

The French and Indian War

In 1689, a series of wars broke out involving Great Britain, France, and Spain. The winner stood to gain supremacy in the West Indies, Canada, and the lucrative American colonial trade. In the first and second wars, King William's War (1689-1697) and Queen Anne's War (1702-1713), the British attempted and failed to capture Quebec, while the Native Americans, supported by the French, attacked British frontier settlements. However, by the end of Queen Anne's War, the British prevailed and gained France's Nova Scotia and trading rights in Spanish America. During King George's War (1744-1748), the French and Spanish once again attacked British colonies. In Georgia, James Oglethorpe led a colonial army that repulsed Spanish attacks; in the north, a group of New Englanders captured Louisbourg, a major French fortress. In the peace treaty that ended the war, Britain returned Louisbourg back to the French in exchange for political and economical gains in India.

In the first three wars, the fighting focused primarily on Europe and secondarily on the colonies. However, in the French and Indian War (1756-1763), the fighting began in the colonies and spread throughout Europe. The British and French realized the value of the colonies and sent large numbers of troops to North America rather than rely on colonial forces.

The British believed that the French provoked the war by building forts in the Ohio River Valley to halt the westward growth of the British colonies. Hoping to stop the completion of the French Fort Duquesne, which would give the French control of the Ohio River Valley, the governor of Virginia sent a small armed force under a young George Washington. After winning a small victory in the Battle of Great Meadows,

Washington's troops surrendered to the French and their Native American allies on July 3rd, 1754. The battle began the French and Indian War.

At first, the war went badly for the British. In 1755, General Edward Braddock of Virginia and his 2,000 British and colonial troops were routed by a smaller force of French and Native Americans near Fort Duquesne, ending in disaster. The Algonquin Indians were attacking the frontier from Pennsylvania to North Carolina. Both British invasions of French Canada in 1756 and 1757 failed.

However there were some events early in the war that raised British and American spirits. In June 1755, Massachusetts governor William Shirley and his forces succeeded in taking Fort Beausejour, which occupied a strategic position between Nova Scotia and Acadia. As a security measure, the British expelled many of the French-speaking citizens from Nova Scotia, fearing that they would aid the enemy. In September of 1755, the colonies, under General William Johnson, halted the French advance on Lake George, but the planned follow-up attack on Crown Point never occurred due to stubborn New England soldiers.

The small colonial conflict was transformed into a major European war in 1756. Illuminating a reversal of past alliances, Austria allied with France and Prussia with Britain. The British failures continued in North America with the loss of Fort Oswego to the French in 1756. Louis Joseph became the new French commander and pushed southward along Lake Champlain and Lake George. Finally in 1757 Fort William Henry fell to the French, leaving Albany vulnerable.

It seemed that Austria and France were going to break the forming superpower of Britain. But, the numbers did not lie. By 1757, the French had an army of 10,000 French

and Canadian soldiers in North America (the Native American allies had become undependable), while the British had 20,000 regulars and an equal number of colonial militia. The overall population of British North America was ten times that of New France. A turning point in the war was inevitable. This turning point occurred in 1758 after William Pitt gained full control of the British war effort.

Pitt concluded that North America was the key to the worldwide struggle and concentrated the government's military strategy on conquering Canada. He instituted several changes. Britain paid Frederick the Great of Prussia to prosecute the war in Europe, freeing Britain to concentrate on North America. Pitt instructed the royal navy to blockade the French fleet, providing a safer passage of soldiers and supplies to America. And, he introduced two dynamic commanders, Jeffrey Amherst and James Wolfe.

In 1758, the war began to favor the British. Amherst and his forces gained control of the mouth of the St. Lawrence River in July, by capturing the fortress at Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island. James Bradstreet and his New England soldiers captured Fort Frontenac on the eastern end of Lake Ontario. Finally in September, the soldiers of John Forbes and George Washington conquered Fort Duquesne, and renamed it Fort Pitt. The only setback that the British incurred was the failure of James Abercromby to take Fort Carillon.

But the fortune continued into 1759, which became known as the "Year of Victories". Sir William Johnson captured Fort Niagara, which was a vital link between Lakes Ontario and Erie. In September, Quebec fell to General James Wolfe, sealing the fate of French Canada. By September 1760, the British captured the last important holdout, Montreal. Indian warfare continued on the frontier for the next few years,

culminating in events such as Pontiac's Rebellion. Through the Treaty of Paris (1763) the war ended and Great Britain acquired both French Canada and Spanish Florida. France ceded Louisiana and claims west of the Mississippi River to Spain in compensation for Spain's loss of Florida. Many other exchanges occurred in the West Indies, India, Africa, and the Mediterranean. Britain made many gains, but could have received more. King George III, new to the throne, was anxious to conclude the conflict.

The initial reaction to the British triumph in the French and Indian War was an outburst of pride in Britain and in the colonies. However the unity did not last long. A huge debt had been incurred by the war. George III prepared to reduce the debt and increase control over the colonies, but the colonists' perception of Britain had changed. During the war, New England shipping interests had traded with the French in the West Indies, which demonstrated a greater loyalty to profit than to Britain. Colonial legislatures had been reluctant to tax to provide funds for the war, but willingly accepted subsidies ordered from the Royal Treasury by William Pitt. The elimination of the French in North America was viewed by many colonists as an invitation to seek lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Many Americans concentrated on local and personal interests, not imperial concerns. A separate American identity was forming and many colonists no longer viewed themselves as British. Also, anger within the merchant class surfaced. They wondered why their economic benefit was not of most importance. Respectively, the British came away from the war with a low opinion of colonial war effort and the view that the colonists were both unable and unwilling to defend the new frontiers.

The British victory of the French and Indian War could not hide the rift between the colonies and the mother country. The colonists demonstrated increased concern over the permanent British military presence. This fear intensified as the British demanded imperial reform, imposed taxes, and stationed even more army units in colonial port cities. Ironically, the British efforts to tighten control throughout the empire sparked the flames of revolution in the colonies that paved the way for the creation of the United States of America.

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