

The Seven Years' War and its Political Legacy

Thomas L. Purvis

1 Territorial Rivalries Precipitate War

GREAT Britain and France sparred for dominance in North America during three inconclusive conflicts fought between 1689 and 1748 (see chapter 4). In response to a French policy of encircling the mainland Anglo-American colonies with military posts at strategic points in disputed regions, Britain authorized armed expeditions to oust French troops from the forks of the Ohio, Lake Champlain, and the Isthmus of Chignecto during 1754 and 1755. The Newcastle ministry hoped to avoid outright war through victories so decisive that the Bourbon court would consider retaking those areas by force to be either futile or prohibitively expensive.

The French held their frontiers everywhere except Acadia, however, and delivered a rude awakening to British illusions of a quick and easy triumph by their stunning upset of General Edward Braddock's army near the forks of the Ohio (July 9, 1755). At the battle of Braddock's Defeat, French and Amerindians not only routed a British force three times their own number, but furthermore inflicted 30 percent casualties while sustaining only minor losses themselves. Braddock's regulars had been destroyed as an effective fighting force; as they limped into Philadelphia, cynics sneered that the king's soldiers had taken up winter quarters in August. Two consequences ensued from this catastrophe: first, it disabused Anglo-Americans of their impulse to idealize the British military as invulnerable – a sentiment that would have formed a considerable deterrent to risking a war for independence if not dispelled well before 1776; second, it left the Newcastle ministry no alternative but to issue a formal declaration of war against France, which George II proclaimed on May 17, 1756.

2 Wartime Frictions Emerge

The Seven Year's War became the first inter-colonial conflict in which large numbers of British regulars fought alongside provincial soldiers in North America. Both forces initially found it awkward to work amicably together. The dismal record of British generalship furthermore encouraged skepticism among Anglo-Americans about both royal troops and the king's ministers through 1757.

Britain's commanders-in-chief for North America at first experienced repeated frustration in getting colonial legislatures to raise the number of soldiers they needed. No assemblies complied fully with requisitions from Whitehall, and a few (Maryland, North Carolina, and Georgia) provided virtually no men or supplies. All the assemblies, to greater or lesser degrees, used the home government's desperate need for colonial aid to coerce governors into signing appropriation bills that either sacrificed their prerogative powers or violated specific instructions from the Board of Trade. The legislatures won their most notable victories by forcing every chief executive to accede to large emissions of legal-

tender paper money, which British policy strenuously opposed, as the price of raising provincial troops.

Royal officers generally criticized the quality of provincial units, which rarely came to the field with adequate equipment, sufficient training, or experienced officers. Colonial troops furthermore received their discharges in late fall, sometimes before the British commander-in-chief declared that year's campaign over, and the cycle would have to be repeated the following spring when fresh levies took their place. "And for my part," wrote an exasperated British colonel in 1757, "I wou[l]d rather have no Troops than to be at the Trouble & expense to form them, & when the[y] could begin to be able to perform their Duty, be oblig'd to disband them."¹

Royal officers likewise encountered many local leaders and ordinary citizens who acted more like adversaries than allies when regular forces sought recruits, logistical supplies, or winter billets. Magistrates issued writs of habeas corpus to release servants from British recruiting parties that had unlawfully inveigled them to join the service without their masters' consent; they also intervened to void enlistments by free men if evidence surfaced that they had been enrolled through fraud, deception, or alcohol. Sheriffs and justices of the peace often sympathized with farmers who refused to comply with royal impress orders obliging them to surrender horses or wagons needed by the military, and neglected to fine them.

Despite the urgent need to find winter housing for royal troops once the campaign season ended, dozens of town councils and several assemblies vigorously fought army efforts to quarter soldiers in private homes, even though no barracks or other practical alternative existed to furnish the necessary shelter. Lord Loudoun, British commander-in-chief, summarized the view of most royal officers in 1756 when he alleged that "[t]here is resistance against everything that is military in this country."²

Royal officers expressed additional disappointment that many American officers seemed unwilling to give them any more than grudging cooperation. Bad blood had been left simmering, between the two corps of officers by a War Office directive of November 12, 1754, which defined rank between them. This order gave British officers precedence over all colonials with identical rank through major (grades in which few provincials outranked any British counterparts), but then severely discriminated against colonial commanders of battalions, regiments, and brigades (colonels and generals) by subordinating them to any major of regulars. That policy generated enormous ill-will between British and American field-grade officers, besides sowing indignation among both junior officers and colonial elites, who interpreted it as a gratuitous insult belittling their own colony's contribution to the war effort. Ordinary colonial soldiers also took strong exception to the frequent failure of British commanders to honor the term of service for which they joined. Entire provincial units were kept on duty weeks past their expected discharge dates, while colonists in the regular army might wait for their discharges many months, or more than a year, after their enlistment had ended. Thousands of Americans reacted to this predicament with deep disaffection and sullen insubordination that sometimes ended in mutinous disorders.

These tensions between the British military and Anglo-Americans resembled, on a smaller scale, conflict sparked by the Royal Army's expansion in Great Britain. English magistrates and other officials vigorously resisted efforts to quarter troops in their communities, invalidated the enlistment of apprentices by recruiting parties, and sometimes confined army or navy officers to jail on trumped-up charges. Crowds frequently assaulted army recruiters or navy press gangs and rescued persons thought to have been tricked into enlisting. Innumerable communities harbored deserters and protected them from arrest. Extensive rioting convulsed ten English shires in 1757, when rumors circulated that men would be drafted from the militia into the regulars; the government only restored order after deploying 5,200 infantry and cavalry against mobs who swore "that they had rather be hanged in England, than Scalped in America."³

From 1754 to 1757, the Newcastle ministry had much difficulty building support for the war effort, because it appeared to have blundered into an expensive struggle that was enormously disruptive of its citizens' lives, without offering much hope of a decisive outcome. A sizeable minority of Englishmen acted as if a large-scale military mobilization threatened their personal liberty and property rights, and even many colonists behaved as if they were ambivalent toward a war raging on their own frontiers. Beginning in mid-1757, however, support for the government's war policy swelled dramatically in both the British Isles and America.

3 The Mainland Colonies Mobilize for Victory, 1757–1763

The year 1757 brought new military setbacks for the British, but it also marked a critical turning point, in which the empire began to summon the political will to defeat France once William Pitt became prime minister. Pitt's oratory electrified the House of Commons, and he soon captured the empire's imagination with his fighting spirit and grim determination; under his leadership, the war inexorably evolved from a desultory stalemate in the wilderness to a crusade aimed at forcing France to sue for peace from a position of military weakness and then cede valuable possessions. Pitt recognized that the colonies' manpower resources had barely been tapped and could prove decisive, so he gave priority to mobilizing the largest possible number of provincials for ensuing campaigns.

Pitt stimulated a groundswell of military support from American legislatures by promising to reimburse the bulk of costs incurred by them in raising soldiers. In both 1758 and 1759, the colonies sent 21,000 provincials into battle, fully half the troops under the British Commander-in-Chief for North America, and enabled Britain – for the first time in the war – to attempt the conquest of Canada. Since the Seven Years' War was a global struggle, in which Britain's limited population resources strained its ability to field armed forces equal to its enemies, the colonial mobilization had strategic ramifications far beyond Canada: by eliminating the need for the ministry to send any significant reinforcements of regulars to North America after 1757, the provincial levies freed many thousands of redcoats raised in Britain to fight in Germany, the Caribbean, and India, where they were desperately wanted.

Pitt and his generals devised practical solutions to problems that had bedeviled relations between regulars and provincials. The prime minister ended the rank controversy that had aroused so much animosity between senior officers of both corps by decreeing that colonial field-grade officers would no longer have to take orders from any regulars of a lesser grade (modified only by a special warrant promoting all British lieutenant colonels in America to brevet colonels). The British government also took steps to improve the quality of provincial units by supplying them with stands of new arms, camp equipage, and other necessary items whose former shortages had seriously hobbled the colonials' effectiveness.

Friction between Anglo-American civilians and the British army also subsided substantially after 1757. The controversy over quartering redcoats in private homes had largely abated by 1759, since most royal troops spent their winters garrisoned at frontier outposts, while those few behind the lines occupied barracks built for them at provincial expense. The British army likewise had developed a satisfactory logistics system by the late 1750s, and no longer made extensive use of the hated impress orders to seize wagons and draught animals from reluctant farmers. Regular soldiers moreover seem to have conducted the enlistment service more reputably than earlier in the war, so that magistrates were called on less often to investigate complaints that servants were wrongfully recruited or freemen were deceived – if not shanghaied – into joining the army.

The war years of 1758 through 1763 marked the pinnacle of British and Anglo-American cooperation. By the conflict's end, at least 60,000 Anglo-Americans had served in provincial units against the French and another 12,000 enlisted in British regular units, whereas only about 21,000 redcoats had been sent from Britain to fight in the Canadian theatre of operations. If the number of men who performed duty on privateers, as rangers, or in the bateaux corps were also included, perhaps two-fifths of all adult males completed some military service during the war, a higher ratio of the population than entered the army or navy from Great Britain.

4 The Political Legacy of the Seven Years' War

Victory invariably heals most wounds between fractious allies, and so, for Anglo-Americans in 1763, the British Empire's triumph over France far outweighed fading memories of wartime frictions with redcoats in the war's early years. The conflict enshrined British statesmen and soldiers at the forefront of the colonists' pantheon of heroes. William Pitt had innumerable communities named after him. Almost every college consistently lauded James Wolfe, the daring victor at Quebec, in its annual commencement poem well into the 1770s, while Israel Putnam, a future rebel general, named his Connecticut tavern the "Genl Wolfe." The Massachusetts Assembly commemorated just one fallen hero from the war with a monument, and that was to honor George Augustus Howe, a general in the Royal Army enormously popular among provincials, who died leading Americans at Ticonderoga. The Seven Years' War imbued the colonists with pride in the British Empire and a visceral sense of English identity.

The war left Britain's upper class grouching that the colonists had not made contributions in the struggle equal to their abilities, however. This perception stemmed in part from lack of information about colonial participation in military campaigns, a point that Benjamin Franklin noted as early as 1756. "They say," wrote Franklin, "that last Year, at Nova Scotia, 2000 New England Men, and not more than 200 Regulars, were join'd in the Taking [of Fort] Beau Sejour; yet it could not be discover'd by the Account sent by Govr. Lawrence, and publish'd in the London Gazette, that there was a single New England-Man concern'd in the Affair."⁴

Britain's political elite also tended to discount the colonial military contribution because, from their perspective, the most important measure of support for a war effort was not the number of soldiers mustered, but the amount of taxes paid and debt incurred. The aristocracy and landed gentry, who owed most taxes, endured increasing levies on their rent rolls that peaked at 25 percent of annual income. Britain's national debt moreover nearly doubled from £72,289,673 in 1755 to £129,586,789 by 1764, with annual interest charges exceeding £5,000,000, while the accumulated colonial debt was about £1,000,000 in 1764. England's landed elite, whose members dominated Parliament, felt enormous resentment that Parliament had voted over £1,000,000 in subsidies for the 13 colonies, about 40 percent of their total military expenditures, for raising troops in a war initiated to defend the Anglo-Americans' very own frontiers. When it was learned that garrisoning and governing the conquered territories of Canada and Florida would entail annual costs of nearly £250,000, irresistible pressure began building for the colonies to bear part of that expense through a parliamentary tax.

As British public opinion turned increasingly antagonistic toward Anglo-Americans, political support materialized for measures that would reform imperial administration through stricter supervision and control over the colonies. The Board of Trade had unsuccessfully tried to strengthen metropolitan authority from 1748 to 1755; it abandoned those efforts during the Seven Years' War to avoid offending American legislators, whose help was needed against the French (see chapter 13). The war confronted Whitehall's bureaucrats with several problems that reinforced their predisposition for tighter control over the colonies: allegations of widespread American smuggling indicated that enforcement of the Navigation Acts had grown too slack; as the amount of paper money circulating expanded by 355 percent in North America from 1754 to 1764, British merchants lobbied the Board of Trade to resume its former antagonism against fiat currencies; Pontiac's uprising of 1763 stirred concern that Anglo-American expansion, if left unchecked, could trigger future Amerindian conflicts that would drain the Treasury; and most importantly, Whitehall concluded from the recalcitrance shown by a handful of colonies (Maryland, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina) that to comply with royal requisitions for wartime assistance, Parliament should establish a tax in America to help offset the cost of occupying the former enemy territories of Canada and Florida. It was consequently issues arising out of the Seven Years' War that furnished the very rationale underlying those British policies most objectionable to Anglo-Americans in the early 1760s, namely the customs service's crackdown on colonial smuggling that spawned the writs of assistance controversy, the Proclamation of 1763, the Sugar Act, the Currency Act of 1764, the Quartering

Act of 1765, and the Stamp Act. The impact of these measures, as James Otis observed in 1764, was to “set people a thinking, in six months, more than they had done in their whole lives before.”⁵

The Grenville ministry’s program struck the colonies like a thunderbolt precisely because the Seven Years’ War had absorbed their population’s energies to an unprecedented degree. Like other Americans, Otis took immense pride in the provincial contribution to victory over the French. “In the late war the northern colonies not only raised their full quota of men but they went even beyond their ability,” he affirmed, “the flower of our youth were annually pressed by ten thousands into the service.”⁶

Despite what Otis and other Americans saw as incontrovertible evidence that “the Colonies had been so remarkable for loyalty,” they discovered themselves facing a sudden barrage of new restrictions, unprecedented taxes, and an unmistakable posture of hostility directed against them from Britain. An especially spirited boldness marked the protests of colonies that had been most energetic in prosecuting the Seven Years’ War. Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York had exerted themselves to an extraordinary degree against the French in the number of troops raised, money expended, and indebtedness incurred. These three colonies took the lead in protesting the Grenville program, and this forwardness sprung in large part from an intensely felt sense of betrayal upon realizing that their wartime sacrifices had not brought the esteem to which they thought themselves entitled, but rather rank ingratitude, punitive laws, and unconstitutional taxes.

It was the crowning irony of the Seven Years’ War to create conditions that would precipitate a constitutional crisis at the very moment when the 13 colonies had made significant contributions to Great Britain’s emergence as Europe’s foremost imperial power. The colonial military mobilization had been essential in enabling Britain to conquer Canada, but the assemblies attracted frequent criticism at Whitehall because – like most democratic institutions (including Parliament) – they not only tended to wage war inefficiently, but also constrained royal officials to accept help on their own terms, often in violation of British policy. By the war’s end, a consensus had emerged among British leaders that the colonies needed to be brought under closer supervision; mounting pressure came simultaneously from the aristocracy and landed gentry to relieve their crushing tax burden by finding new sources of revenue in the provinces. Once the Grenville program came in response to these impulses, Anglo-Americans opposed it vigorously, in large part because they had taken fresh stock of themselves and grown in self-confidence after making unprecedented sacrifices to help defeat western Europe’s largest kingdom. Having left in its wake a never-ending financial crisis that would drive British leaders repeatedly to seek a colonial revenue, while stiffening American readiness to oppose parliamentary taxes, the Seven Years’ War created the political circumstances chiefly responsible for producing the Stamp Act crisis and the Townshend Acts Crisis.

REFERENCES

1 Henry Bouquet to Arthur Dobbs, Sep. 29, 1757, in J. L. Tottenham and L. M. Wad-

dell, eds., *The Papers of Henry Bouquet*, 5 vols. to date (Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1951–), I, 201.

2 Loudoun to Commodore Holmes, Sep. 30, 1756. Loudoun Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

3 J[ob] S[anton] Charlton to Duke of Newcastle, Aug. 27, 1757. Newcastle Papers, British Library, London.

4 Benjamin Franklin to Sir Everard Fawkener, July 27, 1756, in Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 33 vols. to date (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960–) VI, 473.

5 *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (Boston, 1764), 54. 6 *Ibid.*, 72.