

# The Spanish Empire and the Seven Years' War



One of Fred Anderson's goals in *Crucible of War* is to stimulate discussion about the place of the Seven Years' War in American and eighteenth-century history. By showing how the insights of recent scholarship can be incorporated into a new narrative synthesis, and by revealing problems that historians have not yet resolved, Anderson has called attention to some fruitful avenues for future research. One of these concerns the role of Spain's American empire in the origins of the Seven Years' War.

Anderson focuses his narrative on the "the forty-year-long effort to subject the Ohio Country, and with it the rest of the Transappalachian west, to [British] imperial control." In his discussion of events pertinent to the valley, Anderson devotes the better part of his attention to the colonies and government of the British empire; a great deal of attention to the Indian nations involved in the causes, course, and consequences of the Seven Years' War; and considerable attention to Britain's French imperial adversary. He mentions the Spanish empire only in passing. In many ways, the Ohio Valley is a good choice for the book's narrative focus. A succession of significant events occurred there, and some of the most impressive recent scholarship concerning

the Seven Years' War discusses Native Americans and Europeans who were active in the region. But centering an account of a global war on an American river valley also raises questions. The hostilities that triggered the American portion of the Seven Years' War began in the Ohio Valley, and the war was fought in part for imperial possession of the region. But was the war really about the Ohio Valley itself? A close examination of Anderson's descriptions of British policy and of contemporary French interpretations of British conduct indicates that the Ohio Valley region may have derived much of its importance from its relation to British and French interest in the wealth of the Spanish empire in the Americas.

Consider first the curious combination of warlike behavior and war-weary sentiment that characterized British North American policy in the mid-1750s. Anderson demonstrates the militancy that formed one aspect of this policy. By October 1754, the British plan for operations in North America included an advance on the French forts in the Ohio country, and the destruction of French forts on Lake Ontario, Lake Champlain, and the Nova Scotia isthmus. In early 1755, General Braddock and two regiments of British troops arrived in Virginia. That spring, British ships tried to intercept French reinforcements bound for Canada. In July 1755, Braddock's advance into the Ohio country culminated in the Battle of the Monongahela. This all occurred before an official declaration of war.

As Anderson observes, in spite of the apparent bellicosity of these actions, prominent figures in the British government still hoped to prevent or contain renewed Anglo-French hostilities. The recently concluded War of the Austrian Succession had given Britain little in return for the thousands of lives and millions of pounds lavished on the conflict, and thus had dampened British enthusiasm for a new war. Moreover, with this recent demonstration of the rising costs of eighteenth-century European warfare in mind, British officials could anticipate that another large-scale war with France could only worsen the state of British public finances. (They were right to worry: British governmental debt climbed to about £146,000,000 by the end of the Seven Years' War.) [1] The Duke of Newcastle hoped that resolute British action in America would persuade French officials to abandon their attempts to expand into areas such as the Ohio Valley, thereby reducing the danger of a full-scale Anglo-French war in North America. At the same time, a "System" of British financial subsidies, diplomatic overtures, and defensive alliances in Europe would discourage France from extending North American hostilities to the European continent. Nonetheless, although prominent British officials may have hoped to avoid a general war with France, British attacks on French forts and French troop ships could not help but risk provoking one. What persuaded Whitehall that taking this chance was worthwhile?

Anderson mentions two considerations animating Britain's assertive North America policy, but they alone seem insufficient to explain the degree of British pugnacity that was evident in the mid-1750s. He points first to a fear on the part of British imperial officials that a French cordon in the trans-

Appalachian west would raise the “prospect of a burgeoning [British] colonial population indefinitely confined to the lands between the Appalachian barrier and the Atlantic, where demographic growth would inevitably drive down wages to the point that Americans would compete with British manufacturers, rather than consuming their wares” (17). Anderson notes later, however, that British officials themselves would, in the 1760s, seek to prevent British colonists from expanding into the lands west of the Appalachians. Britain could have allowed its colonists to settle beyond the mountains sometime in the future, but Halifax’s plan, officially promulgated as the Royal Proclamation of 1763, shows at least that expansion into the trans-Appalachian west was not an urgent and continuous priority of the British government.

Anderson suggests a second concern that was driving British North American policy in the early and mid-1750s: the British government did not “relish the stationing of expensive army and navy detachments in America as bulwarks against French aggression” (17). It is not clear, however, that courses of action envisioned by British statesmen before the war could have obviated the need for such detachments. British officials knew that no immediately foreseeable war would eliminate all of the Indian peoples in North America that were potentially hostile to British settlers; so some threats to the colonies would remain, regardless of the outcome of a war between Britain and France. More importantly, as Anderson suggests, few British officials in the early and mid-1750s were contemplating the eviction of the French empire from mainland North America. Anderson calls Pitt’s interest in doing so “by far the most original and distinctive aspect” of his December 1757 plan for the conduct of the war, and he notes that Pitt’s later scheme to strip France of its colonies made others in Whitehall uneasy. If Pitt’s desire to drive the French from North America was exceptional, then most British officials in the mid-1750s must have expected some kind of continued French presence in North America after the war, and, along with it, a possible need for a continued, expensive, imperial role in the defense of the British colonies there. Anderson’s account of British conduct during and after the war weakens his explanation for the aggressiveness of British North American policy before the war.

What, then, accounts for this aggressiveness? A look at the ideas of French officials provides some insight into the underlying reasons for the combativeness of British conduct and for the diplomatic prominence of the Ohio Valley in the 1750s. A February 1755 letter from the French minister of foreign affairs, Antoine-Louis Rouillé, to the French ambassador in Spain, the duc de Duras, offers one example of a French attempt to understand British intentions. In it, Rouillé asked about the reasons behind recent British actions in North America:

Are our possessions in America the unique object of the jealousy, the ambition, and the cupidity of the English? One need only cast one’s eyes on a map to be left with no doubt about the designs of England. The territory of the Ohio

which forms the subject of the current discussions does not approach in value the amount that the court of London is expending on armaments, and the nation would not pardon the ministry for engaging in a war of which all the advantage was limited to a portion of a barren and wild country where it is not possible to establish a lucrative commerce. The supposed rights to the Ohio are nothing but a mask artificially contrived to cover the true objective intended. It is at the possessions of Spain that the English wish to arrive. [2]

Rouillé went on to say that Britain wanted to remove the barrier that the French colony of Louisiana interposed between the British colonies and Mexico. Control of the Ohio Valley would enable the British empire to cut communications between Louisiana and Canada, thereby allowing it to conquer either vulnerable French colony as it pleased. With the French empire in North America eviscerated, British soldiers and merchants could move overland towards Mexico's northern frontier, or down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico and its Spanish coastal cities.

Why might French officials have thought that British North American policy aimed in this fashion at the Spanish empire? One reason was that Spanish America constituted a crucial market for European goods. Its population was large, far greater than that of the British colonies in North America. In 1800, a year for which good comparative statistics are available, the population of the United States was about 5.3 million, while that of Spanish America was between 13 and 17 million. [3] In the early 1750s, before the extraordinary post-1763 growth in the population of eastern North America, the disparity would have been greater still. Moreover, Spanish America was the only market of the mid-eighteenth century that could pay for European goods with silver. This silver came from the mines of Peru, where production at the famous Potosí mine tripled between 1720 and 1780,; and Mexico, where output quadrupled over the course of the eighteenth century. [4]

The British empire needed large quantities of this American silver. Silver served as a useful means of exchange in Europe and it backed European paper currencies whose value could become uncertain during periods of warfare and political instability. Silver was becoming even more important for British trade in the eighteenth century because Chinese merchants generally demanded silver as payment for goods such as porcelain, silk, and tea that were growing increasingly popular in Europe. Bullion usually formed eighty percent of the cargo of outgoing British East India Company ships. [5] Moreover, still popular mercantilist ideas held that silver and gold sustained state power, and these ideas were not without some basis in fact. French officials observed, for example, that the British empire used silver to pay its armed forces and to subsidize its German allies in times of war. Anderson notes that during the Seven Years' War, British shipments of silver to Germany and America were so large that they created a severe specie shortage in Britain in early 1759. [6]

Along with these general commercial and political considerations, a succession

of specific British actions had convinced French officials that British statesmen coveted the mineral wealth of Spanish America and the influence over European affairs that this silver could buy. In 1711, motivated in part by the challenge of financing debts incurred during the War of the Spanish Succession, Britain had formed the South Sea Company for trade with the Spanish empire. In 1713, Britain had obtained the lucrative *asiento* contract to supply Spain's possessions with slaves. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, British merchants had smuggled their goods into Spain's colonies and exchanged them for American silver. In 1739, Britain had enthusiastically entered the War of Jenkins' Ear against Spain, and had then attacked important Spanish-American trading cities such as Cartagena and Portobello, raided Spanish silver-producing colonies such as Peru, and captured the silver-laden Spanish galleon that sailed annually from Acapulco to Manila. In the case of the Seven Years' War, one has to ask if British statesmen would have pursued such risky policies before the war, and if they would have accepted strategies that so increased the national debt during the war, if they had not thought that military victory would somehow repay such risks and expenditures by increasing British access to the riches of Spanish America.

Much suggests that a full explanation of the origins of the Anglo-French war that began in the Ohio Valley may require further inquiry into the relationship between events in the region and British and French designs on Spain's empire. As Fred Anderson has convincingly traced the connection between the Seven Years' War and the events precipitating the revolutionary crisis in North America, scholars inspired by *Crucible of War* may, in turn, usefully place the Seven Years' War in the context of the long series of attempts by European powers to profit from the resources of Latin America.

## Notes

1. To put this figure in perspective, Alexander Hamilton estimated that the total value of both specie and paper money in the thirteen colonies on the eve of the Revolution was £6,750,000. See John J. McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America, 1600-1775* (Chapel Hill, 1978), 7. The approximate annual value of British exports to the thirteen colonies in the years from 1749-1755 was about £1,374,000. See Jacob M. Price, "The Imperial Economy," in *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 2 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1998), 103.
2. French Archives des Affaires etrangeres, Correspondance Politique, Espagne, 517, Rouillé to Duras, February 25, 1755, 154-55.
3. John Lynch, *Bourbon Spain, 1700-1808* (London, 1989), 366; Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz, "The Population of Colonial Spanish America," in *Colonial Latin America*, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge, 1984), 34.

4. Peter Bakewell, "Mining in Colonial Spanish America," in *Colonial Latin America*, 148; D. A. Brading, "Bourbon Spain and its American Empire," in *Colonial Latin America*, 420-21.
5. P. J. Marshall, "The British in Asia: Trade to Dominion, 1700-1765," in *The Eighteenth Century*, 488, 490; Price, "Imperial Economy," 80, 83.
6. See Stanley and Barbara Stein, *Silver, Trade, and War: Spain and America in the Making of Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, 2000).

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