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Colonial Wars Essay
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At the end of the fifteenth century colonialism was on the rise in Europe. Over the next four hundred years, colonialism would be a driving force behind all of the actions of European monarchs and its driving economic force was mercantilism. Mercantilism was applied differently by each state, through varying adherence to the theory. Still, mercantilism was a common thread because it justified and even defined colonialism. The lenient approach of the British to mercantilism led to relative autonomy in its American colonies, thus a society distinctly different from that of the mother country's with a strong desire for independence evolved.

Mercantilism is the economic philosophy that corresponded to the political development of colonial empires. In mercantilist theory, the colonies are supposed to furnish raw materials for the mother country, the country that is colonizing them, so that it may produce finished products. These finished products may be sold back to the colonies or to foreign markets. All mercantilist states want more exports than imports, and colonies are to provide the materials needed to keep this balance. In Europe, the states applying mercantilist policy often had government sponsored companies, such as the British East India Company, that extracted and sold the goods. They were private companies looking to make a profit, but had government backing and the government made money from the increased trade the companies produced.

France was the strictest adherer to the mercantilist philosophy. Under Jean Colbert's economic and financial policies, during the reign of Louis XIV France's power and wealth expanded greatly. Numerous other countries would attempt to model their colonial empires after France's. The French did not even settle many people in their colonies, but purely extracted natural resources to make as much money as possible from them. If the colony is only supposed to provide raw materials for the mother, then no settlement beyond administration is necessary.

The British Empire was more lax in its observance of the mercantilist philosophy, which permitted a society distinct from England's to evolve. The British allowed many people to move into their colonies, especially those in North America. In fact, they even encouraged groups of people, such as religious and political dissenters, to relocate in North America. The British government also encouraged the poor to leave England and "seek their fortune" in America. Many of the poor came as indentured servants. During the seventeenth century, seventy five to eighty five percent of the one hundred thirty thousand immigrants to Maryland and Virginia were indentured servants. The population of the North American British colonies grew tremendously in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the number of commercial centers far outnumbered the administrative centers. This was very different from the sparsely populated French colonies. The British also allowed self government in the American colonies, an approach a strict mercantilist state would not have taken. The colonies began to develop a distinctive culture of their own as there was no dominant government and the colonies were some six thousand miles away from the mother country. This culture varied even from colony to colony, particularly different from one another were the northern, urban colonies and the southern, rural ones. Due to the lax approach of the British, the American colonies were in no way uniform towards serving the mother country.

In their doctrine, the British followed strict mercantilist philosophy, but not in practice. From 1651 to 1673, Parliament passed a series of laws known as the Navigation Acts. These acts attempted to apply mercantilism to the American colonies. The acts established three principles; 1) only English ships or colonial merchants could trade with the colonies, 2) certain valuable goods could only be sold to the mother country (for example wool, sugar, tobacco, indigo, other dyes, and ginger.), 3) all foreign goods destined for sale in the colonies had to go to

England first and pay English import duties there. The Navigation Acts were more difficult to enforce than to write. The North American coastline had many harbors that provided refuge for smugglers when the government was closely monitoring for illegal transactions. Usually, colonial officials simply did nothing when illegally imported wares appeared for sale in colonial markets. Other than the Navigation Acts, the British demonstrated little authority over their American colonies until the 1760s.

For nearly one hundred years, the American colonies traded amongst themselves, with England, and illegally with other countries, such as France. This period in which there was virtually no authority was pressed upon them has been called a time of “salutary neglect”. Colonists were neglected by the rulers in England, yet it was beneficial in the sense that the colonies prospered at this time because of the laidback approach to mercantilism. This period aided in the progress towards independence, because the colonies were free to develop their own ideas and society, though this ultimately undermined British power in America. In New England, the Puritans built their “City on a Hill” and tried to create a model society. In Pennsylvania and the middle colonies, trade thrived as craftsmen from all over Europe began to settle there. (Another way the British were more laidback with regards to their mercantilism is that they permitted immigration from all over Europe.) In the southern colonies, tobacco farming made some people extremely rich and increased the desire for free (slave) labor to do the tedious jobs of planting and picking. It is necessary to note that the colonists did deeply believe that they were British subjects and did not consider themselves “Americans”. It was not until the 1760s that restlessness began to grow.

The Seven Years’ War (French and Indian War) ended in 1763 in Europe with the Treaty of Paris, but it began in 1754 in the American colonies. (The fighting began in Europe some two

years later.) The British and French were two preeminent empires in Europe, with each one wanting to dominate the other. Fighting and skirmishes were not uncommon between their armies in Europe, their ships at sea, and their colonists abroad. The war had been very costly to the British and they were deeply in debt at the end of it. The British could not tax the English at home anymore, for they were being taxed to the maximum. Thus they began to look for other sources of revenue, and decided to tax the colonies where the fighting had started. The British reasserted their power over their American colonies, and between 1764 and 1767 implemented the Sugar, Stamp, and Townshend Acts. In mercantilist philosophy, the British should have never let the American colonies have as much freedom as they had had and it was challenging for the British to execute their aims-increased taxation.

Great Britain, represented by Parliament and the king, felt that they had always had the power to tax the colonies, but after having been overlooked for so long the American colonists began to resent the reassumed authority. Indeed, other British colonies had certainly received more attention from the mother country. The Caribbean colonies were exceedingly successful for the British and therefore worthy much more attention. The Caribbean colonies had huge sugar plantations that were extremely profitable to the British, because it was not only a popular flavoring in England, but elsewhere, too. They could sell it as a finished export, which followed the mercantilist tenet of exporting finished goods, not raw ones. Meanwhile, the American colonists began to resist this increasing power exerted by Britain. Such resistance showed itself in the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, and the convening of a continental congress.

Great Britain's lenient approach and application of mercantilism allowed a separate society and a desire for independence to evolve in its American colonies. The British permitted self government and poor enforcement of the Navigation Acts creating a period of "salutary

neglect". This period was the era in which the colonies began to drift from the mother country. The distance was not even felt, perhaps, until the attempted implementation of the acts following the Seven Years' War. Each European state that employed mercantilist philosophy did so differently. The British approach, which was more relaxed, permitted the first rebellion of a colony of any nation around the world.

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