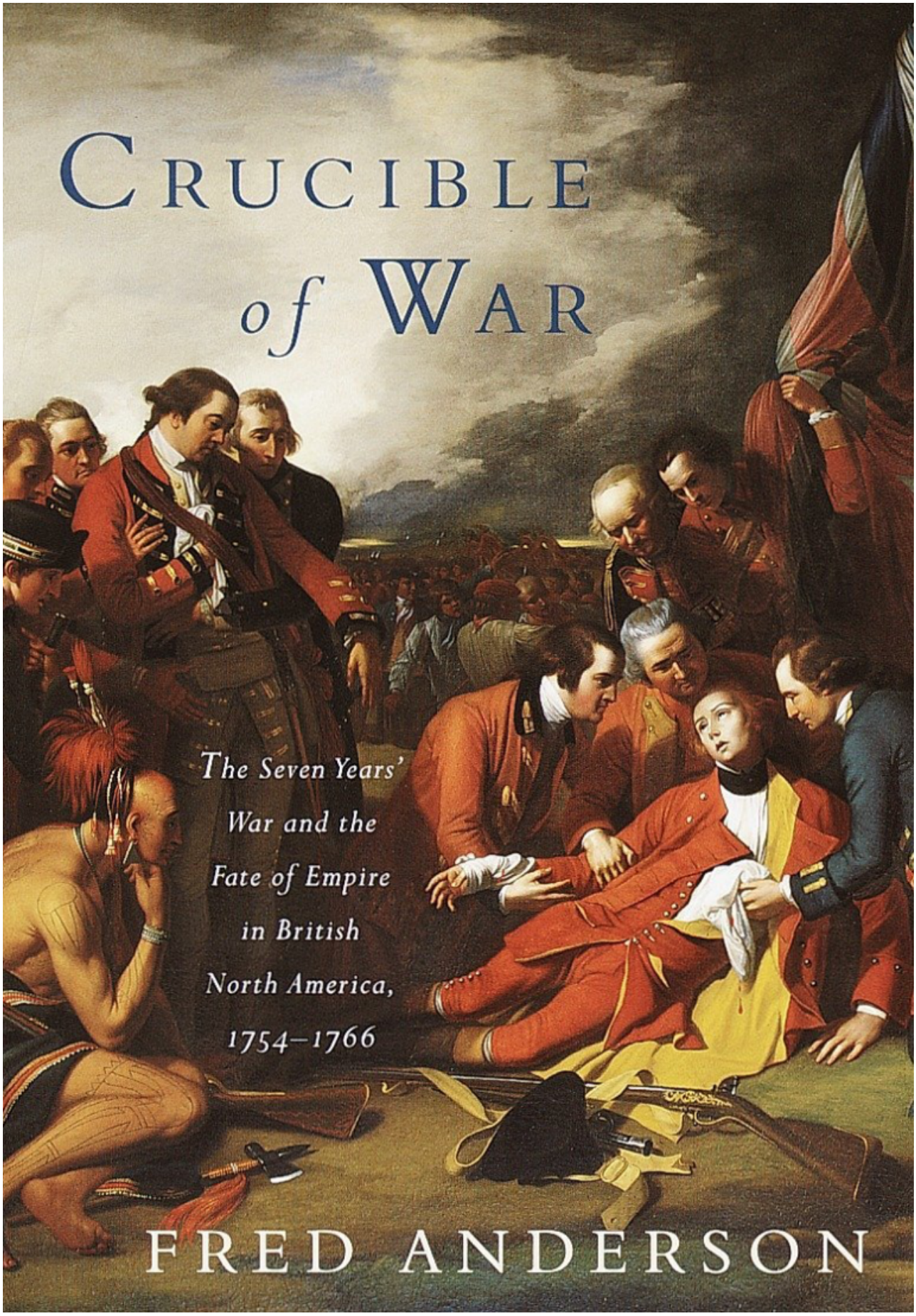
Crucible of War: Some Context, and a Sketch of the Narrative


CRUCIBLE
of WAR
The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766
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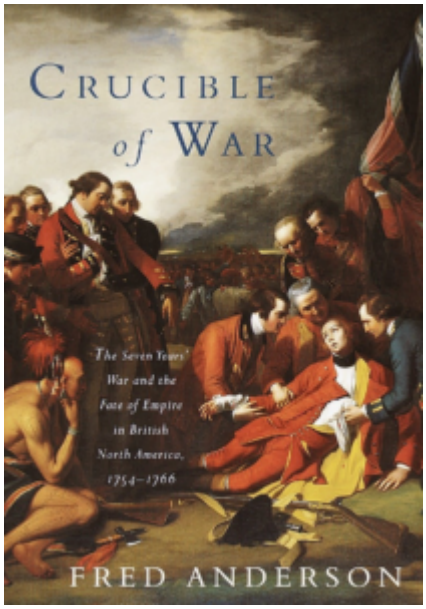

In the fall of 1987 I was on leave and hoping to write a quick book on the Revolutionary era. My wife, Virginia DeJohn Anderson, had just returned to teaching at the University of Colorado, after giving birth to our son, Samuel, and I was on duty as daytime caregiver. Finding that he slept a good deal between feedings, I convinced myself that I could take advantage of those long naps to produce a textbook for use in upper-division Revolution courses. I set out to shape it according to the way I had been teaching my own Revolution course, with a beginning in the period of the War of Jenkins' Ear and King George's War (1739-48), and its end in the early 1790s.

Sam proved a good sleeper that year. By its end I found that I had written something like two hundred pages of text, but my project had altered out of all recognition. Rather than the high-level, argument-driven book I had planned, I was writing a more closely focused narrative, emphasizing contingency and driven largely by the effects of individual acts, decisions, and accidents. So I set aside my plans for a short book, threw away most of what I had written, and embarked on writing a kind of history I had never before attempted. The result ultimately became *Crucible of War*, a book that I came to understand as an attempt to use narrative as a means of achieving scholarly synthesis. I hoped to tell the story of the Seven Years' War and its effects by creating an argument that would function as a plot, providing a framework both for explaining the actions of the characters and for assessing their impact on the course of events.

Half-consciously, I had undertaken to write history in the mode Bernard Bailyn advocated in his December 1981, presidential address to the American Historical Association. Bailyn argued that the "essential narratives" of modern historiography would do three things: give "a sense of movement through time"; fully incorporate the findings of what he called "the technical studies," or monographic social histories; and "concentrate on critical transitions from the past toward the present." To attain these goals, historians would have to accomplish three tasks. First they would need to integrate "latent

events”—demographic trends, migration patterns, and other fundamental conditions that contemporary witnesses did not fully grasp, but which have become evident in retrospect—with “manifest events” such as wars and commercial depressions, on which contemporaries commented. Second, because these new narrators had to connect the latent and the manifest in history, they would need to address the “critical transitions” they described not narrowly or in isolation, but as part of world-historical processes. Finally, the writers of these narratives would have to integrate the history of culture and consciousness into the history of external events. The “comprehensive narration” that would result from all this, Bailyn maintained, would take the fragmented understanding of groups, events, and structures that the “technical studies” had produced, and

put the story together again, . . . [drawing] together the information available . . . into readable accounts of major developments. These narratives will incorporate anecdote but they will not be essentially anecdotal; they will include static, “motionless” portrayals of situations, circumstances, and points of view of the past, but they will be essentially dynamic; they will concentrate on change, transition, and the passage of time; and they will show how major aspects of the present world were shaped—acquired their character—in the process of their emergence. [**1**]

I do not maintain that I accomplished all of this, or even a part of it: only that I tried my best to write in that essentially story-driven mode. At the heart of my story I placed interactions between several cultural groups—metropolitan English, metropolitan French, colonial Anglo-Americans, colonial Franco-Americans, native American peoples in alliance with those groups, and native peoples who sought to stand apart from the Europeans and Euro-Americans—for I wanted to argue that the Seven Years’ War was a theater of cultural interaction. Insofar as each group had leaders, their actions, decisions, and understandings had to play a central role in creating the tapestry of stories that would make up the narrative as a whole. Because the war was also a world-girdling conflict, I tried to frame these largely North American interactions with the strategic, political, and diplomatic narrative of the war as a whole. Finally, because I intended to examine both the war and its effects, I extended the coverage of the narrative beyond the typical endpoints of 1760 (the conquest of Canada) or 1763 (the Peace of Paris) into the postwar era, in order to explain such events as the Stamp Act crisis not as harbingers of Revolution, but as results of changes in imperial relationships.

The net effect of these self-imposed requirements (several of which I discovered only as I wrote) was to make me create seven principal story lines, each with its own trajectory and cast of characters; these I wove together, as best I could, into a single counterpointed story. That story had, in effect,

five parts: the colonial and imperial contexts of the war's outbreak, the two phases of the fighting in North America (1754-58 and 1758-60), the war's long coda in the West Indies, Europe, and around the world (1761-63), and the postwar period of adjustment to empire.

If the outbreak of the war had to do with diplomatic factors driven by American conditions and dependent on the actions of Indian peoples, the two phases of active fighting in America corresponded quite precisely to European influences. The years from 1754 through 1758 saw virtually uninterrupted French successes because the French adhered to their proven strategic formula from previous conflicts, *la petite guerre.* Relying on Indian allies acting in cooperation with Canadian militiamen and *troupes de la Marine,* the French raided English frontier settlements, killing and capturing many hundreds of civilians and throwing tens of thousands more into flight; then they attacked fortified outposts whenever the opportunity appeared. This was war waged on Indian terms, and it allowed France's native allies to act independently in choosing targets and tactics. *La petite guerre* drew no sharp distinctions between combatants and noncombatants and made generous allowances for mourning-war practices of captive taking. The first commander-in-chief France sent to America, the baron de Dieskau, showed no inclination to meddle with the practice.

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But Dieskau was wounded and captured in 1755, and his more rigid successor the marquis de Montcalm shunned *la petite guerre* and the long-established usages of Indian warfare. Horrified by the taking of captives and trophies after the surrender of Oswego in 1756, he ransomed the hostages for gifts and brandy, and thus in the following year attracted the largest contingent of Indian warriors ever assembled to fight the English. The "massacre" at Fort William Henry in 1757 was in fact a tragic episode that Montcalm promoted by trying to treat Indian warriors as auxiliaries rather than allies. Montcalm's commitment to the values of European professional military culture and his disdain for what he saw as barbarous Canadian-Indian practices effectively drove away the Indian allies on whom New France had relied for more than a century.

Ironically, Montcalm's understanding of warfare as an activity that clearly distinguished between combatants and noncombatants prepared the way for the British army and its Anglo-American auxiliaries to win an unlimited victory. Montcalm's metropolitan ideals and prejudices led him to confront the redcoats of Major General James Wolfe on professional, conventional terms on the Plains

of Abraham in 1759, where they cost him his life. His successor, the chevalier de Lévis, was a more adaptable officer, but he could neither reconstruct the Indian alliances Montcalm had destroyed nor offset the numerical advantage of the British forces without reinforcements and vast quantities of supplies from France. Neither ever came.

While Montcalm was weakening the French by Europeanizing Canadian war fighting, changes in the British approach reversed a singular series of defeats and prepared the ground for an unprecedented victory. In 1755 the ministry had intervened directly in North American land operations for the first time, sending a commander-in-chief and a contingent of regular troops to fight. Major General Edward Braddock and his successor, the earl of Loudoun, were as professional in outlook as Montcalm, shared his abhorrence of alliances with Indians, and carried commissions that authorized them to stipulate the manpower and financial contributions of the various colonies to the war effort. The colonies' reluctance to be subjected to the commanders-in-chief's orders grew by 1757 into virtual refusals to cooperate. Colonial noncooperation contributed to the military disasters that culminated in the loss of Fort William Henry, the nadir of the war for Britain.

But the ingenious, improvised solutions of William Pitt—who as secretary of state for the southern department and chief minister from late 1757 through 1761 promised reimbursements to the colonies in proportion to their participation in the war effort, and who restored colonial autonomy by restricting the powers of the commander-in-chief—regained colonial enthusiasm and support just as Montcalm destroyed them in Canada. That renewal of morale; the thousands of redcoats Pitt sent to carry on military operations; the support of tens of thousands of provincial troops who answered the call for volunteers; and a diplomatic initiative that broke the alliance between the Ohio Indians and the French in 1758: all these reversed the course of the war. Yet neither the Anglo-American seizure of Fort Duquesne in 1758 nor the conquest of Québec in 1759 proved decisive. What finally determined the outcome of the war in America were two nearly simultaneous, reinforcing developments in 1759: the Battle of Quiberon Bay (November 20) and the Six Nations's decision to abandon the neutral stance it had maintained since 1755 and join the Anglo-Americans in the Niagara campaign. The battle cost the French navy its ability to operate on the Atlantic, denying Lévis the reinforcements and supplies he needed to capture Québec and resist the invading Anglo-American armies. The absence of trade goods and weapons simultaneously prevented him from rebuilding the Indian alliances that Montcalm had destroyed, so that the Iroquois alliance with the Anglo-Americans tipped the strategic balance irrevocably against the French.

The final acts of what had become a worldwide war between England, France, and (from 1762) Spain saw another wave of British victories, culminating in the surrender of Havana (August 14, 1762) and Manila (October 5, 1762). These helped create the unshakable conviction that British arms were invincible, and produced a treaty that gave Britain sovereignty over the eastern half of North

America, transferring Louisiana to a defeated and severely shaken Spain. Britain, preeminent in Europe, seemed about to achieve hegemony in North America.

And yet the Seven Years' War ended as it did only because the wholesale reliance of the contesting parties on European methods gave the advantage to the better-equipped, -supplied, and -manned armies. Britain's forces were all of those; yet the fact that they were in no sense fated to triumph can clearly be read in the history of Pontiac's War, 1763-65. This "rebellion" of Indians formerly allied with the French, precipitated by British efforts to economize and reform long-standing practices in trade and diplomacy, cost the redcoats at least four hundred lives and the Anglo-American colonists more than two thousand, reduced the British presence in the newly conquered West to three isolated posts, and once more emptied the frontiers of settlers. In the end, the "rebels" ceased fighting not because the British reconquered the interior—they had no hope of doing that—but because the Indians ran out of arms and ammunition. Having demonstrated that Britain would occupy its interior forts at Indian sufferance, the Indians got back the terms of trade they wanted and secured promises that no settlers would cross the Appalachians. The British army reestablished only a symbolic presence in the West. Viewed in terms that the Indians would have found understandable, the treaties that ended Pontiac's War marked an Indian, not a British, victory. The great pan-Indian uprising had demonstrated the inadequacy of coercion as a basis for imperial control; but the lingering vision of glorious victory blinded Britain to a lesson that might have saved its empire from destruction.

For indeed George III and his ministers drew exactly the wrong conclusion from the war and as a result embarked on a disastrous program of retrenchment and reform intended to bring the colonists into line. In that sense the Stamp Act crisis furnished a parallel case to the great Indian rebellion, for it too represented a local rebellion in favor of the status quo against an assertion of metropolitan authority. Both during the war and in its aftermath, resistance to the costs of empire—whether levies of men or money, or restrictions on the liberties of localities or individuals—had been most pronounced when they seemed at odds with a sense of empire that was, at bottom, supremely voluntarist. In that sense the surliness and foot-dragging of the colonists in 1755-57 reflected no more (and no less) than the impulse that underlay colonial refusal to pay taxes in support of a peacetime military establishment. Thus in small ways before 1763 and in large ones thereafter, the war catalyzed the dialectic of imperial citizenship.

The success of the British between 1754 and 1763 thus made it possible to argue about what it meant to be British. That was precisely what the colonists did—first with words, then with economic sanctions, and finally with powder and ball—over the next two decades. In the process, men like Washington and Franklin who had been passionately committed to the empire were driven to defend their notions of rights and privileges in increasingly universalist terms. The essence of their Revolution lay in the replacement of subjecthood

with citizenship, which reformulated the idea of community in terms of voluntary allegiance. Their voluntarist understanding in turn formed the grounds on which the white male property holders of the thirteen colonies could create not just a new republic, but a new empire, one far more effective at projecting its power into the interior of the continent than the British empire had ever been. Thus the long process of bringing the Ohio Valley under military control, begun by a naive Virginia provincial officer in 1754, would finally reach its completion forty years later when that bumbling youth had finally grown up to become president of the United States.

Note

1. Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 87 (February 1982): 7, 10, 11, 24.

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