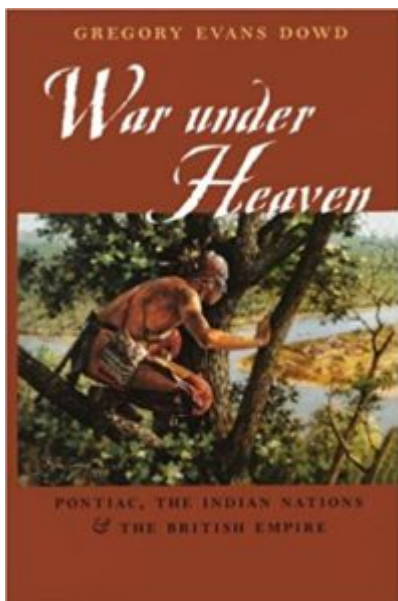
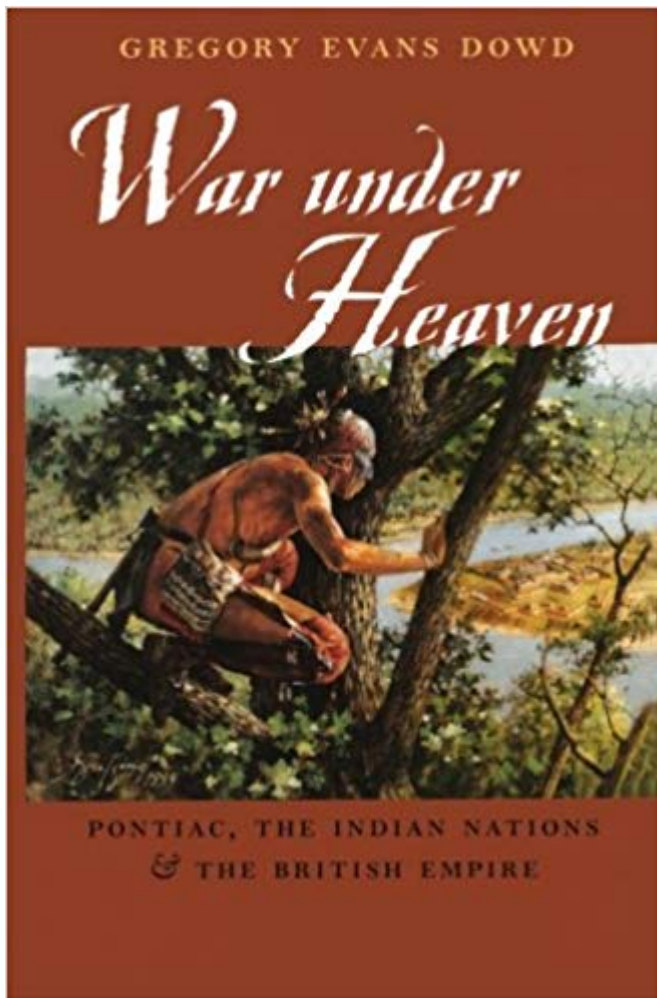


A Redesigned Pontiac for the Twenty-First Century



Gregory Evans Dowd, War under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, and the

British Empire. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xvi, 360 pp., cloth, \$32.00. Review by Timothy J. Shannon.

During the summer of 1763, warriors from the Ottawa, Objibwa, Potawatomi, Wyandot, Miami, Delaware, Shawnee, and Seneca nations attacked British forts and homesteads in an arc stretching from the tip of the Michigan peninsula to the Greenbriar Valley of Virginia. Whether their attacks represented a purposeful, coordinated offensive is open to question, but their mutual grievances against the British Empire are not.

Historians have always had a hard time deciding how to describe this paroxysm of intercultural violence. Was it the epilogue of the Seven Years' War in North America, a last ditch effort by Indians formerly allied with the French to restore the balance of power between natives and newcomers they had known in their homelands previous to 1760? Or, was it the opening act of the American Revolution, an episode of administrative and military incompetence that presaged Great Britain's mismanagement of its North American colonies between 1765 and 1775? Was this conflict a war, similar in scale to the destruction and panic King Philip's War unleashed in New England nearly a century earlier, or was it a brief, futile rebellion by Indians against their new British overlords? And what of the figure whose name has ever since been attached to this conflict: was Ottawa leader Pontiac the conspiratorial mastermind behind the most significant pan-Indian resistance movement of the colonial era, or was he simply the most notorious of many war chiefs who acted autonomously in venting their rage against the British?

Among historians of early America, the consensus in recent years has been to underplay Pontiac's role as a visionary patriot chief but at the same time to elevate the conflict that bears his name from a "rebellion" to an all-out war that stopped British imperial expansion in its tracks, at least temporarily. Gregory Evans Dowd provides a thoughtful, expertly researched articulation of that consensus in his new book, which is certain to supplant Howard Peckham's *Pontiac and the Indian Uprising* (Princeton, 1947) as the definitive scholarly account of the conflict. While Dowd artfully dodges the juxtaposition of "Pontiac" and "War" in his title, he clearly considers this conflict much more than an ill-fated rebellion, and he accords Pontiac a central role in its making. For Dowd, Pontiac's War created an irreparable rift between Indians and colonizers in North America that would color all subsequent encounters between these groups. It is to this conflict that we can trace both the Euro-American impulse to wipe the frontier clear of Indians and the Indians' reliance on nativist spiritual movements to resist that effort.

Like historians before him, Dowd finds the origins of this conflict in the failure of British military officers to assume the diplomatic responsibilities they inherited from the French at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War. Following the lead of commander-in-chief Sir Jeffrey Amherst, the British

expressed disdain for Indian diplomatic customs and cut off the supply of presents to Indians formerly allied with the French. Dowd correctly points out that this disregard cannot be attributed to British unfamiliarity with Indian custom, for they had been engaged in such diplomacy with eastern Indians since the seventeenth century. Rather, it was a product of the hubris born from their conquest of Canada. Convinced of their superior might, the British decided they could do as they pleased. After all, with the French gone, they were now the only game in town. It was time for the Indians to bend to their rules.

That hubris pushed Pontiac and his allies to go to war against the British in 1763. While they attacked Detroit, Indians in the Ohio Country laid siege to Fort Pitt and destroyed several smaller posts west of the Allegheny Mountains. The Indians also raided some colonial homesteads in areas of disputed possession, but Dowd emphasizes that the Indians' grievances had less to do with land grabbing by squatters than with the British officers and agents who had ceased to treat them with the respect and generosity that allies deserved. Inspired by the Delaware prophet Neolin, these Indians revived traditional methods of appealing to sacred power, such as the black drink ceremony, to spread their message of resistance to the new imperial order.

Dowd's depiction of the British and Anglo-Americans involved in this conflict is less nuanced than his depiction of the Indians, but not without merit. He bucks a recent trend among historians to distinguish between racist colonists anxious to exterminate all Indians and British officials more inclined to incorporate Indians into the empire as subjects and trading partners. Military officers revealed their genocidal tendencies when they authorized executing Indian prisoners and using smallpox as a biological weapon. When a colonial mob known as the Paxton Boys murdered the peaceful Conestoga Indians of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, British officials condemned their lawlessness, but not out of any sympathy for their victims. In Dowd's opinion, the line between "a sober imperial and colonial elite willing to protect Indians and a wild colonial frontier ready to kill all . . . breaks against hard facts" (211).

Much like the conflict it describes, this book's narrative never reaches a definitive conclusion. Amherst's successor as commander-in-chief, General Thomas Gage, declared the war over in December 1764, after a punitive expedition against the Ohio Country Indians, but intrigues and negotiations continued well into the following year, especially in the Illinois Country, where Pontiac continued to lead an anti-British resistance. The British never solved the problems that had caused the war, nor did they develop a consistent Indian policy for North America. According to Dowd, the British did not end the war so much as give up on it, their attention diverted by the growing political crisis east of the Appalachians. Likewise, the Indians' war against the new order never really ended because their grievances went unanswered.

Intercultural violence on the Ohio frontier may have ebbed after 1765, but it flared up again during the Revolutionary Era and continued until the defeat of Tecumseh's pan-Indian movement in the War of 1812.

Francis Parkman's Pontiac was a tragic figure, a doomed but cunning conspirator who embodied the treachery Parkman considered ingrained in the Indians' character. Dowd's version of the story is much more sympathetic to Pontiac, and one of this book's strengths is the attention it pays to the Indians' spiritual motivations for engaging in this war (readers familiar with Dowd's earlier book, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* [Baltimore, 1992] will recognize his approach here). A case may still be made for referring to this conflict as a "rebellion," at least from the British perspective. Reading about the British officers' high-handedness in dealing with the Indians, their merciless approach to eliminating resistance, and their desire to replace diplomacy with intimidation calls to mind earlier English experiences with rebellions in Ireland and Scotland. Since their earliest encounters with North America, the English were fond of comparing Indians to Scottish Highlanders and the "wild Irish," and when Indians failed to cooperate with the imperial project, they did not hesitate to treat them in the same manner as those other groups. Historians have been inclined to heap the blame for Pontiac's War on Amherst's shoulders, but we should not let one man's incompetence distract us from the wider cultural context that spawned his approach to Indian relations. This fine book raises important questions about how we should situate Pontiac's War (or Rebellion, if you like) in the larger story of Britain's eighteenth-century imperial expansion and U.S. empire building to this day. At a time when U.S. allies are decrying the current administration's penchant for acting unilaterally abroad, this book reminds us that "cowboy diplomacy" has a long, albeit undistinguished, heritage right here in North America.

Further Reading: Fred Anderson's *The Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York, 2000) places Pontiac's War among the events that put the British Empire on the road toward the American Revolution. Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York, 1991) emphasizes the British failure to fill French shoes in intercultural diplomacy after 1760. Dowd's argument that the British officers' approach to Indian relations was indistinguishable from that of American colonists challenges conclusions reached by Eric Hinderaker in *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley* (New York, 1997), and J. Russell Snapp, *John Stuart and the Struggle for Empire on the Southern Frontier* (Baton Rouge, 1996).

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