

INTRODUCTION

Crucible of War By FRED ANDERSON, 2011

The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766
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The Seven Years' War and the Disruption of the Old British Empire

Few reveries haunt history professors more insistently than the dream of writing a book accessible to general readers that will also satisfy their fellow historians' scholarly expectations. At least that dream has haunted me, and I must admit that I wrote this book because of it. What follows is a narrative intended to synthesize a sizable range of scholarship, which can (I hope) be read without specialized prior knowledge. Because my understanding of the period before the American Revolution differs from what I take to be the conventional one, however, it seems only fair to begin by sketching the broad outlines of the book's context, intent, design, and argument.

The most important event to occur in eighteenth-century North America, the Seven Years' War (or as the colonists called it, the French and Indian War) figures in most Americans' consciousness of the past as a kind of hazy backdrop to the Revolution. As citizens of a nation created by an act of collective secession from the British empire, we Americans have always tended to take as our point of reference the thirteen rebelling colonies, not the empire as a whole — or the North American continent. This perspective has generally limited our ability to see the continuities between our pre-Revolutionary past and the rest of our history. Coming to grips with the Seven Years' War as an event that decisively shaped American history, as well as the histories of Europe and the Atlantic world in general, may therefore help us begin to understand the colonial period as something more than a quaint mezzotint prelude to our national history. For indeed, if viewed not from the perspective of Boston or Philadelphia, but from Montréal or Vincennes, St. Augustine or Havana, Paris or Madrid — or, for that matter, Calcutta or Berlin — the Seven Years' War was far more significant than the War of American Independence.

Unlike every prior eighteenth-century European conflict, the Seven Years' War ended in the decisive defeat of one belligerent and a dramatic rearrangement of the balance of power, in Europe and North America alike. In destroying the North American empire of France, the war created a desire for revenge that would drive French foreign policy, and thereby shape European affairs, for two decades. At the same time, the scope of Britain's victory enlarged its American domains to a size that would have been difficult for any European metropolis to control, even under the best of circumstances, and the war created circumstances of the least favorable sort for Whitehall. Without the Seven Years' War, American independence would surely have been long delayed, and achieved (if at all) without a war of national liberation. Given such an interruption in the chain of causation, it would be difficult to imagine the French Revolution occurring as it did, when it did — or, for that matter, the Wars of Napoléon, Latin America's first independence movements, the transcontinental juggernaut that Americans call "westward expansion," and the hegemony of English-derived institutions and the English language north of the Rio Grande. Why, then, have Americans seen the Seven Years' War as little more than a footnote?

In part it has been the intensity of our focus on the Revolution as a seminal event, one that even professional historians have assumed determined both the shape of our national institutions and all the significant outcomes of our national development before the Civil War. With so much riding on it, scholarly discussion of eighteenth-century American history has necessarily been dominated by concern over the fundamental character of the Revolution and perforce its origins. In the mid-1970s, when I was in graduate school, much of what early Americanists debated in one way or another related to the motivations of the Revolutionaries: Were they fundamentally driven by material interests or by ideological concerns? It was a Big Question then and remains a powerful one even now that it has achieved a scholastic — not to say sterile — maturity. By the late 1980s,

when I undertook this project, the question had generated distinctive lines of interpretation that framed the ways historians explained eighteenth-century America almost as decisively as Vauban's magnificent fortifications framed eighteenth-century military campaigns.

On one hand (the left) ran the works of those scholars, descendants of the Progressive historians, who argued that the class interests of Americans stimulated both a movement for independence and an internal struggle over the forms of government to be imposed in the new United States. For Neo-Progressive scholars, the Revolution was an intensely human process rooted in the experience of social inequity and in a democratic striving against privilege. Concerned as they were with colonial social relations and economic conditions, the Neo-Progressives focused less frequently on the great men of the Revolution than on ordinary people — farmers, artisans, laborers, women — and such dispossessed or marginalized groups as blacks, Indians, and the poor. Looking to the opposite side of the field, one could see arrayed the intellectual fortifications of those numerous historians, sometimes called Neo-Whigs, who believed that republican political ideas determined the allegiance and the actions of the Revolutionary generation. Their Revolution, while not bloodless, was most importantly an ideological and ironic one: ideological because it followed from the shared belief that powerful men had always sought, and would always seek, to deprive their fellow citizens of liberty and property; ironic because in the conservative act of defending their liberties and estates, the decidedly elitist gentlemen who articulated the Revolution's ideals also liberated egalitarian impulses that would produce the most democratic, individualist, acquisitive society in the world.

Even in the late 1980s, of course, this military metaphor could hardly be said to depict with literal accuracy the range of scholarly opinion on the late colonial period and its relation to the Revolution. In fact, the positions of scholars fell along a spectrum that ranged from extreme materialism on one hand to an equally extreme idealism on the other. Few subscribed absolutely to a single kind of explanation, although most — if pressed hard enough — would have preferred one end of the spectrum over the other. No matter what their interpretative preferences, however, what most historians assumed without disagreement was a common starting point. And that was the problem I had in mind when I began this study.

Virtually all modern accounts of the Revolution begin in 1763 with the Peace of Paris, the great treaty that concluded the Seven Years' War. Opening the story there, however, makes the imperial events and conflicts that followed the war — the controversy over the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act crisis — into precursors of the Revolution. No matter how strenuous their other disagreements, most modern historians have looked at the years after 1763 not as contemporary Americans and Britons saw them — as a postwar era vexed by unanticipated problems in relations between colonies and metropolis — but as what we in retrospect know those years to have been, a pre-Revolutionary period. By sneaking glances, in effect, at what was coming next, historians robbed their accounts of contingency and suggested, less by design than inadvertence, that the independence and nationhood of the United States were somehow inevitable. With the assumption of inevitability came the desire to fix the original character of the Revolutionary controversies in radical or conservative impulses.

The more I thought about this problem, the more I became convinced that an alternative understanding might flow simply from beginning the story a decade earlier. Examining the period from a perspective fixed not in 1763 but in 1754 would necessarily give its events a different look and perhaps permit us to understand them without constant reference to the Revolution that no one knew lay ahead, and that no one wanted. To start in 1754 would be to begin in a world dominated by wars between the northern British colonies and New France: conflicts that had been frequent, costly, indecisive, and so central to the thinking of contemporaries that the colonists were all but incapable of imagining themselves apart from the empires to which they belonged. Such a story would begin when the greatest unity the British colonists knew came not from the relations of one colony with another, but from their common connection with what they thought of as the freest, most enlightened empire in history — and from the enemies they also shared, the papist French and their Indian allies.

Given these assumptions, and the requirements that they imposed on any narrative that would follow from them, other historical factors and agents would take on greater significance. To begin the story in the 1750s would require the inclusion of many more actors, for Indians would be anything but the incidental players they seem in accounts that look ahead to the Revolution. The Seven Years' War could not have begun unless a single desperate Iroquois chief had tried to keep the French from seizing control of the Ohio Valley; nor could the war have reached the conclusion it did, and created the consequences it did, without the participation of native peoples. This in turn cast subsequent events in a different light, suggesting that an equally interesting way to understand the last half of the eighteenth century was in imperial as well as Revolutionary terms. Perhaps we would be able to understand the founding of the United States differently, I thought, if we explained it not only in terms of political conflict within the Anglo-American community or the working out of Revolutionary ideals, but as a consequence of the forty-year-long effort to subject the Ohio Country, and with it the rest of the Transappalachian west, to imperial control.

As I wrote the chapters that follow, much exciting scholarship appeared in print: works that enriched my understanding of the events of the period and also (alas) helped to complicate my story. One strand of this new work proceeded from the efforts, largely of English historians, to describe the emergence of a British empire and national identity during the eighteenth century; the other, from the writings of American colonialists and ethnohistorians addressing the history of native peoples and their interactions with European settlers. Although they emerged from different concerns, and different scholarly communities, I found that these two strands braided together like plaits around a concept of empire best articulated by the historian Eric Hinderaker. The empires of eighteenth-century North America, he has written, can better be understood as "processes than structures," for they were not merely metropolitan creations imposed on a distant periphery of lands and peoples, but "negotiated systems," created by the interactions of peoples who "could shape, challenge, or resist colonialism in many ways." Empires, he observes, are "sites for intercultural relations."

With this definition of empire in mind (or, to be honest, a less elegantly phrased understanding of my own that resembled it) I wrote what follows, a story of violent imperial competition that resulted first in a decisive victory and then in a troubled attempt by metropolitan authorities to construct a new British empire along lines that would permit them to exercise effective control over colonies and conquests alike. It is not, therefore, a story that has the birth of an American republic anywhere in view. Its centerpiece is a war that began when the diplomatic miscalculations of the Six Nations of the Iroquois allowed the French and British empires to confront each other over the control of the Ohio Valley. The ensuing conflict spread from North America to Europe, the Caribbean basin, West Africa, India, and the Philippine archipelago: in a real although more limited sense than we intend when we apply the words to twentieth-century conflicts, a world war. While the Seven Years' War resolved none of Europe's internecine conflicts, so far as North America and the British Empire were concerned, this immense conflict changed everything, and by no means only for the better. I argue that the war's progression, from its early years of French predominance to its climax in the Anglo-American conquest of Canada, and particularly in its protraction beyond 1760, set in motion the forces that created a hollow British empire. That outcome neither foretold nor necessitated the American Revolution; as any student of Spanish or Ottoman history can testify, empires can endure for centuries on end as mere shells of cultural affiliation and institutional form. Only the conflicted attempt to infuse meaning and efficacy into the imperial connection made the Revolution a possibility.

The story that follows depicts the Seven Years' War above all as a theater of intercultural interaction, an event by which the colonists of New France and British North America came into intimate contact both with metropolitan authorities — men who spoke their languages but who did not share their views of the war or the character of the imperial relationship — and with Indian peoples, whose participation as allies, enemies, negotiators, and neutrals so critically shaped the war's outcome. Its narrative logic suggests that the early experience of the war convinced British government officials (more mindful of colonial recalcitrance in the disastrous years of 1754-57 than of their enthusiasm in the years of victory, 1758-60) that the only rational way to deal with the American colonists was to exert control from Whitehall. Thus the war's lessons prompted a

series of ministries to seek revenue from the colonies, even as they struggled to stabilize relations with the Indians and stem the outrush of settlers to regions that the war had made accessible. None of it worked.

The native peoples of the interior were the first to react negatively to changes imposed from above. They did it by launching the attacks that grew into the most successful pan-Indian resistance movement in American history, the war misleadingly called Pontiac's Rebellion. At almost precisely the same time, ministerial efforts to reform the administration of the colonies, raise modest revenues for their defense, and make the colonists more responsive to metropolitan authority precipitated violent civil disobedience in the Stamp Act crisis. Both Pontiac's Rebellion and the riotous resistance to the Stamp Act marked efforts of groups distant from the formal center of imperial power to "shape, challenge, [and] resist colonialism" — not with any intention to destroy the empire, but rather to define it in terms acceptable to themselves. Of course, no one in the British government saw the Indian insurrection or the Stamp Act riots in that way; nor did they appreciate the significance of the fact that both the Indians and the colonists, groups always more disposed to compete internally than to find common ground among themselves, had shown a sudden, unexpected capacity to achieve consensus.

This volume thus begins in a chaotic competition of two empires to control the Ohio Valley and ends with the losing empire in ruins and the victor seeking to control its fabulous gains — and seemingly being repaid for its pains with ingratitude and resistance. Taking 1766 as its stopping point allows us to understand the war as an event with direct consequences extending well beyond the conquest of Canada, detaches the Stamp Act crisis from its usual narrative function as the prologue to the Revolution, and makes manifest the parallels between the Stamp Act riots and Pontiac's War as efforts to defend local autonomy within the empire. Britain resolved both crises by 1766 in ways that reassured Indians and colonists alike that the new empire would be a tolerable place to live. The British authorities, however, had no intention of letting either Indians or colonists define the character of empire. The future of Indian relations could, for the time being, be set aside; the question of the colonists' submission could not. Britain's subsequent efforts to specify the terms of the imperial relationship, and the reactions of the colonial populations to them, would begin a new chapter in the story of an Atlantic world transformed by war.

Thus, in the larger narrative of the period as I understand it, even the later crises precipitated by the Townshend Acts and the Tea Act did not reflect a movement toward revolution so much as an effort to define the nature of the imperial relationship. In this sense, the outbreak of fighting at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1775, was less a moment in which the birth of a nation can be glimpsed than the traumatic dissolution of a once affectionate relationship between Britain and its colonies. Between 1766 and 1775 lay a decade-long effort to deal with the legacies of a great war and a prodigal victory — an effort that instead of solutions generated a constitutional stalemate. Until the shots rang out on that bright spring morning, the British empire had remained a transatlantic political community made up of subjects who, despite their differences, questioned neither their common allegiance to the Crown nor their common British identity. With April 19, however, began to dawn the kind of horrified realization that may come to a couple who, after years of bitter arguments and lengthening angry silences, suddenly find themselves hurling crockery at each other across a kitchen battlefield.

A full year stretched between the realization that the empire was falling to pieces and the Declaration of Independence — a year of war during which the American Revolution may finally be said to have begun. If I had to pick a moment from which to date that transformation, I would choose July 3, 1775, the day that the Virginian George Washington took command of a locally raised force of New England provincials who in the previous three months had killed or wounded fourteen hundred of His Majesty's troops. By taking command on behalf of all thirteen colonies, in the name of the Continental Congress, Washington turned a collection of New England regiments into a Continental Army — the physical embodiment of a political union. With that act, Washington and his men crossed at last from rebellion into revolution, and from there there was no turning back. It would still take a year to make the colonies' representatives at Philadelphia realize that the only reason for fighting was to establish the United States as an independent nation. War, and war alone, made possible the unanimity so painfully achieved in July 1776.

This book, then, offers a closely focused narrative of events that did not imply or anticipate revolutionary change: events driven by military necessity, chance, miscalculation, desperation, hope, fear, patriotism, hatred, and all the other chaotic corollaries of war. It argues that, however else one might interpret the postwar era, one must never forget the power of war to shape relations between, and within, empires. Construed in such a context, the interpretations of materialist and idealist scholars who have sought to explain the coming of the Revolution may not in fact be irreconcilable, but rather different, and partial, views of efforts to define the limits of empire in a world suddenly reshaped by an epochal victory.

Throughout the story I do my best to describe the human dimensions as well as the systemic effects of military activity. In practice this has made for a large book, because while I have sought to give space to the traditional concerns of military history — operations, strategy, logistics, and so on — I have also tried to provide sufficient coverage of cultural, social, political, and economic matters to keep battles and campaigns from wholly absorbing the narrative. But there are two further reasons for the size of this book, and I might as well conclude by confessing them. I have tried to tell a story that is, in fact, epic in scope and consequence, and I believed that the only way to do its characters justice was by seeking to recapture their story's contingency without understating either the limitations of their understanding or the transcendence of their strivings. The colonists who shed their blood and gave their treasure in the 1750s on behalf of the British empire could think of themselves as nothing else but British subjects in 1763, when they fairly reveled in the name of Briton. By 1766 they had confronted, and in their own minds had surmounted, a challenge to the British rights and liberties they loved, on behalf of which they believed they had fought and paid and bled. Their commitment to empire structured their political ideas, identities, and hopes for the future. If in their view there was no problem without an imperial solution, it was because the victory that lay behind them had created their vision of the future, no less than their understanding of the past.

It is hardly surprising that the Britons of North America did not grasp how that war and its ending could impart a very different vision of the future, and a different understanding of the past, to the men who were trying to govern the empire from London. If it is also unsurprising, from the vantage point of two centuries, that those divergent views might lead to further conflict, we can best preserve our understanding of the contingency of the events that followed if we concentrate on how much their actions owed to the war, and the victory, that towered over their present. Thus the stories of blood spilled to create an empire and blood spilled to resist that empire's sway become the same story: one that can speak to us fully only if we resist the subtler tyranny of a hindsight that suggests the creation of the American republic was somehow foreordained.