, 1777, Congress decided to ask the Governor and Council of Virginia to consider the advisability of sending an expedition against the Mingoes of Pluggy’s Town. On March 12, three days after Morgan’s letter to the agent of the Northern Department, the Council of Virginia decided in favor of the expedition.

Governor Patrick Henry of Virginia informed Colonel Morgan (Morgan had been made a Colonel in the Continental Army on Jan. 8, 1777) of the proposed expedition and requested him to gain the consent of the peaceful Dela-
wares and Shawnees, since the expedition would be compelled to pass through their territory. In view of the fact that the proposed plan was in direct opposition to his constant peace policy, it was natural that Morgan should be opposed to it. Furthermore, as was indicated above, he was hoping to accomplish the desired result with the aid of the Northern Department. In addition, Morgan objected to the expedition because he believed its inevitable consequence would be a general Indian war. He explained that the critical condition of affairs in the East made it imperative that peace be maintained on the western frontier. This, he explained, should be made possible even by the “mortifying means of liberal Donations” to the troublesome Indians.

Col. Morgan was thus able to give good reasons for his opposition, at that time, to a policy of force. He readily admitted the desirability of teaching the harassing Mingoes a lesson which they would long remember. He suggested that an expedition against them might very satisfactorily be undertaken when the nation was no longer at war with Great Britain. But in 1777, peace on the western frontier was, in his opinion, so necessary that it should be maintained at any cost. His views produced the desired effect, and Congress asked Virginia to suspend the proposed expedition.

Early in 1778 the situation on the Indian frontier again became alarming. This condition was in part brought about by the increased activity of Governor Hamilton at Detroit. In January of this year the British Governor sent proclamations to the American frontiersmen in which he promised them protection from Indian brutality, with safety and freedom in happier surroundings, if they would come to a British post. These messages were given to the British Indian allies who left them, as a promise of life and safety to others, beside the dead body of a white victim. A British agent brought some of these documents of disaffection to the Delawares, and asked them to aid in their distribution. Morgan’s faithful allies refused to stray from the path which led to American friendship, but instead, informed him of this effective British ruse for Indian and white support.

Indian relations were further complicated by the inexcusable murder of the Shawnee chief, Cornstalk, in the
autumn of 1777. This brutal affair caused Morgan grave concern. He was especially eager to maintain peaceful relations with the Shawnee Indians of the Scioto Valley.

Under these circumstances Col. Morgan believed to be eminently desirable to make another treaty with the Indian tribes. On March 20, 1778, he wrote to Captain White Eyes, Chief of the Delawares. Morgan expressed the hope that he and his warriors would come and renew their ancient friendship. He also wrote to the Shawnee and urged them to come so the white people might give "full satisfaction" for the murder of the Shawnee Chief.

During the course of these preparations Morgan found it necessary to go to Philadelphia. In the preceding year, on November 20, 1777, he had been appointed to the office of Deputy Commissary General of Purchases for the western department. In this position he was responsible for purchasing and placing in available form all supplies necessary for the troops in the garrisons of the western department. He encountered considerable difficulty in every part of this work. It was impossible to get sufficient food supplies from the western farmers and the transportation of provisions over the mountains presented many difficulties. In addition he was very frequently embarrassed by the lack of Congressional financial support. Because of these additional duties and the difficulties involved in their performance, Morgan left Fort Pitt in the midst of his preparations for an Indian Council. He did not intend to be gone but a short time. It was January 2, 1779, however, when he returned. During this eight months absence the famous Indian treaty of September, 1778 was made by the Commissioners of the Middle Department and General McIntosh, commander of the Western Department with the leading chiefs of the Delaware nation. The treaty provided for a military alliance between the United States and the Delaware nation. The alliance was to become effective at once and the troops of the United States would receive aid from their Delaware allies against the British.

When one remembers that Col. Morgan had consistently and unequivocally insisted upon Indian neutrality, the full import of the treaty provisions will be understood. He returned to Fort Pitt on January 2, 1779, but remained slightly longer than one month. During this brief period he started upon a course of action, in opposition to the
events of the preceding fall, which led to his resignation as Indian Agent for the Middle Department.

Col. Morgan immediately began to make preparations for a reversal of the policy inaugurated by the treaty. Three days after his arrival at Fort Pitt he sent a message to the Delawares in which he explained to them that they were misled by a false interpreter at the treaty council. At the close of his message he asked them “to protest against this false interpretation with a Spirit becoming the Wise Delaware Nation”. He further asked them to select a few of their “sober wise men” to accompany him to Philadelphia in order that they might come to a closer understanding with the great Council of the United States.

The Delawares accepted his proposal. The chiefs, representing their nation, arrived at Morgan's home at Princeton about the first of May, 1779. Toward the end of the month they presented their plea for neutrality to the Congress of the United States. Morgan's influence is here clearly discernible. The chiefs referred to the annual treaties made with their nation since 1775, all of which had provided for their strict neutrality in the war. But now by the treaty of 1778, General McIntosh and the Commissioners had “induced some of their Chiefs,” ran the speech “to sign certain writings, which to them were perfectly unintelligible and which they have since found were falsely interpreted to them.” On May 26, Congress replied to the Delaware message. That body insisted that so long as many Indians were fighting against the United States, it was necessary that they have the active aid of those Indians who professed to be friends.

Morgan was discouraged by the failure of the Delawares visit. He had brought the chiefs to Congress to protest against the policy of active alliance included in the treaty of 1778. The result was the practical agreement of that body with General McIntosh and the Commissioners who had arranged the treaty. Their view was upheld in preference to the policy of peace and neutrality which he had consistently advocated. He accepted the Congressional declaration to the Indians as an official expression of their lack of confidence in his policy.

On May 28 two days after the Congressional reply to the Delawares, he wrote his letter of resignation. It was received by the Continental Congress on May 31, and from
that date Col. Morgan ceased to have any active influence in the Department of Indian Affairs.

In an evaluation of Morgan's services as Indian agent, it appears that it was not so much the office which he filled, as the way in which he filled it, that made his position and his services of consequence. At all times he considered his work as one part of the whole scheme of defense against Great Britain and her Indian allies. He was ever an avowed exponent of peace and neutrality for the Indian tribes, because, only amidst such conditions, could new frontier settlements be established or old ones safely maintained. He realized that the outcome of the war with Great Britain would not be determined altogether by army maneuvers in the East. His constant aim was to maintain a peaceful frontier in order that eastern military activities might be conducted without undue concern for the situation in the West. His successful peace policy with the influential Delawares is perhaps his most valuable accomplishment in this respect.

As Deputy Commissary General of Purchases, he was constantly troubled by the lack of appropriate Congressional support. Furthermore, he was prevented from supplying sufficient provisions for the frontier troops by his dependence upon others, who were not in a position to give him aid. He was only laboring, however, under the disorganized conditions so common during the Revolutionary period.

As an Indian agent, firmly convinced of the desirability of peace with the Indians at any cost, and as Deputy Commissary General of Purchases, supplying provisions amidst troublesome conditions, Colonel Morgan appears as a patriotic individualist, as a prominent leader for the advancement of American interests on the frontier and in the Indian country.