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MERCED

POCAHONTAS

and the

POWHATAN DILEMMA

"Townsend . . . writes
with a sharp sword
and a crackling whip."

—John Leonard,
Harper's Magazine

CAMILLA TOWNSEND



Their king had a great dilemma to consider. What was he to do about Jamestown? He obviously could not ignore it. He was not at all convinced that the English were there only in transit as Smith had claimed: they either intended to stay indefinitely or were planning on returning frequently. Should he destroy the settlement, rather than wait for it to upset the balance of power in the region and his own pre-eminence? He almost certainly already recognized that he could not: even if he could manage to defeat the current colonists by spending all his political capital and mustering every single warrior in all the tributary tribes, there would be an extraordinary number of deaths, and more English would probably come. His people's past experience with Europeans indicated as much, and Newport's reappearance proved the point. Recently, historians have been so eager to grant the Indian culture the respect it so richly deserves and to emphasize Powhatan's strength that they have often chosen to overlook certain facts that the paramount chief did not have the luxury of ignoring. He knew English technology exceeded his own and structured his strategies accordingly.

Powhatan was far from powerless. The white men were dependent on the Indians for sustenance in this early period. Indeed, they seemed so inept at providing for themselves that it must sometimes have seemed almost impossible for Powhatan to believe that they could ever really dominate him, technology notwithstanding. Very likely he sur-

mised that they had come with the intention of extracting goods (much-needed food, in their case) and conceivably even lands from him. That was certainly why he himself conquered other tribes. Smith's story about their coming to avenge a fallen comrade on the other side of the mountains was hard to credit; Powhatan certainly knew there was no great salt water in his immediate backyard. He was aware, through the stories of Don Luis and Smith's own admission, that these foreigners were composed of warring tribes—of Spanish and English. That fact might be useful to him. Certainly his most dangerous foe up to this point had been the Iroquoians to the north and west. Perhaps the divided strangers could be made useful in his own battles.

Yet Powhatan was far from blind to the new peril; he was not locked within his traditional frame of reference. He knew he was facing a dangerously powerful entity. The weapons of the English were more lethal than his own, their metal coats fantastically protective; their boats could circle the oceans, bringing ever more men. Elsewhere, where the Indian population was larger and European determination to settle weaker, the indigenous held the upper hand longer.³⁰ But Powhatan was too intelligent, and by now had too much evidence, to imagine that he still had a multitude of options or that he was easily the stronger of the two parties. He would have to outmaneuver the newcomers in the best way he could.

He had begun well by making a friend of John Smith and through him, hopefully, of Captain Newport, whom Smith had described to him. The key to maintaining his power was the tribute he received from subject peoples, which he used to reward successful warriors and loyal werowances. If he could keep the coat-wearers isolated and contained, and then through trade with them gain a monopoly of access to the valuable weapons and metal cutting tools they brought, he could actually hope to turn these events to political profit. He would become more powerful relative to other Indian tribes and, as an even stronger leader, would be better able to render the newcomers vulnerable to his will. It was certainly worth making occasional gifts of

corn to maintain good relations. (He ordered that some corn be sent to the fort almost immediately. It was delivered.) He would have to make sure that the strangers were prevented from trading with western tribes, or other groups not under his political umbrella. (He began to put pressure on various groups and probably ordered the annihilation of the Chesapeakes just about then.)³¹

Well-intentioned anthropologists have sometimes tended to ignore the political calculations made by this savvy prince, preferring to dwell on his cultural tendencies. They argue that Powhatan made decisions that were culturally appropriate “even in the face of a comparatively novel situation.” In short, his traditional outlook blinded him to his peril and his opportunity. In looking with favor on trade and exchange, he is understood to have been trying to put the arrogant English in his debt, following the cultural norm of giving gifts to successful young warriors returning from a battle. He theoretically made decisions based not on political calculations but on what high-level priests told him the gods wanted. His culture allegedly dictated that he seek goods that were of ceremonial or spiritual value, like copper jewelry and glass beads; guns and metal supposedly trailed in second place. This kind of argument, however, seems a form of willful blindness based on a belief in the Indians’ supposedly immutable way of being.³²

The facts belie the belief. According to the original chroniclers, for example, Powhatan and his werowances expressed interest in guns and metal everywhere the English went, and only secondarily in pretty trinkets. In fact, a weapons demonstration was often the first thing they asked for. It is safe to presume the requests arose not from innocent wonder but from a desire for information. The captive Smith was asked to shoot something out of his pistol’s range, so he, recognizing that they were testing its limits, claimed the piece was broken.

Up and down the eastern seaboard Native Americans used European goods ceremonially only at initial contact. Almost immediately they recognized what they really wanted: besides the ever-useful textiles, they wanted *metal*—hatchets, iron arrowheads, bodkins, swords,

picks, knives, and kettles. They would also, of course, take guns whenever they could get them from the unwilling settlers. We know Pocahontas’s people were no different. Less than a year later the women whom the girl accompanied to the fields wanted more European metal farming tools. Who, bending over the ground, trying to cut through a tough root, would not have wanted them? The Indians’ love of their traditional culture in no way prevented them from seeing what might improve their lives and enable them to do what they had always done even better.³³

One element is beyond debate: at no point did Powhatan, Pocahontas, or any of their people look on the strangers with wide-mouthed awe or consider them gods. Hernando Cortés never claimed that the Aztecs thought he was a god—as they almost certainly did not—yet the flattering notion became wildly popular in the after-the-fact accounts that appeared later in the century, several of which were widely available in England. The English waffled on the point in their early descriptions of Virginia: they tended to claim it only regarding tribes with whom they had not actually had much contact, or whom they had not seen in many years, or about whom they had only heard from other explorers. In fact, the farther removed the English were from the events they described, the more likely they were to report that the Indians had been virtually blown away in wonderment. John Smith, for example, who had only one brief encounter with the Susquehannocks, said several years later in 1612 that they had “adored” him and asked him and his men to accompany them on a raid against their enemies; in 1624 he added that they had wanted to “adore them as gods.” Smith’s friends, writing later about his captivity among the Powhatans, said he had convinced them he was a demigod, though in 1608 he himself had asserted no such thing.³⁴