

Whose Great War for Empire? British America and the Problem of Imperial Agency



The world war that commenced on the banks of the Ohio in 1754 has never been an easy one to name. The French and Indian War—probably the war’s oldest designation and one still popular with many Americans—suffers from the obvious defect of only referring to the colonial dimensions of what was, ultimately, a global contest. European historians eventually settled on the Seven Years’ War as a more inclusive title; however, it, too, fails to account for the nine years that the war lasted in America, nor does it accurately describe the conflict in India, which ended some two years after the Peace of Paris (1763) concluded hostilities elsewhere. Despite its panoramic sweep, even Lawrence Henry Gipson’s *Great War for Empire* implicitly privileges the extra-European theaters over Germany, where the war had more to do with maintaining the balance of power among the Continent’s principal states. Although victors typically claim the right to bestow definitive names, the British themselves long referred to it simply as “the late war” or, when there seemed to be a need for greater clarity, “the late war with France.”

If the question of what to call the Seven Years’ War poses difficulties, it is largely because it touched so many people in so many different parts of the world. Among the more significant of the war’s legacies were the origins of the transatlantic movement to abolish slavery, the erosion of Mughal authority in

India, and the beginning of the end of the ancien régime in France. In the war's aftermath, even the most benighted of Europe's rulers appeared to embrace the cause of Enlightenment and reform, with Catherine the Great taking the extraordinary step of offering to help finance the completion of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. In terms of sheer complexity, though, none of the war's consequences can rival the tumultuous effects on Britain itself, both at home and among the outlying regions of its Atlantic empire. Although the victory heralded Britain's apotheosis as the greatest imperial power since Rome, it also brought a host of related problems, including a crushing deficit, new territories in every region of the globe, and diplomatic isolation in Europe. An early sign of trouble was the outburst of anti-Scottish xenophobia in England centered on the cashiered militia officer John Wilkes; another was the Stamp Act (1765), Britain's misguided attempt to force the Americans to help pay for their own defense. But the most surprising consequence of all was Britain's apparent impotence in the face of the colonial protests that resulted, an incapacity signaled most clearly in Parliament's humiliating repeal of the stamp tax during the spring of 1766. The British had triumphed in every quarter of the globe, inviting the admiration of friend and foe alike. As they pondered the fruits of victory, however, well might they have asked, whose great war for empire?

The answer to this question was—and is—anything but straightforward. As Fred Anderson's magisterial new book demonstrates, British America alone contained at least three different groups, each with its own vision of what the war meant. In descending order of the power at their disposal, they were the American colonists, the Indians of the trans-Appalachian interior, and the British government. Of course, most people at the time would have placed the British first; however, the government's ability to control events in the colonies was limited. Not only was the initial crisis in the Ohio Valley largely shaped by the machinations of colonial speculators and the Iroquois Confederacy's desperate attempt to retain its authority over the region's other tribes, but even after Whitehall committed some thirty thousand regulars to North America, the British repeatedly found themselves playing by someone else's rules. In the continent's interior, this meant recognizing that the Indians were allies, not subjects, and that British and provincial officers were powerless to prevent them from engaging in a range of "barbaric" practices, including taking women and children hostage, scalping French prisoners of war (officers as well as enlisted men), and insisting on lavish gifts as the price for accompanying the king's troops into battle. Despite obvious cultural differences, the same dynamic was evident in Britain's dealings with the colonists, who repeatedly refused to quarter British soldiers, who regarded military service—whether in provincial units or the regular army—as a strictly contractual undertaking, and whose assemblies invariably insisted on parliamentary subsidies to help them raise the troops necessary for their own defense. In the exasperated words of Lord Loudoun, the imperious Scot who spent two campaigns in the colonies as the British commander-in-chief, America seemed to be a maddeningly chaotic place, with no law but "the Rule every man pleases to lay down for himself" (148).

As long as the conquest of French Canada was in doubt, the British had no choice but to accept such limits on their authority. At no point, however, did they see their willingness to do so as more than a temporary expedient. Once the war was over, they accordingly attempted to impose new terms, ending the costly practices of Indian gift giving and taxing the colonists to help pay for the ten thousand regulars that remained in garrisons west of the Alleghenies. The results, of course, were disastrous, with Pontiac's Rebellion crippling Indian relations in the interior, while the Stamp Act crisis threatened Westminster's authority up and down the eastern seaboard. Anderson believes that neither irruption was inevitable and that Britain might have retained its North American empire, had George III's ministers acted less precipitously. Yet, as Anderson also notes, it is not clear whether the persistence of imperial authority would have made much difference for any of the three parties involved. At most, the British government would have been left with a "hollow" empire, where the exercise of effective authority depended on the consent of the colonists and their representatives. Under such conditions, moreover, Britain would have been able to offer only limited protections to any of America's other inhabitants, including, especially, the Indians, whose lands in the Ohio Valley were already being encroached upon by a steady influx of European settlers. In a sense, the Seven Years' War ended up confirming the "American" character of Britain's North American empire, an entity over which metropolitan authority had never been more than tenuous.

Without doubt, there is much to recommend this argument, and not just for the way it sets up a promised sequel in the American Revolution. Indeed, despite some important differences, Anderson's interpretation of the Seven Years' War in North America bears a striking resemblance to the one that Peter Marshall and Christopher Bayly have proposed for India during the same time period. As happened in Iroquoia, the Mughal Empire's progressive collapse during the later 1740s and 1750s drew the British, who had been in India as traders since the early seventeenth century, ever more deeply into politics on the subcontinent, first as the auxiliaries of local grandees, eventually as political actors in their own right. When the East India Company assumed effective powers of government in Bengal (1765), however, it did so not through the imposition of British or European forms, but by acting as the Mughal Emperor's *diwani* (a Muslim office roughly analogous to a European tax farmer). Despite the temptation to act unilaterally, moreover, the company's officials never forgot that they owed their authority to the cooperation of local elites, who in turn accepted British rule because they assumed they could use it to their own advantage. Although there were undoubtedly the vast differences between them, India's experience of British rule during the eighteenth century points to the same devolution of imperial agency as in America, what Jack P. Greene has identified as a pattern of "negotiated authority," whereby the unlimited powers claimed by officials at the empire's center were subject to constant revision by indigenous and creole brokers on the periphery.

All this suggests that the Seven Years' War was actually a war for several different empires—each shaped as much by provincial conditions as by

metropolitan goals—with the one that culminated in the independence of the United States being only the most conspicuous. At the same time, though, it is important to remember that the war was also a “British” war for empire, whose chief effect was to impose an unprecedented degree of political unity on what had previously been a set of scattered, frequently unconnected regions. Despite the crucial part played by men and women on Britain’s periphery, the war’s meaning was no less dependent on the metropolitan public, especially the public “without doors,” whose bellicose patriotism transformed how the British viewed both themselves and their place in the wider world during the eighteenth century’s middle decades. Up to that point, the nation’s extra-European activities, whether in South Asia, the West Indies, or North America, had typically possessed a piratical, bucaneerish quality, with most Britons regarding their imperial project as an adventure “beyond the line,” to be embraced only when it did not affect their affairs in Europe. In the rapidly changing environment of the 1730s, 1740s, and 1750s, however, even minor colonial imbroglios began transmogrifying into international incidents of the first importance, *causae belli* like the unfortunate Captain Jenkins’ severed ear, which neither Parliament nor the king’s ministers dared ignore. Only with this shift in metropolitan attitudes could Washington’s ill-fated skirmish at the headwaters of the Ohio become the opening engagement in the first European war of truly global proportions, rather than an engagement of merely local significance. Likewise, it was only because of this shift that the British people proved willing to make such extraordinary sacrifices during the Seven Years’ War, including escalating taxes, public borrowing on a scale never before seen, and a deeply unpopular militia reform, which prompted England’s worst rural riots of the eighteenth century.

This is not to discount the agency of either the colonists or the Indians; rather, it is to say that the metropolitan public’s imaginative capacity to connect events in North America, Europe, India, Africa, and the West Indies was equally decisive in shaping the fate of the British Empire in each of its outlying regions, including the Atlantic seaboard. On repeated occasions during the 1760s, the colonists were forced to respond to the British government’s imperial policies, not only in terms of their relevance to conditions in North America, but in ways that also acknowledged connections between their own situation and conditions elsewhere, including Britain’s own crushing tax burden, the annual £400,000 subsidy that the East India Company placed at Parliament’s disposal in 1767, and the metropolitan perception that the colonists were British subjects, who could be governed in the same manner as men and women in England, Scotland, and Wales. Even the British public’s mounting qualms over the slave trade affected the imperial crisis, making it difficult for colonial planters to complain of the figurative dangers of British slavery when they were personally responsible for far more insidious forms of bondage. In each instance, the integrated nature of the wider British world placed definite limits on the extent to which Americans could control the terms of debate, let alone their own political destiny, even when the issue involved something as apparently clear-cut as the English right to no taxation without representation.

For this reason, the Seven Years' War was both an essential prologue to the American Revolution and a key event in the integration of the wider British Empire. It would obviously be foolhardy to give one consequence priority over the other, not least because the British context continued to shape the course of American history, even after George III grudgingly recognized the independence of the United States in 1783. To borrow Richard White's useful term, Britain's history as an imperial power occurred on a "middle ground" where no one group could completely dominate the others. As early American historians shift the discussion of their own subject onto this embattled landscape, they, too, will need to accommodate the histories of many other groups and nations, whether European, African, or indigenous American. If Fred Anderson's concern is largely with the Seven Years' War as a founding moment in what became the United States, one of his book's many strengths lies in the way it shows just how multiethnic and transnational the crucible of war that preceded the Revolution ultimately was.

Perhaps this is why the apparently minor question of what to call the Seven Years' War refuses to go away. It was easily among the most decisive British conflicts ever, with the *annus mirabilis* of 1759—the remarkable string of victories with which Britain vanquished France in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas—eclipsing any other comparable moment except, perhaps, the period between Trafalgar and Waterloo. Indeed, in a very real sense, the war inaugurated Britain's two-hundred-year reign as the world's leading imperial power. For all its stupendous scale, however, the Seven Years' War was also a war whose first and most memorable name was coined by the colonists, using words that gave equal weight to Britain's French and Indian adversaries. Perhaps on some unacknowledged level even the British recognized that theirs was a hollow victory and that they would not be the only ones to profit, still less as its primary beneficiaries.

Bibliographic Essay

The British dimension of the Seven Years' War is the subject, most recently, of Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill and London, 2000), especially chapters 2-4; see also Marie Peters, *Pitt and Popularity: The Patriot Minister and London Opinion during the Seven Years' War* (Oxford, 1980); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1985). On the origins of British India, see P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead*, vol. 2 of *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge, 1987); C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988). Along with Anderson's magnum opus, readers interested in the dynamics of European-Indian relations in North America should consult Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, 1991). The war's role in the origins of the Anglo-American movement to abolish slavery—a subject on which Anderson has little to say—has been treated by numerous scholars, most recently by

Christopher L. Brown, "Empire without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 56 (1999): 273-306. For the comparative problem of imperial authority both within the British Empire and elsewhere in the Atlantic world, see Jack P. Greene, *Negotiated Authorities: Essays in Colonial Political and Constitutional History* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994); there is also much of value in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 2 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1998). The politics of naming military conflicts generally is, of course, a principal concern of Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998). Although the Seven Years' War has been studied extensively from the standpoint of each of the fields mentioned here, there is no modern study that considers the war as a truly global, transnational conflict.

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