“The number of Indians victualled at Niagara is prodigious, and if not by some means reduced, must terminate very disagreeably.” So wrote General Frederick Haldimand, governor of the British Province of Quebec, in September 1780. “No useless Mouth, which can possibly be sent away” could be allowed to “remain for the Winter,” he concluded, before asking for “a Minute Return of every Person upon the Ground, exclusive of the Troops, for whom Provision is drawn.”

A year before Haldimand wrote this letter, during the summer of 1779 (and in the middle of the Revolutionary War), the rebel American army mounted a devastating victual-warfare campaign, known today as the Sullivan Campaign, against Britain’s Iroquois allies. By autumn of that year, Iroquois refugees had moved from burned villages into British forts, where they expected their military partners to feed them. Haldimand’s alarm deviated from George Croghan’s assessment of Native appetites less than a decade previously. Haldimand, like some of his predecessors writing during the 1750s and 1760s, imagined noncontributing, ravenous Indian civilians whose useless hunger took food out of the mouths of indispensable British soldiers.

What is striking about Haldimand’s complaints is how ineffective they ultimately were. Rather than losing power, Iroquois Indians gained it in the wake of the Sullivan expedition, and they did so partly by promoting their own interpretation of Native hunger. Shifting British perceptions of Indian hungri-
ness changed food diplomacy and reworked the related military idea of the useless mouth. Iroquois guidance on British hunger-prevention efforts consequently increased British food aid to Indians. Here, too, however, were rumblings of a nascent American hunger policy, born out of the ashes of the 1779 campaign. Under future president George Washington, that policy aimed to cause Native hunger for the explicit purpose of legitimizing food-aid distributions to conquered enemies.

Diplomacy itself—with all its fluid, improvisational qualities—had started to collapse in the two decades before the start of the war. Signs appeared in fur scarcities, land battles, divisions among officials in North America and between them and their superiors in England, and conflicts over trade goods after the Seven Years’ War. Goods became scarce in the 1760s and early 1770s, but after shots rang out at Lexington and Concord in 1775, Britons and Americans had to move fast to secure allegiances with Indians. Because trade diplomacy was becoming less effective, they needed additional means to secure strategic connections. Food diplomacy provided the answer, but it, too, required adjusting in light of new wartime power relationships.

Early in the war, food diplomacy did not change much; Americans and Britons replicated the practices that Natives and non-Natives had created together during the colonial period. British officials relied on symbolic gifts of food at strategic moments to maintain the loyalties of important Iroquois Indians (also known as Six Nations). The Americans deployed food metaphors while asking for Iroquois neutrality before haphazardly distributing different types and quantities of provisions. Neither Britons nor Americans regularly gave the Six Nations large amounts of food. After 1779 these strategies proved untenable, and Frederick Haldimand became unable to avoid feeding those whom he called “useless mouths.” American campaigns had forced the Iroquois from their homes, resulting in a situation that allowed Indians to create a new form of food diplomacy that drew on revised notions of hunger.

The 1779 campaign was more effective than previous instances of victual warfare in North America in its ability to create significant, enduring famine. Two major related changes occurred after the expedition. First, British descriptions of Iroquois hunger by the 1780s allowed most officials to envision Indians as useful mouths who could overlook hunger while also requiring more provisions. British Indian agents ignored Haldimand’s contention that the Six Nations needed to be removed from British strongholds and instead bowed to Indians’ insistence that war was a time to stay together to share experiences of dearth in forts and on campaigns.

This altered perception of Iroquois hunger created a second change: a reworking of Iroquoian food diplomacy into something more violent than its
previous iterations. Indians started to deprive their allies—rather than their enemies—of food when it suited them. People had destroyed enemy foodstuffs since the colonial period but did not often target their military allies. Iroquoian food diplomacy in the American Revolution was thus constituted, in part, by mutual fasting—a policy the Indians sometimes had to enforce through the use of aggression. This diplomacy took Indian requests for certain types of provisions into account, obliging non-Natives to go out of their way to accommodate Native tastes. By the time the northern military campaign came to a close, these behaviors were apparent among other Indian nations, who also used them in their interactions with the British.

The American Revolution ravaged Indian communities, including Iroquois ones, but, during the war, changing British perceptions of hungry Indians allowed the Iroquois to challenge the state of power relations at a time when contemporaries assumed they were powerless in the face of crop destruction and land losses. Iroquois abilities to ignore and endure hunger made it impossible for their British allies to think of them as useless mouths; those who did not hunger could not eat uselessly. It is impossible to say what prompted Indians to alter their approach to hunger endurance, but non-Native misunderstandings of Indian hunger were crucial to British and Indian food diplomacy. Indians used hunger to fight back.

Iroquois strength had fluctuated during the colonial period. In the 1650s the Iroquois had waged a series of wars that resulted in their alliance with the Dutch, the defeat of the Hurons—their major competitor in the fur trade—and a cycle of captive-taking and violence that rearranged the Native populations of North America. After these conflicts, which are known as the Mourning Wars, many Indian refugees went to live with the Iroquois, or in entirely new villages. Up until 1680 or 1690, the Iroquois claimed dominance over tribes such as the Delawares, Shawnees, and Susquehannocks. These tribes gained a respite from Iroquois interference in 1681, when the colony of New York split from Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvanians, under the influence of Quaker William Penn, offered them protection from the Six Nations. Two peace treaties in 1701, between the Iroquois and the English, and the Iroquois and the French, helped to consolidate the strength of the Six Nations. By 1736 William Penn had died, and Pennsylvania also recognized the Six Nations’ right to cede the land of other tribes. Although there is some disagreement over whether these Iroquois actions constitute those of a formal empire, it is clear that victual imperialism was not a factor in these power struggles. The Iroquois may have taken land from other Indians, but they did not try to change those Indians’ food choices.
By the 1760s, between sixty-four hundred and ten thousand Iroquois claimed the region south of Lake Ontario (it is difficult to estimate population numbers of Native towns because officials frequently omitted women and children in their surveys). The Mohawks occupied the villages of Canajoharie and Tiononda in the Mohawk Valley, and the Oneidas and Tuscaroras shared the Susquehanna Valley region and the area around Oneida Lake. Further west, the Cayugas and Onondagas dwelled by the Finger Lakes, while the Senecas, the most numerous members of the Iroquois, lived in the Genesee and Allegheny River valleys and around the Seneca and Canandaigua Lakes.

The Seven Years’ War (1754–1763) and the subsequent conflict known as Pontiac’s War (1763–1766) prompted changes in Indian affairs because of declining French influence, Indians’ inability to play imperial powers off of each other, and new British trade policies. Thereafter, clashing empires, imperial agents fighting with ill-informed English politicians, declining trade, and land hunger undermined many diplomatic rituals. The Seven Years’ War in North America stretched from Nova Scotia to the interior of the Ohio Valley, with
other conflicts reverberating around the globe. By the war’s end the British claimed land around the Great Lakes, the Ohio Valley, and present-day Canada. Throughout the conflict French and British officials fought over Native alliances. The British increased their diplomatic efforts because the Iroquois controlled the waterways over which the British needed to move their cannons. French officials’ inability to cooperate with each other, combined with austerity measures passed down from Versailles, ensured a British upper hand. By 1757 most Natives refused to assist the French in future campaigns at the same time that the French became more cautious about employing them. By 1758 most Indians agreed to a truce at Easton, Pennsylvania. Crucially, by the time the English defeated the French, the Iroquois expected not only symbolic gifts of trade goods, but also larger amounts of goods as evidence of English officials’ sincerity.6

Although the British maintained Indian alliances, their ability to use trade goods to do so decreased in the 1750s and 1760s. At the same moment, the fur trade began to suffer too. It is uncertain which game animals died out fastest; some beaver, deer, and otter populations dropped as early as 1670. It is hard to count seventeenth-century beaver numbers because of Indians’ tendencies to use metaphors to exaggerate their poverty. Skins of smaller animals—“raccoons,” “otter[s],” “Musquashes” (muskrats), and “Cats”—do appear for sale in William Johnson’s correspondence, but Johnson also continued to record sales of beaver pelts and deerskins. Seneca hunting transitioned from beaver to white-tailed deer before 1750. In 1762 Mohawks further east reported that deer were scarce.7

What is clear, even if precise numbers for animals remain elusive, is that the trade changed. In the 1750s, a growing French presence in the Ohio Valley threatened to keep English traders from the fur market. Furs, which in the first half of the century had constituted more than 25 percent of all New York’s exports to England, plummeted to 2 percent of exports by 1775. Transforming deer-hunting practices disrupted gender divisions in Native communities; in Creek and Iroquois country, power shifted from the sachems in charge of hunting and the women who prepared skins to younger male warriors. The Iroquois continued to overhunt game, but the scarce nature of pelts challenged Natives’ abilities to control the value of the furs they exchanged and, consequently, the prices of the trade goods they bought.8

Trade goods remained similarly elusive, and trade diplomacy became unworkable for non-Natives. In some regions, like the Pays d’en Haut, trade goods had been scarce as early as 1745. Britons’ destruction of French shipping inhibited French abilities to transport and distribute goods. French influence further inland in turn prevented British goods from reaching Indians. In 1758 Colonel Henry Bouquet told a group of Delawares that because “we are at
War with the French,” the British “can’t send Traders amongst you as we formerly did, to be robbed and plunder’d by the Enemy.” He promised future trade goods but provided none at the time. By 1761 Sir William Johnson relayed Indians’ complaints about “the dearness of goods, & extortion of the Traders.”

In response to Indians’ complaints, Johnson, with Commander-in-Chief Jeffery Amherst’s approval, issued regulations to reform trade to Native Americans’ benefit. He limited commerce to British posts, appointed commissaries, and fixed prices for skins at various strongholds from Pennsylvania to present-day Ohio in an attempt to standardize exchanges of furs for trade goods.

Word of his changes spread from official to official at Detroit, Niagara, and Oswego, and the atmosphere seemed to improve. In the main, however, British efforts to maintain forest diplomacy did not go well because Jeffery Amherst took Johnson’s trade regulations too far—thus provoking Pontiac’s War. In August 1761, Amherst, in addition to encouraging Johnson’s directives, wrote to Johnson and instructed him “to avoid all presents in future,” demanding that officials abolish the practice of gift giving to cut costs. Amherst, like others before him, did not recognize the overlap between the commodity- and gift-exchange economies of Indian diplomacy. William Pitt’s military policies had increased Britain’s debt. Although Johnson agreed with the idea of restricting gift giving, he worried about any abrupt changes to Indian Affairs. When he objected, Amherst overruled him.

Amherst’s actions accelerated the conflict that came to be known as Pontiac’s War. Although the war bears his name, the Ottawa chief Pontiac espoused the teachings of Neolin, a Delaware Indian hundreds of miles away, who preached that Native Americans needed to distance themselves from European influences. During a time when Native Americans, affected by the First Great Awakening, sought new modes of spirituality, Neolin advocated for renewed attention to Indian rituals, a rejection of British trade, and the gradual abandonment of European-made goods. He also promoted venison consumption over pork and beef, and abstinence from alcohol. This boycott was significant because it demonstrated Indians’ attention to what non-Native commodities they consumed and how they did so.

Neolin’s followers severed alliances. A group of Cherokees fought against their former British allies from the late 1750s until 1761. In April 1763 Pontiac convinced Potawatomis, Ojibwas, and Ottawas to strike British forts throughout the Ohio and Illinois country. Although most of the Iroquois avoided the conflict, the Senecas participated. Other non-Iroquois Indians—Delawares, Hurons, Kickapoos, Mascoutens, Miamis, Mingoos, Ojibwas, Ottawas, Piankashaws, Potawatomis, Shawnees, Weas, and Wyandots—readily “took up
the hatchet,” as they might have described it. Indians seized every British post west of the Appalachians with the exception of Detroit, Niagara, and Fort Pitt. The war stretched until 1764, when most of the Indians made peace.13

In the aftermath, forest diplomacy momentarily recovered. British Indian Affairs officials, led by William Johnson, articulated the need for a four-pronged policy that enforced land boundaries, regulated trade, resolved disputes, and assigned Indian agents who could make decisions without needing approval from London. At the Treaty of Augusta in 1763, Scottish agent John Stuart managed to distribute gifts, discuss trading arrangements, and confirm peace with Catawba, Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw Indians. Further north, William Johnson set about redistributing gifts with a generous touch. By 1764 the London Board of Trade had accepted many of Johnson’s initial recommendations, and imperial agents on the ground in North America enforced them at the key posts that had been rebuilt following Pontiac’s War. And in the early years of the 1770s, Amherst’s hated policies drifted into disuse.14

This calm was not to last. Whereas in 1764 Whitehall seemed amenable to Johnson’s recommendations for trade, by 1768 the ministry formally rejected them. Reverberating debt from the Seven Years’ War siphoned money from Indian Affairs. Johnson retained his position as superintendent, and thus official management of Indian diplomacy, but the ministry allowed each individual colony to become responsible for regulating trade.15

Colonial governors proved more interested in acquiring Indian land than in protecting Indians from land-grabbers. The King’s Proclamation of October 7, 1763, was designed to stymie white encroachment beyond the Appalachians, and the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, which Johnson helped to negotiate, was supposed to reassert this demarcation line. In theory the Fort Stanwix treaty created a “line of property” that protected Native American land interests in the northwest, separated Indians from colonists, and opened present-day West Virginia and Kentucky to white farmers. Further to the south, Natives and non-Natives set a similar dividing line between the Cherokees and North and South Carolinians by 1768. In reality, colonists continued to ignore established boundaries, and squatters from Virginia and Pennsylvania flooded into the Ohio area. Large portions of these lands, which the Iroquois sold despite Shawnee and Cherokee claims to them, became contested in Dunmore’s War, a 1774 attempt by Virginians to seize territory by provoking the Shawnees to violence.16

It was during a council at Johnson Hall on July 11, 1774, in the midst of trying to convince Iroquois leaders to limit violence in Dunmore’s War, when William Johnson collapsed. Two hours later, he died. Johnson’s death threw
the British Indian Department into an uproar. His son, John Johnson, was offered the position of superintendent of Indian Affairs, but he refused it. Although Guy Johnson, William Johnson’s cousin and son-in-law, smoothed things over by agreeing to take over the job, no one would ever be able to reach the diplomatic heights that Sir William had previously attained. It is impossible to say whether Johnson’s death, problems stemming from unclear land boundaries, and divided policies between North America and London would eventually have proved surmountable had war between Britain and the mainland colonies not broken out—but it did. It represented little change at first to Native Americans, who had been fighting colonists and each other since the 1750s.

William Johnson may have had a sense of the impending conflict and its ramifications for Indian relations, but others were less prepared. Non-Native fighting began at the Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775, and in July 1776 the Continental Congress voted for independence. Before 1775, rebel American officials may have considered violence against Indians, but few had trained themselves to think about Native American diplomacy. American negotiators who wished to ally with Indians would find that their own nonimportation policies, combined with the Continental Congress’s lack of funds, made it difficult to obtain requisite gorgets, glass beads, medals, vermillion, and clothing for gifts. Once military campaigns against the Americans began, British ships sank or, on occasion, fell into the hands of the colonists—which in turn curtailed British gift-giving abilities. Land problems did not disappear. When goods once again became less obtainable, diplomacy disintegrated almost beyond repair.

As officials struggled to practice diplomacy, food became a more useful commodity in alliance building. Many practices resembled colonial ones and granted Native Americans leverage. British military leaders knew to provide some rations to warriors, and officials sent foodstuffs into individual villages, as they had in previous years. But in contrast to earlier decades, military forts at all times of year housed huge quantities of nonwarriors, who stayed for longer periods and appeared to consume more provisions. Their presence prompted renewed discussions about the usefulness of Native allies. American rebels, lacking significant stores of food to distribute and insufficient experience to broker allegiances, practiced a less nuanced food diplomacy that used metaphors to connote ideas of cooperation.

Diplomacy constituted part of broader efforts to partner with Indians, who held their own meetings and made decisions too. As early as September 1774, the British considered asking Natives to aid them; they implemented that plan...
in 1777 under the direction of the new imperial secretary of state, Lord George Germain. Part of cementing this union involved giving the Iroquois massive gifts of cattle, flour, and rum. The Americans also made plans. In July 1775, Congress delegated liaisons with the Six Nations and their allies to the Northern Department, with the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws to the Southern Department, and with all other tribes to the Middle Department. Eventually most Oneida and half of the Tuscarora members of the Iroquois sided with the Americans, and most Cayugas, Mohawks, Onondagas, and Senecas supported the British. Iroquois warriors and clan mothers—including Mohawk Molly Brant, William Johnson’s widow—took part in this decision-making process.¹⁹

Americans (and, to a lesser extent, Britons) struggled to administer diplomacy with limited funds and foodstuffs. Congress established the Continental Army in June 1775, but disagreements between the army, state troops, and militia meant that it became difficult for Americans to regulate food supply and distribution. There was more than one account of bread that contained “some villainous drug . . . that took all the skin off” men’s mouths. Bad, frequently “impassable” roads blocked provisions convoys. Heavy snow, driving rain, destructive pests, and stifling summers interfered with storage. In 1778 the Hessian fly devoured Virginia and Maryland wheat before buzzing north to New York. Violent storms compounded the problem by destroying Virginian mills, which made it difficult to process surviving grain into flour.²⁰

The British Army struggled for different reasons. During the Seven Years’ War the military had procured grain and animals from the colonial countryside, but the army had trouble getting rebel enemies to produce provisions for them. The British believed they could not plant crops near Indians’ towns without violating the 1768 Treaty of Stanwix, and thus British-Indian alliances. In this instance, the British probably misunderstood Iroquois ideas about hospitality, which allowed allies and tenants to grow food on Indian lands. This misunderstanding contributed to food-production problems, which worsened in 1781, when the army’s northern food caches were “devoured by Caterpillars” and “Hay, Corn & Vegetables . . . suffered in common.”²¹

On the supply end of things, whereas roads bothered the Americans, tacticians in Britain disagreed about how many provisions to ship from England, which commodities to send, and how frequently to send them. Initial shipments of flour were actually “American Flour,” probably sent from the colonies before British-American relations soured. The flour was already quite old when British contractors shipped it back to North America for their soldiers. Sometimes it “got wet on the Wharfs” and was then “sold & bought again by
the Commissaries and served out to the Troops.” Even when the navy sent vessels through Cork, Ireland, bread continued to spoil. The opening of the southern campaign in 1780 invited the prospect of purchasing provisions from Jamaica, but West Indian colonists who had lost access to mainland grain and meat remained reluctant to export foodstuffs because they feared food shortages, hunger, and thus, potentially, slave revolts.22

Additional inconsistencies in British food diplomacy occurred because the British Indian Department functioned in tandem with, but officially separate from, the British military. Although General Burgoyne had curtailed his use of Indians on the battlefield after his defeat at Saratoga, the autumn of 1777 and spring of 1778 witnessed an increase in the Indian Department’s use of British-allied Iroquois in raids and guerrilla warfare. Letters from Daniel Claus, who mediated with the Six Nations, and Major John Butler, who worked frequently with Mohawk Joseph Brant (Molly Brant’s brother), revealed that these Indians consumed poorer provisions compared to British troops.23 Butler worried that the Indians tasted “very little” fresh meat, except “the heads, Offals, & feet” of cattle flesh “too poor to be issued to the Garrison.” Fresh meat marked for the Indian department instead went to the garrison at Niagara. Joseph Brant, who operated a group of Indians and Loyalists known as “Brant’s Volunteers,” suffered the disdain of British officers because his unit was unpaid and had to scavenge at Niagara for their rations. Initially such inequalities did not cause Indians problems, because Iroquois women continued to produce enough corn, squash, and beans to sustain their people. Iroquois Indians produced large crop yields in comparison to their Anglo-American contemporaries.24

By 1778, however, effective British policy also meant providing food aid to individual towns. That spring British officials reported that “almost all the Indian Villages” stood “in a distressed condition for want of Victuals.” Younger warriors had “neglected” their spring hunting season, which meant that Iroquois Indians had been eating stored corn instead of venison. Even though the Indians were not starving, British aid increased: twenty-seven hundred Native women and children came to Detroit, where they ate “all the Beef . . . in six or seven days.” After he fed them, one lieutenant colonel reflected that he had felt obligated to do so. If he had refused, “this Garrison must have been distressed or the Savages offended,” and “cou’d have joined the Rebels,” he explained.25 Whereas before the war officials had sporadically distributed food relief to individual villages, now officials expected to supply Natives at British forts whenever they showed up, and excessive consumption became more common. Britons who misjudged Native appetites risked losing their military partners, so it was better to be generous.
As the British struggled to balance strategic sustenance with high provisions costs, the Americans also tried to maneuver with the Six Nations, employing Indian metaphors to describe their hopes for peace with Britain. Representatives of twelve of the colonies met Oneida, Tuscarora, and some Mohawk members of the Iroquois in 1775 (on the Indian side of things some Stockbrothers also attended, and on the American side Georgia was missing). Officials Philip Schuyler, Oliver Wolcott, Turbutt Francis, and Volkert Douw led the delegation, though they required the assistance and translation of Samuel Kirkland and James Dean. Speaking through translators, the Americans said, “If our people labour in the fields, they will not know who shall enjoy the crop. If they hunt in the Woods, it will be uncertain who shall taste the meat or have the skins.” Implying that Britons had made it hard for colonists to farm and hunt, they used the possible absence of flesh and grain to explain their rebellion. Colonists, they concluded, “cannot be sure whether they shall be permitted to eat drink and wear the fruits of their own labour and industry.”

Officials expressed their hope that in the future their relationship with Britain would mend so that they would be able to “eat and drink in peace” with them. By gesturing to the Indian metaphor of a common dish, the rebels signaled their desires to end conflict with the British at the same time that they maintained their claim to British-controlled land.

Indians’ responses at this meeting indicate that these metaphors proved unconvincing. Abraham, a sachem of the Lower Mohawk Castle, complained of decreased trade opportunities. “The shops are every where empty,” he said, and Indians “cant get any Cloathe or necessaries which we want.” The Americans reminded him that wartime was different. “You Brothers in Time of war do not hunt so much as in Time of peace,” they responded. Colonial officials’ description of the conflict in terms of game scarcity justified their reasons for rebellion, but cognizant of the weakness of their metaphor, they did not request assistance from the Six Nations. Instead, they asked the Indians “to remain at home and not join on either side.” It proved difficult for them to obtain even this promise, because they did not possess sufficient financial backing or organization.

By January 1776 rebel American colonists distributed actual foodstuffs to the Natives to remain competitive with British diplomacy. One American Indian commissioner recorded providing Mohawks with victuals enough for thirty people, “11 Cayugoes and 1 Onondaga” with three meals each, and 120 unnamed Indians with 36 pounds of bacon, “2 Fat Swine,” and “70 Loaves of Bread.” Perhaps he supplied the Mohawks because he hoped to undermine British negotiations, or perhaps he did not know enough to identify the likeliest allies. Americans became more efficient in their distributions by March 1778,
when “3 or 400 of the Warriors of the six Nations” joined the continental service, and Albany commissioners resolved “to furnish” them with “provisions from Time to Time.” At first these were slapdash allocations—meals here, a pig there—because in early 1776 a state of war was not yet official. During the war, however, lists of contemporary provisions indicate that Indians received rum, beef, and bread in ration-like quantities after returning from Washington’s camp.28 This decision, like the Britons’ decision to provision Iroquois women and children, was likely a symbolic gesture rather than a full supply of food on which Indians depended.

At the start of the war independent Iroquois retained power as they had done for centuries: by drawing on Gayaneshagowa and Guswenta. Iroquoian food diplomacy remained consistent with earlier eighteenth-century practices. The Six Nations used metaphors to communicate; they requested edible goods; and they supplied British and American troops with provisions, which at times allowed them to influence the actions of the soldiers who depended on them. The Iroquois, in contrast to Americans and Britons, used food to communicate with enemies as well as allies because Iroquois neutrality remained paramount. At a 1778 meeting between American-allied Oneidas and American commissioners, Oneidas reflected that although “It is probable that there are some . . . who are inimical to us and who would wish to give Information” to British Major John Butler, they would willingly “cause them to be supplied with provisions” and rum for “the Journey to Niagara.” The Oneidas worried that other Iroquois might report details of their meeting, but they still planned to supply them with food and drink for the trip. Before the Revolution and at least since the late seventeenth century, the Iroquois had limited Iroquois-on-Iroquois violence, refusing to fight against their brethren when France and England warred.29 After conflict began between Great Britain and the American colonies, Oneidas treated food and drink as necessary components of this nonaggression pact, which suggests the continuing importance of Gayaneshagowa.

Iroquois Indians also continued to accept food as payment for services rendered to non-Natives. By requesting consumables, Natives reminded military officials that they needed to purchase Indians’ allegiance. In September 1778, a group of British-allied Onondagas desired “provision to carry on the Service.” The Onondagas wanted food and ammunition sent to “Irondaquat Bay in Lake Ontario” because it was “nearest to the Seneca & 6 Nations Country.” They stated their willingness to fight and then asked for the sustenance to do so. They even stipulated a location for British distribution. That August, Onondagas had told American commissioners of their intention “to remain in the strictest friendship with the United States,” despite the influence of the
“great many evil Birds among us.” That these events occurred within a month of each other underlines both the factious nature of relations within tribes and the Indians’ inclinations to say what they needed to say to obtain supplies. British and Patriot officials had been right to worry that refusing provisions to Indians might result in a shift in allegiance—not because Natives required food but because diplomatic protocols mattered to them. It is also possible that non-Native officials were too ill-informed to identify factions within the Iroquois and thus confused divided groups with the act of switching sides.

Native Americans also supplied food to Americans and Britons, which non-Natives sometimes accepted as gifts and sometimes purchased from Indians to cultivate alliances. Although Iroquois women’s control of provisions had decreased before the revolution (in part because of William Johnson’s efforts to become the main distributor), women still acted as key producers. Iroquois oral histories today tell the story of Oneida Polly Cooper, who went with other Iroquois to feed the Continental Army at Valley Forge in 1777–1778. Cooper supposedly showed the Americans how to prepare corn for soup, and later received a bonnet, hat, and shawl from Martha Washington as thanks. The British also required supplies that winter, particularly at Niagara. One officer reported that he had felt “obliged to buy up all the cattle the Indians had to spare,” doing “everything in [his] power to keep the Savages in good Temper.” His use of the word obliged likely indicates that he purchased cattle from Indians to broker good relations by overpaying and overfeeding them.

Occasionally, Britons encountered difficulties obtaining something to eat from British-allied Indians, even when out on joint expeditions. One man’s 1778 journal lamented that while on the march with “about 300 Indians of different tribes, chiefly Senecas and Delawares . . . we many a time had very hungry times.” Repeatedly, he went “into a wigwam and waited for the Hommany Kettle with the greatest impatience to get a trifle and was as often disappointed,” he complained. Sometimes Natives charged what the British considered to be exorbitant prices, and sometimes Indians did not feed them at all. Native women doubtless wondered why useless British mouths could not be fed by non-Native women. Where food was concerned, Indians could supply food and accept it, and the records provide evidence that some Britons depended on Indians rather than the other way around.

If food diplomacy granted the Iroquois the most power and the rebels the least power, then victual warfare also continued to test power relationships. Americans used victual warfare by attacking Indians’ towns and villages—as they had during the colonial period—and sometimes by stealing Natives’ animals. In 1777, Molly Brant was “insulted & robbed of every thing she had in
the world by the Rebels & their Indians” for the role she played at the Battle of Oriskany in August of that year. She had warned the British of American movements, and her information ratcheted up the number of American and American-allied Iroquois deaths. Legal depositions from 1778 reveal the extensiveness of New Yorkers’ punitive thefts of crops and animals from the Mohawk Upper Castle at Canajoharie during the fall of 1777. Peter Deygart, chairman of the Tryon County Committee of Safety, spent three days “Riding Indian Corn & Potatoes from the Canajohary Indian fields.” Someone else saw “Old Christian young, pulling up and Destroying Potatoes, Turnips, Cabbage, and other Gardian Stuff.” They dug barrels of flour up from the ground, and took those too. The New Yorkers also stole sheep and hogs.  

Non-Natives persisted in using victual warfare against Indians because they characterized them as a savage enemy. They also, however, convinced Indians to act as proxy victual warriors in their attacks against other non-Natives because it exonerated them from blame. Americans used their Iroquois allies to target British supply wagons. In April 1779, Joseph Brant relayed a warning that some “of the ill disposed Trib[es] of the Six Nations” planned “to cut off or interrupt” a British “convoy of Provisions and Store.” Brant used his knowledge of British supply networks to prevent the other Iroquois from carrying out the action as well as to demonstrate the Mohawks’ value to the British.  

To fill their own stomachs, the British encouraged Native allies to pilfer cattle, horses, and grain from American farms and supply wagons. During a July 1778 expedition near Wyoming, Pennsylvania, rangers and Indians “killed and drove off about 1000 head of horned Cattle, and sheep and swine in great numbers.” By destroying and stealing the animals that pulled plows and yielded meat, John Butler speculated, “we can prevent the Enemy from getting in their grain,” and “their Grand Army (who are already much distress’d) must disperse and their Country of course become an easy prey to the King.” The British hoped that causing hunger in the American countryside would limit supplies to the American army. This strategy echoed English attacks against the Irish in Dublin over a century earlier, but now Britons used Indians to attack civilian food caches in order to make the rebels starve and to feed British soldiers.  

Not everyone was comfortable with this decision. In 1778 Daniel Claus implored Frederick Haldimand to make sure that only Indians participated “in the glory of such petite guerrers as burning and destroying,” and he claimed it “would look much better in the eye of the public” if such actions came “rather from Savages than whites.” Men fighting in the combined unit of Natives and non-Natives known as Butler’s Rangers asked that the phrase “To Serve
with the Indians” be struck from the terms of their commissions because they worried about the consequences of being linked with such tactics if the Americans captured them. Both Britons and Americans seemed to have a sense that victual warfare was unacceptable when used by non-Natives against non-Natives, but they got around this dilemma by urging Indians to practice it.

Their encouragement led to Indians practicing victual warfare against other Iroquois. Oneida Indians also took part in the retaliatory attack against Molly Brant in 1777. Led by Oneida chief Hanyery, or Tehawenkaragwen, Oriska Oneidas joined the rebels in plundering the Mohawk castle at Canajoharie. The Oneidas’ orders stated that if in the past they had “lost, one Cow, Ox, horse Hogg Sheep . . . that we should take two in liu thereof.” Oneidas reacted against the actions of Mohawks by participating in animal theft, stealing twice as many animals as the Mohawks had taken from them. Escalations of this kind threatened to do more than send a symbolic message; they may actually have hurt Mohawk meat supplies. Whereas in some contemporary instances of inter-Indian food diplomacy the Oneidas expressed their willingness to feed enemy Indians, here they received instructions to steal as many animals from the Mohawks as they could. This event was unusual. Even in this instance, the Oneidas waited until the Mohawks left Canajoharie; they attacked crops but not people.

By 1779, all parties knew that the destruction of crops and thefts of domesticated animals made for an effective method of causing chaos. Joseph Plumb Martin, the white private who had described problems with adulterated bread, even named the absence of grain and meat: he called it “the monster Hunger.” Yet hunger had thus far been a manageable foe for the Indians and Britons who fought it. British food diplomacy had involved giving Indians symbolic gifts of food that did not make up the majority of their diets, even if British officials felt obliged to offer such gifts frequently because they knew they had to continually reaffirm Six Nations’ fidelity. Indians used food to talk to each other, whether that meant diplomatically promising food supplies to traveling enemies or stealing animals as signs of victual warfare when other Indians’ actions violated the standards of acceptable behavior. They had proved capable of disrupting supply, demanding food when they felt justified in doing so, and stealing it when necessary. But 1779 was a year with all the right conditions for a food crisis.

In 1779 Americans’ summer incursions into Iroquoia ushered in food shortages that coincided with a harsh winter and sparked an Indian refugee diaspora. Thereafter, ideas about hunger and the protocols of food diplomacy both
changed. These civilian refugees arrived at British forts ready to consume larger quantities of provisions because Americans’ victual warfare had increased to such an extent that it became effective at causing Native famine; Iroquois Indians began to die. In a paradoxical twist, this hunger made British-allied Iroquois more capable of enforcing a new version of food diplomacy, which came to mean the use of or forced abstention from grain, meat, and alcohol to forge or maintain connections between allies. Natives chose to alter how British troops and officers fought alongside them by curtailing Britons’ access to food. Rather than voicing their need for and dependence on British food supplies, Indians refused provisions, destroyed stored grain, crops in fields, and cattle, and welcomed starvation, thus challenging British ideas about Native hunger and military service.

In July British strategists found that they could not drive “off Cattle from the Enemy’s Frontiers,” as they had during earlier years, because the rebels had protected those cattle with “a Chain of Forts,” which made raiding for animals dangerous. The “considerable Quantity” roaming through “Indian Country” the previous fall, John Butler observed, had “been chiefly consumed by the Indians themselves.” Bark from elm and basswood trees, birds, boiled bones, dogs, eels, mussels, muskrats, and even rotten meat were more conventional famine foods, but sources such as Butler’s imply that at least some Iroquois ate beef during times of hunger. Now this option had disappeared. To add to these issues, the Indians had not planted “the usual Quantity” of “Corn, Pulse, and things of that Kind” because a combination of military service and colonial attacks had prevented Native men from being able to protect their towns as women planted corn. Scattered settlement patterns had given the Iroquois many years to stockpile emergency caches, but an American attack could still prove problematic.

And attack they did. The 1779 campaign was a crusade of devastating victual warfare against British-allied Seneca and Cayuga Six Nations’ towns and villages that signaled Americans’ growing interest in causing hunger and strategizing about its consequences. George Washington instructed Major General John Sullivan that the campaign’s “immediate objects are the total destruction & devastation of” noncombatant “Settlements.” He anticipated that the men and women Sullivan assaulted would “in their distress” welcome “supplies of Provisions.” Washington hoped to create hunger and then distribute food aid, but he also warned Sullivan against offering either provisions or peace before Sullivan’s men had accomplished “the total ruin” of their villages. Later, when it seemed such aid would not convince the Iroquois to break with their British allies, he would charge Sullivan with the task of “throwing [the Indians] wholly on the British Enemy.”
In April, Colonel Goose Van Schaick moved west from Fort Schuyler to begin the intrusion into Iroquoia, striking the main Onondaga village, where he and his troops killed a dozen people and took another thirty-three noncombatants prisoner—some of whom the Onondagas accused soldiers of raping and then killing. During the summer three armies under direction from Congress and led by Sullivan, Brigadier General James Clinton, and Colonel Daniel Brodhead raced across New York. Sullivan destroyed at least seventeen Seneca settlements between Chemung and Genesee Castle, and Brodhead’s men razed eleven settlements on the Allegheny River. This operation hearkened back to the sixteenth century in its design to force submission of the Indians, their dependence on the British, and their extermination, when possible.41

American rebels spent the summer burning the evidence of Iroquois women’s labor—their letters committed their actions to history.42 They torched “very fine and extensive” cornfields. Soldiers wrote letters and diary entries about making “large fires with parts of houses and other woods” and “piling the corn on the fire” to ensure total destruction. On August 13 at Chemung they lit “a glorious bonfire of upwards of 30 buildings at once” before cutting down “about 40 acres” of the fields. In another town “called Kanegsae or Yucksea,” they burned corn for four hours on September 13. It must have been a sleepless night; they rose at six the next morning to spend eight hours burning twenty thousand bushels at the Genesee Flats. At Chemung and Oswego they “destroyed all their crops,” and near Canadasago they “girdled the fruit trees” (so they would not produce fruit in future years) “and destroyed the corn.”43 Some soldiers found the task of mutilating fruit trees too extreme and asked Sullivan to excuse them, likely because Emer de Vattel singled this act out (along with tearing down vines) as one of savage barbarity. Sullivan forced them to do it anyway.44 Finally, after burning “the Genesee Village and destroy[ing] the Corn,” the Americans retreated. By September the expedition had consumed Iroquois villages. To add to the distress of these physical attacks, Natives also suffered the mental anguish of knowing they would be unable to return home: by October, white American reavers had moved into the abandoned dwellings in the Lower Mohawk Castle, finding serenity in the “great plenty of Grain; several Horses, cows and waggons” that the American army had left in place for the non-Native invaders.45

Sullivan claimed his men destroyed at least 160,000 bushels of corn, other vegetables, and animals. His men did not distinguish between the destruction of stored and standing corn, so it seems possible that the campaign scorched large portions of grain reserves. Each Iroquois person ate approximately 6 bushels of corn per year.46 Even if one takes the lower pre-Revolution population estimate of sixty-four hundred people, the Iroquois required 38,400
bushels of corn per year—and Sullivan probably destroyed four times that quantity. The campaign resulted in abrupt losses of food and life and altered future diplomatic relations. In the immediate wake of the attacks, Indian communities fought and reexamined their various loyalties. Americans had asserted their dominance but also possibly frightened the colonial-allied Oneidas and Tuscaroras—who perhaps never imagined how completely the colonists would destroy the towns of their brethren. British-allied Indians, of course, possessed better reasons to reassess their position, given the severe consequences of supporting His Majesty’s troops.

As a result of the campaign, the Americans achieved their goals of evicting the Six Nations from their villages, pushing them toward the British, fostering famine, and, consequently, killing Indians. Hundreds would die of starvation and related diseases that winter. On his return to Niagara, John Butler sent word that “all the Indians with their Families are moving in, as their Villages & Corn are Destroyed.” More than five thousand Iroquois Indians arrived at Fort Niagara alone. General Haldimand noted that this phenomenon was not confined to the Mohawk, Onondaga, and Cayuga Indians at Niagara; “old men, women and children . . . of the Shawanese & Delawar Nations” faced “the Same Predicament at Detroit,” further to the southwest. These migrations affected other Native peoples; as refugees reached Detroit, Grand River, Niagara, Pensacola, Saint Augustine, Saint Louis, and Schenectady, others headed west beyond the Mississippi, requesting Spanish permission to resettle. Such population shifts had a domino effect as these migrants then encroached on the land of Apaches, Comanches, Osages, and Pawnees in the Native-Spanish borderlands of the southwest.

Reports of British-allied Iroquois sentiments from this period are contradictory. John Butler was “happy to acquaint” Frederick Haldimand that the Indians appeared “Still unshaken in their Attachment to His Majestys Cause.” “As Soon as they have placed their Women & Children in Security,” he reported, they planned to “go and take Revenge of the Enemy.” Butler’s missive belied conditions on the ground, as evidenced by the fact that when Guy and John Johnson arrived at Niagara, the Iroquois chiefs at first refused to conduct the diplomatic welcoming ceremony that always attended the start of a meeting. Some Iroquois had questioned the strength of their British allies and signaled that diplomatic customs required reform.

The Sullivan expedition likewise prompted the British to reexamine their relationship with their homeless Native supporters. Haldimand proposed provisioning Indians less frequently. He was probably motivated by animal scarcities, crop failures near Detroit and Niagara, and qualms about the economic and military costs of feeding Indians. The “quantity consumed by the Savages
is enormous,” he complained. He asked John Butler to remind the Indians “that all our distress . . . proceeds from the amazing quantity of provisions they consume” at the same time that he decided against supplying Butler’s Rangers with more rations. By September he was asking that the Indians “make demands for Provisions as seldom, and as moderate as their wants will admit of.”

Haldimand objected to feeding Indians because his definition of usefulness turned on military assistance, and he thought that food diplomacy interfered with other military operations. He argued that the cost of supplying the Indians “far Exceeds all ordinary and Extraordinary Expences in this Province, including [the] army, navy, Engineer & all Departments.” To have the troops be “obliged to abandon the Purpose of their Enterprize for want of Provisions,” he wrote, “would be followed by much more fatal Consequences than if they had never undertaken it.”

Whereas before the war Britons noted excessive consumption predominantly at treaty meetings, now some military leaders viewed any Indian as an enormous eater who threatened their whole enterprise. The presence of Indian warriors and noncombatants collected at Niagara and Detroit placed Haldimand reluctantly under “the Necessity of Feeding” them to keep the warriors from changing their allegiance. In the fall of 1780 Haldimand penned the lines that titled this book, in which he demanded “that no useless Mouth” would remain at Niagara for the winter. Seeking to avoid a repeat of the previous year, Haldimand sought to decrease the number of Indians he would need to feed. He now conceived of useless mouths as not only too hungry and costly but also easy to resettle.

Haldimand failed in this quest to evict Iroquois allies and promote his definition of uselessness, because Indians’ attitudes toward hunger and service also changed. Their actions implied that they were useful partners to the British; they portrayed hunger for strategic reasons and could teach their allies to better deal with it. The aftermath of the 1779 campaign was similar to and different from the colonial period. It was similar because the British officials who tried to curtail Indian hunger did not succeed. Natives reminded Britons of the one-dish metaphor, and they accepted food as a gift without reciprocating with military service. By September 1779 one official related that John Butler had encountered “difficulties” obtaining food and thus in “assembling the Indians.” Indians continued to eat in ways that deviated from British expectations of reciprocity—but British perceptions also changed.

The months after 1779 were therefore different from the colonial period for two reasons: First, because of the increase in British provisions to Indian warriors in addition to noncombatants’ provisions during previous
decades. Second, because the campaign had transformed Indian and British attitudes about Native hunger. Whereas in previous years Britons assumed that they would feed Iroquois women and children symbolic gifts while men hunted game and women grew crops and managed war provisions, during and after the winter of 1779–1780 the British expected to feed nearly all Indians. In February 1781, Indians around Niagara would arrive “upon us sooner than could be wished” because of their lack of success “on their hunting grounds” and “the severity of the last winter.” Natives now arrived at military forts in time for winter, and Britons planned to host them for its duration.

The first real signs of this uptick in Iroquois power came during the 1779 campaign, when one lieutenant colonel reported that someone at Niagara had “endeavoured to persuade the Indians . . . that they were paid too small a price for their Cattle,” Indians chose to charge more for the few cattle they possessed, and British purchasers chose to pay those prices. Other reports indicated Indians’ growing discontent with Haldimand’s vision for British food diplomacy; British unwillingness to supply them looked too much like bad faith. British-allied Indians resented all the worry over food, warned that “they could no longer fight the King’s Battles,” and voiced annoyance that the British “talked of nothing but Provisions.” Britons, concluded their Indian allies, “could have no excuse for not assisting them,” because they possessed a quantity of extra food at Quebec. At this point in the war the Six Nations charged the British more for the beef they supplied to them and manipulated the British for more provisions when they could. Once British unwillingness to feed Indians became actual inability, the situation gave the Iroquois the upper hand.

Six Nations Indians implied that allies should share the experience of hunger when food was not available for everyone. At the same time that they accepted more British foodstuffs, Natives also proclaimed themselves less hungry, more willing to undergo scarcity, and more insistent that the British should abstain alongside them. By making it impossible for the British to feed them, the Iroquois challenged power relations. It is difficult to say what prompted this change. Certainly the shift followed the 1779 expedition. Perhaps warriors accustomed to fasting before attacks sought to extend that behavior to British engagements. Perhaps in 1779 the metaphor of sharing a common dish meant going hungry when the dish was empty. Perhaps the Iroquois knew that their allegiance was so valuable that they could dictate the terms of their military service. Or perhaps they simply sought to prepare themselves for starvation. Whatever their motivations, this new form of food diplomacy, which included mutual abstention from provisions, altered contemporary ideas about hospitality as well as British food policies.
In response to the campaign and the growing refugee crisis, officials first attempted to remove Indians from their forts to save money. At an October meeting Guy Johnson and John Butler tried to convince the Iroquois at Niagara to go to Carleton Island and other parts of present-day Canada because the lateness of the season meant trouble shipping “a sufficient Quantity of Provisions across the Lake.” Daniel Claus proposed sending warriors’ families to Montreal. After citing transportation costs, officials tried to tell the Six Nations that leaving Niagara was their best chance for receiving comestibles. In November Guy Johnson finally “prevailed on” some fifty Indians to depart for Carleton Island and several hundred others to go out hunting.57

For the most part, the British did not succeed in removing the Indians because the Iroquois privileged their proximity to each other. Indians declared that they would simply withstand hunger. Those remaining stated their lack of interest in provisioning problems. The Cayuga Twethorechte told British officials, “We of the Six Nations have been much cast down by the great Loss we have sustained in the Destruction of several of our Villages and Corn-Fields.” He appreciated “what has been said on the Score of Provisions,” but said that the Indians “cannot think of separating.” If the Indians had “to suffer for Provisions we cannot help it.” They felt “determined to persevere in the Cause,” and would “endeavour in some Measure to help [them]selves by Hunting.” Although Johnson worried that the Indians seemed “already to complain that your Allowance of Provisions is small,” most of the Indians made plans to stay put.58 Indians ignored British worries about costs and set an example of weathered soldiers willing to experience hardship. Crucially, the Iroquois stopped emphasizing their hunger and made it impossible for the British to feed them at the precise moment when starvation became a reality. Twethorechte’s words indicated that Indians may have been motivated by concerns other than food.

At this point in time, Iroquois Indians’ military service changed. Indians were the counterpart to white soldiers who rioted over absent rations, but they did so much more effectively because they were better at convincing observers that monstrous hunger did not scare them, and because they were not subject to penalties for disobedience and desertion.59 By the end of 1779 Iroquois Indians were going beyond voicing doubts about British food diplomacy and trying to obtain more provisions from British officials; they were making their British allies hungry by damaging pilfered food supplies in the field and leaving joint expeditions too early. In August 1779 John Butler reported on an action with Mohawk Joseph Brant and a number of Delawares and Senecas. After failing to persuade the Indians to retreat, Butler lamented having “Scarcely time to dress a few Ears of Corn” before attacking. Once the action failed,
“many of the Indians made no halt, but proceeded immediately to their respective villages.” In this instance, the Delawares and Senecas dictated where and how they would stand against the enemy; they ate only a tiny snack before they fought; and upon retreat they privileged their return to their villages over an orderly retreat with the British, no doubt to see whether the rebels had succeeded in destroying their villages’ food stores, as they had in so many other Indian towns.

Indians’ behavior forced their British allies to experience deprivation. In 1781 a combined party of Indians and rangers met at Oswego, and the Seneca Indian headmen “held a council . . . without advising” the British of their plans. They informed two British officers that they would go to Monbackers (in present-day Rochester, New York) and “to no other place,” because they were “in a starving condition” and because it was “a verry rich country.” One officer even remembered that he felt obliged to go with them, “altho contrary to my Instructions.” Here the threat of hungry Native allies seemed to loom large, but given what happened next it is not clear whether the Senecas were really starving or whether their starvation was metaphorical.

Once the action commenced, the Indians at first pursued only one aspect of victual warfare: ruining food supplies, rather than stealing or eating them. The party destroyed “thirty large storehouses,” grain, and animals. In encountering a fort defended by the Americans, the attackers chose to burn the party of rebels, with the “large quantities of grain” inside of it, rather than giving quarter to the troops. The officer retelling the story tried to save face by reporting that he had suggested the destruction of grain houses because he did not have enough men to take the forts. In reality he had lost control of the situation: a few days later, after the Indians had stolen some cattle, the officers were horrified “to see the Indians kill and take the greatest part of the cattle that were captured by the Rangers,” leaving the rank and file in “a starving situation.” The men in charge could do nothing to stop them. Even during moments when Indian hunger seemed paramount, Indians themselves avoided eating and then stopped their allies from doing the same. The British officer was less interested in the fact that the Senecas had stolen some cattle; what mattered to him was the fact that the Indians violently caused British starvation.

Over time this conduct manifested among Indians who were not Iroquois. In June 1780 a group of Shawnees and Great Lakes Indians arrived at the American-held Fort Liberty with Britons Henry Bird and Alexander McKee. Before they entered the fort, the Indians agreed to let the British take “the Cattle for Food for our People, and the Prisoners.” While McKee and Bird were inside the fort finalizing plans for the following day, however, the Indians
“rushed in,” killed several of the civilians, and slaughtered “every one of the Cattle, leaving the whole to stink.” The Natives’ obliteration of all of the food stores ensured that the British could not appropriate any of them. They repeated these actions at the next fort, where “not one pound of Meat” survived. Bird recorded that they “had brought no Pork” and were “reduced to great distress.” The prisoners stood “in danger of being starved.” Although food stores were scarce in the wake of the 1779 campaign, Indians in the archival record persist in destroying allies’ access to meat and grain. The most persuasive explanation is that Native Americans throughout the northern theater of war had come to associate hunger with times of combat, and that these Indians did not view beef cattle as acceptable sources of meat.

Some British officers missed the connection. Frederick Haldimand was infuriated by the Indians’ behavior. He had conceived of the Shawnee operation as a way “to cheque the Encroachments of the Enemy, so loudly complained of by the Indians.” Instead, he concluded, that by “killing and destroying the Cattle,” the Indians “not only prevented Captain Bird from pursuing his Success, but reduced him to the last Extremity for want of Provision.” Haldimand did not consider the fact that his military purposes might have differed from the Indians’ goals. By killing the Americans’ cattle, Indians were, in fact, revenging themselves for this encroachment, much the same way as Native Americans in the earlier colonial period acted out their anger against similar “creatures of empire.” Haldimand also misunderstood why the Indians had worked to deprive his men of ready, mobile food supplies. These useful mouths went where they wanted, and they continued to teach Britons how to hunger—sometimes violently.

By the 1780s British food diplomacy had turned away from Haldimand’s attempts to reduce supplies. In spite of Haldimand’s complaints, commands, and entreaties to officers working in Indian Affairs, the British kept making plans to feed Indians. Haldimand was even shocked to find that Iroquois Indians who were “Intermarried, with those of Canada” had received provisions twice—once as Indians belonging to the Seven Nations of Canada, and again as Indians belonging to the Six Nations. Increasingly, Britons sought to discover and accommodate noncombatant Natives’ food preferences. Officials expanded food distribution. Each month the superintendent of Indian Affairs assessed how much food villages required by sending men to obtain a headcount; Indians then received tickets from the commissary, which they could redeem for provisions.

The British also tried hard to accommodate Native tastes. Haldimand’s correspondence reveals a summary of Indian preferences: corn was best, “as the Indians would rather have it than flour.” If there was no corn, Six Nations preferred baked bread to flour supplies. Commissaries tended to issue more pork
than beef, suggesting another opinion about taste. Natives voiced their desire for salt provisions or fresh provisions when it suited them. Indians did not like “the Effect of living entirely upon Salt Meat,” because they found themselves “getting sickly.” As early as 1778 the Mohawks had convinced one official to give them half fresh and half salt provisions after receiving only salt provisions for half of the year. By 1780, however, Indians around Montreal were requesting five days of fresh provisions out of each week—more than twice what they had received in previous years. These Natives complained that a salty diet threatened their health, and, by inference, their manpower. In spite of the logistical problems involved in preserving and transporting fresh meat, Haldimand granted their request less than a week later. British expenditures on supplies to Niagara increased from £500 New York currency at the start of the war to £100,000 in 1781.

Native Americans would also, to an extent, refuse to grow food themselves. In May 1781, the British distributed hoes and corn for the use of the Six Nations, the Delawares, and the Shawnees to encourage them to plant crops at their home at Buffalo Creek. In December of that year, however, these Indians again appeared at Fort Niagara, claiming, “The Trifling quantity of Indian Corn Issued” was their “reason for coming in to be Supply’d with provisions.” In effect, Indians suggested that the amount of seed the British gave them in the spring was too paltry to produce an abundant crop or to sustain them with the strength to carry out the task of planting rows of corn.

It is also possible that the British supplied them with the wrong kind of hoes. There were many different types of hoes—for tobacco, rice, and sugar production—and Native American hoes were different from West African hoes, which were, in turn, distinct from European-produced utensils; not all hoes were designed for corn production. British officials discovered as much in 1784, when someone observed that axes and hoes produced near Montreal were much smaller than those that came from Europe, and Indians would not use European tools until they had been reforged.

These were some of Indians’ reasons for not growing corn, which allowed them to claim British support over the winter. Two years later they offered additional justification: Guy Johnson wrote that “the rememberance of their late losses . . . were too recent for their entering with alacrity on planting.” He was talking about the Sullivan expedition; he explained that even those Indian “Towns that escaped the Rebel invasion” now required British aid, because other refugees had turned to them for supplies. In sum, Indians refused to plant corn when they could receive provisions from the British. They were not lazy, hungry, or dependent; they were traumatized communities who expected the rightful terms of their partnership.
Meanwhile, Americans continued to make clumsy use of victual warfare and food diplomacy. They used the 1779 campaign to remind their Six Nations allies of the consequences of hunger. “For their Breach of the Covenant Chain,” commissioners told the Oneidas and Tuscaroras, British-allied members of the Six Nations found themselves “without Food or Shelter,” “driven from their Country,” and forced to “wander in the wilderness. This,” they concluded, “is the constant Reward of Treachery!” The Americans revised history to suggest that the Covenant Chain had been forged between the Iroquois and the Americans, rather than between the Iroquois and the English or the Iroquois and the Dutch, and implied that those who “became” traitors by switching sides would suffer scorched-earth campaigns. Knowing as they did that opposing factions of the Iroquois continued to communicate with each other, they probably hoped that the Oneidas and Tuscaroras would pass along the message. As long as the Americans were doing well in the war, they could afford to hold the threat of burned ground over the heads of supporters and enemies.

Americans’ continued use of food metaphors that drew on the shared experience of scarcity may eventually have worked to their advantage. At a meeting between commissioners and American-allied Oneidas, Tuscaroras, and Caghnhawagas in 1781, the non-Native officials described how the “long War has impoverished us.” But what differentiated American from British food diplomacy was rebels’ willingness to undergo deprivation with their Native allies. Of course, the former colonists possessed little choice in the matter of hunger, because the war was fought in their towns and throughout their farmlands. But this position ironically gave them a better chance of using food diplomacy, because Indian allies might have empathized. Although the Americans promised “that your way hereafter [would] be better supplied with provision and necessaries,” they also guaranteed that when “hardships are inevitable,” the Indians should “be of good comfort: We suffer with you.” The Americans evinced their willingness to eat when there was food, and to go hungry when there was none. Yet this meeting also demonstrated Indians’ abilities to alter American food diplomacy. No longer could U.S. officials rely on metaphors to maintain Natives’ allegiance; they also promised a future delivery of provisions.

Six months before the Seneca named Cornplanter listened to Timothy Pickering’s misuse of history in 1791, he sent George Washington his own history of Iroquois relations with the United States. Unlike Pickering, Cornplanter was more interested in recent events. “When your army entered the country of the Six nations, we called you the town-destroyer; and to this day when that name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children
cling close to the neck of their mothers.” Cornplanter knew his people’s history of the 1779 campaign, how harrowing it had been for the civilian members of the Six Nations. He also knew Washington’s Iroquois name: “Conotocarious,” meaning “town destroyer” or “devourer of villages.” Washington’s choices had consumed Iroquois territory. Timothy Pickering knew all these things too, because the reason historians have a copy of Cornplanter’s message is that it was enclosed in a letter to Pickering.72

Notions of history were expansive in the eighteenth century, when oral history, storytelling, and personal knowledge mattered just as much as if not more than what got written down. William Johnson’s death was so disruptive immediately before the Revolutionary War because no one else possessed his depth of knowledge about Iroquois protocols. In the 1760s, when Johnson watched as power relationships fluctuated and diplomatic customs faltered, he probably knew what to do—but he died before teaching others how to copy him. Food diplomacy offered a workable alternative to colonial practices, but it required a revision of colonial precedents. The Iroquois stepped in to engineer those changes, and the power they gained from doing so helped them survive the Sullivan campaign.

After John Sullivan’s 1779 burnt-corn expedition, the Iroquois fought against hunger, they fought to create it, and they fought for a role in making hunger-prevention policies. They altered their food diplomacy to dictate the terms of their military service, to make demands about food supply, and to make the British starve when it suited them. They succeeded in enacting these reforms because non-Native ideas about Indian hunger and usefulness had shifted. Two previously separate strands of European perceptions had fused together. Britons began to think of Indians as enormous eaters at the same time that they described Indians as capable of withstanding hunger. Indians did not, however, become dependent on British foodstuffs. Iroquois decisions to refuse food and endure hunger at key moments forced the British to recognize that Indians were still useful to them. As a result, officials went out of their way to accommodate Indian demands about eating specific foods. In 1783, when the Iroquois claimed that they could not plant because the memory of their losses—the newest chapter in the tribe’s history—was still too upsetting, the British distributed food aid.

The American Revolution was not merely a war fought between Americans and Britons, but also one that embroiled some 150,000 Native Americans living east of the Mississippi, with ramifications for Indians further west.73 Changing discourses of hunger underscore the degree to which the Iroquois retained their power in a disastrous situation. By 1781 people increasingly practiced food diplomacy according to Indian notions rather than British or
American ones—they paid attention to Native tastes, and they hungered together whether they wanted to or not. During the war itself everyone had the potential to grow, eat, and destroy food, and thus it became harder to tell who was dependent and who was independent.

Indians were useful mouths who portrayed their hunger in specific ways, ignored it, and tried to avoid starvation. Although Iroquoian food diplomacy allowed Indians to maintain power in their alliances with Britons and Americans, the physical act of eating was not important everywhere. And in some cases, even food diplomacy proved less important. In the southern colonies, hunger—and non-Natives’ perceptions of it—continued to matter, but food diplomacy rapidly became ineffective. For this reason, Creek and Cherokee Indians defaulted to an almost constant state of victual warfare, and violent episodes predominated.