

Document-Based Assessment



14B.J.3

Government in Pre-Columbian America

By the time of European contact, the Americas were home to millions of people. Hundreds of different cultures had developed and adapted to the various environments of their particular regions. Were the governments as varied as the cultures? Use your knowledge of the history of American Indian cultures and Documents A, B, and C to answer questions 1 through 4.

Document A

"For most Native North Americans . . . there existed no institutionalized forms of social or political power—no state, no bureaucracy, and no army. Native American societies, as a rule, were egalitarian, without the kind of centralized authority and social hierarchy typical of modern societies. Custom and tradition rather than law and coercion regulated social life. While there were leaders, their influence was generally based on personal status and not any formal or permanent status. As an early French missionary, Father LeJeune, observed in 1634 of the Montagnais-Naskapis of Labrador, Indians would not "endure in the least those who seem desirous of assuming superiority over others." Authority within a group derived from the ability to make useful suggestions and knowledge of tribal tradition and lore. Among the Eskimos, for example, a person of importance was called *Isumatag*, 'he who thinks.'"

—Carl Waldham, *Atlas of the North American Indian*

Document B

"All the business of the Five Nations Confederate Council shall be conducted by the two combined bodies of Confederate Lords. First the question shall be passed upon by the Mohawk and Seneca Lords, then it shall be discussed and passed by the Oneida and Cayuga Lords. Their decisions shall then be referred to the Onondaga Lords (Fire Keepers), for final judgment. . . .

"In all cases the procedure must be as follows: when the Mohawk and Seneca Lords have unanimously agreed upon a question, they shall report their decision to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords who shall deliberate upon the question and report a unanimous decision to the Mohawk Lords. The Mohawk Lords will then report the standing of the case to the Fire Keepers, who shall render a decision as they see fit in case of a disagreement by the two bodies, or confirm the decisions of the two bodies if they are identical. The Fire keepers shall then report their decision to the Mohawk Lords who shall announce it to the open council."

—*the Iroquois Constitution*

Document C

"Inca society and government were hierarchal and pyramidal in form. The Sapa Inca, or emperor, was believed to be a descendant of the sun god and stood at the apex of the pyramid as the absolute ruler of Inca lands. His senior councilors and provincial governors, each of whom was responsible for 10,000 people, were chosen from the aristocracy which consisted principally of his relatives. Beneath them came lesser bureaucrats and military officers, some drawn from the leaders of assimilated conquered peoples, who in turn controlled smaller numbers of imperial citizens. The system continued downward to the smallest unit, the nuclear family, with each official responsible to the Sapa Inca through the administrator who was ranked directly above him."

—Margaret Oliphant, *The Atlas of the Ancient World*

1. Which term best describes the majority of government systems in pre-Columbian America?
A hierarchical
B bureaucratic
C constitutional
D egalitarian
2. What can you conclude from Document B?
A that the Iroquois valued consensus
B that the Iroquois created a dictatorship
C that the Iroquois rejected hierarchy
D that the Iroquois encouraged conflict
3. In comparing Document A and Document C, a reader should conclude that Inca government was
A a typical pre-Columbian American government.
B an early stage of pre-Columbian American government.
C the most advanced pre-Columbian American government.
D an unusual form of pre-Columbian American government.
4. **Writing Task** What categories, or types of government existed in pre-Columbian America? What are some examples of Native American people who developed each type of government? Use your knowledge of American history and evidence from the sources above to explain your answer.