

An Unnecessary War

On May 18th, 1756, the British and the French suddenly found themselves in a war against each other, a war that neither had wanted. This “Seven Years War” would last until 1763. How did such an undesirable conflict arise from what appear to be insignificant origins? Who, if anyone, should bear the blame and what, if anything, could have been done to prevent it? The root causes of the seven years war can be attributed to three governors, William Shirley of Massachusetts, Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia, and Marquis Duquesne of Canada. They are the people responsible for the initial conflict that set the gears of war in motion. However, both the British and French governments also deserve blame for allowing the petty conflict to escalate into a full blown war. Had any of these causes not occurred, the war would not have happened.

The initial conflict that led to war was actually quite small. Yet it planted the seed that would spiral the situation out of control. Of the three governors responsible, Virginia's Dinwiddie is by far the most guilty. Dinwiddie began governing Virginia in the fall of 1751. He was a selfish leader who wasn't afraid to use his position for personal gain. In fact, “in 1757, Lord Loudoun, then titular governor of Virginia, asked London to recall Dinwiddie on the grounds that he was using his public office for his own private ends.”¹ Dinwiddie was one of the principal share holders of the Ohio Land Company, a company established in 1748 by the British Board of Trade to exploit Ohio's land. He abused his power in the best interest of the company.

Dinwiddie started by using forced logic to justify British ownership of Ohio. He then proceeded to both misinform those in North America that the actions taken by the Ohio Company were orders from London, and misinform London with ambiguous language, implying that threats to the Company were threats to Virginia. He would never refer directly to the company when reporting back

1 Higonnet, “The Origins of the Seven Years War.” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol 40 (1968), 61

to London. After encouraging the building of a fort in Ohio, a fort that the French later attacked, his reports were very vague. In his descriptions, “the French there became the “Invaders of British Property,” the relief column was now “The Forces of this Dominion,” the builders of the company's fort were simply “our People,” and the Fort itself was simply “our Fort.”² He reasoned that although London didn't really care about Ohio, they did care enough about Virginia to act if threats were presented.

After sending a letter to the Board of Trade in the June of 1753, warning of an imminent French invasion, London did indeed decided to act. That August, they allowed Dinwiddie to direct British forces for defensive proposes under the condition that they remain on what was ambiguously defined as “the undoubted limits of His Majesty's Dominions.”³ Although the orders show that the cabinet didn't want to get involved on territory that wasn't already theirs, using his forced logic, Dinwiddie concluded that the “limits of His Majesty's Dominions” included Ohio. This gave Dinwiddie official orders with which he defend the Ohio company. The next time the French “invaded” British “territory,” Dinwiddie could legitimately launch an offensive.

Dinwiddie is the most guilty because he was the first one to start claiming ownership of Ohio. He used forced logic to legitimize ownership for the sake of the Ohio Company. This is important, because although ownership of Ohio was unclear, the French had been to the area much before the British. Dinwiddie encouraged the company, despite French protest and threats of retaliation. Then, to defend the actions of the company, actions that were already against the intentions of the British government, he misled London into believing that Virginia was being threatened by the French, as opposed to the company. He escalated the conflict without reporting back to London what was really happening. He also requested two regiments of British troops, to which London later replied by sending General Braddock.

There are a few things that the government could have done to prevent or lessen Dinwiddie's

2 Higonnet, 63

3 Higonnet, 64

involvement in the conflict. Although it would not have prevented the initial actions of the Ohio Company, had the British given clearer instructions to Dinwiddie regarding the “undoubted limits of His Majesty's Dominions,” Dinwiddie would not have been able to fight the French outside of British boundaries. Also, if people knew about Dinwiddie's abuse of power in 1757, then perhaps the British government may have been able to find out about it sooner. Had they done this in time, perhaps they would have been more cautious in dealing with him.

The British however were not the only ones with an official acting in bad taste. The French governor of Canada, Duquesne, was also heavily involved in creating the conflict in North America. Duquesne became the governor of Canada in 1752. His initial orders included the assertion of the French possession of Ohio, although this was not in any way intended to be militarily. The French were worried that if the British continued to establish themselves in Ohio, the French colonies of Canada and Louisiana would become cut off from each other, and therefore be vulnerable.

Yet to accomplish this reassertion, Duquesne decided to go about it militarily. He organized an army of over 2,000 and unofficially kept pushing back the border of Ohio little by little, expanding the French territory. He then in 1754 used his army to go on an offensive against British forces, starting with Dinwiddie's precious fort. Duquesne then proceeded to have Fort Necessity captured, by which point he was really over extending himself, as even he did not originally believe that it lay on French territory. Although the motives for Duquesne's ambitious offensive are not clear, there is some speculation that he was involved in fur traders.

Duquesne does deserve a good portion of the blame for creating the initial conflict because he was the first person to act against the other side offensively. He disregarded the French intentions of peaceful assertion and decided to use force instead. It was Duquesne's use of force that not only scared Dinwiddie but also caused him to retaliate.

Unfortunately, there isn't really much that could have been done to prevent Duquesne's involvement in the escalation. There was no way for the French to know that he would act so

aggressively beforehand. Plus in 1754, after realizing Duquesne's inability to adhere to French intentions, they did the right thing by dismissing him. The only thing that the French could have done better was to make their objective of peaceful assertion clearer.

Of the three governors, Shirley's mistakes were the most light. Shirley had served as the governor of Massachusetts since 1741. After being sent to Paris in 1749 to debate American boundaries, he returned to Massachusetts in 1753, only to find himself devoid of powerful connections in England and loosing control in the Massachusetts government. In an effort to regain support, he was quick to report any movements of the French in Nova Scotia back to London. Although this may sound responsible, "both Versailles and London had come to accept the idea of sporadic fighting on [the Nova Scotia] front and did not pay much attention to it."⁴ Essentially, Shirley was just being nit picky of the French in a way that really wasn't necessary, and just brought attention to himself.

Shirley's biggest contribution to the Seven Years War, however, was his proclamation of a French invasion. In 1754, Shirley notified London that he had evidence indicating that the French had made a settlement in an area that belonged undoubtedly to Maine. Yet when Shirley actually went to investigate the area that May, he found it to be uninhabited. Yet not only did he falsely assert a French invasion, but he then purposefully delayed reporting his mistake until mid August. He kept London under the impression that the French were invading Maine for three unnecessary months. In any case, whether his accusations of the French were intentional or not, Shirley did enjoy an increase in both public and political support.

Although the increased tension in London caused by Shirley's accusations did contribute to the outbreak of the Seven Years War, it would be unfair to put too much blame onto him. He may have used his political power to pick at and exaggerate the actions of the French, but he never once made any offensive maneuvers. At almost any other time, we could at most accuse Shirley of being a selfish politician. Nevertheless, his actions raised tensions at a most inopportune time, because his claim of a

4 Higonnet, 58

French invasion coincided with Dinwiddie's. For this offense, whether by accident or on purpose, Shirley must take responsibility.

Unfortunately, with his offenses being the lightest, Shirley's actions would also be the hardest to prevent. This is because there was no real way of knowing when a governor 3,000 miles away was crying wolf. The one thing that should not have been tolerated, however, was the length of time it took Shirley to report his mistake. A governor should not have been able to think that it was permissible to postpone a reporting an error of that magnitude for months.

By the spring of 1754, Dinwiddie and Duquesne had instigated the conflict that would ultimately engulf Britain and France. "From greed, incompetence, or imperialism, but in any case from private motive, they had succeeded in involving their governments in a shooting war."⁵ Yet although they had made war possible, it was not in any way inevitable. It was now up to the French and British governments to keep the conflict from escalating into a full blown war, a task that they unfortunately would not accomplish.

First, it is important to mention that although both Duquesne and Dinwiddie were very concerned about Ohio, their respective governments actually cared very little. "There is no doubt that neither the French nor the English government wanted to come to blows about this uninhabited region, so negligible intrinsically that no mention of it had been made in a peace treaty only recently drawn up."⁶ Because of this fact, when the French questioned the British regarding the shooting of one of Duquesne's officers, Jumonville, the British government showed little concern. This, along with the fact that the British did not care to discuss the French hostilities at Fort Necessity, shows how little these events mattered to them. "There were no negotiations of any kind about the North American problem between the time that the news was received of Washington's surrender at Fort Necessity on July 5 and the signature of Braddock's commission of September 24."⁷

5 Higonnet, 67

6 Higonnet, 60

7 Higonnet, 71

This was the first mistake made by the British and French governments. The moment they realized that their governors were creating a conflict over Ohio, officials should have met with each other to resolve the issue. One of the main reasons conflict arose in the first place, was because the ownership of Ohio was not defined. Dinwiddie and Duquesne were only able to justify their respective governments' ownership of Ohio because it had yet to be determined. If the ownership of Ohio was decided and clearly stated, either Dinwiddie, Duquesne, or both would have lost their justification for aggression.

What's more is that a compromise would have been possible. This is because the French and British both wanted different things. The French were mildly interested in the Ohio River because they didn't want the British to cut off Louisiana from Canada. On the other hand, "The British were not primarily interested in the Ohio River; what they were interested in was the surrounding land."⁸ The British wanted to expand their colonies and were afraid that a French ownership of Ohio would prevent them. Because of the differences in what each country wanted, a compromise of Ohio would have been more than possible. In fact, the British made a reasonable proposal in the February of 1755.

"They suggested that the Ohio territory be made a neutral zone, in which English Americans would have some limited trading rights with the Indians, but which they would not settle or colonize. The French would not use the upper Ohio River...instead they would use a route along the Wabash River...This was a route the French had already used occasionally and along which they had a couple of small forts; it was at least as direct as the route via the upper Ohio and required an almost equally short portage. The question of ultimate ownership of the Ohio area was to be deferred indefinitely"⁹

Although the French didn't accept the proposal, it does show that a reasonable compromise was possible.

The British attitude of disregard changed when they received both Shirley and Dinwiddie's reports, alarming them of a French invasion. This caused the British to believe that the French were purposefully invading British territory. They saw the French as having a new, unnecessary aggression towards them, an aggression against which negotiation was futile. This is when the British decided to

⁸ Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 214

⁹ Smoke, 220-221

send General Braddock to fight off the French in North America. They reasoned that the only option they had was to show a display of Force and hope that the French would back down.

The British Government itself should not be blamed for retaliating. Considering the information that was given to them, their reasoning was in fact correct. The blame here lies with Shirley and Dinwiddie, who provided the faulty information. Because there was no way for the British to check the validity of Shirley and Dinwiddie's claims, the decision to retaliate was unpreventable. However, the decision to retaliate by sending Braddock was a miscalculation for a number of reasons. A decision to support the colonists with money and expertise would have been just as, if not more effective. This is because the colonists were much more used to fighting the French and Indians in the area, something British troops were not. In fact, Braddock's regiments would prove to be very ineffective in the area, and would suffer huge losses. Also, the reinforcement of colonists would not have provoked the French nearly as much.

The French, however, felt very provoked and that December, decided to respond with their own move of intimidation and made plans to send 6 battalions to North America. Although they had begun to see the issue the British way, ultimately this was their decision. They responded this way for two reasons. With the British sending Braddock, they didn't want the balance of power in North America to shift too dramatically. They also, using the same exact logic as the British, hoped the British to back down before the conflict escalated any further. This however was very arrogant of the French.

Although the British display of force was justified, this reply of the French was not. By this time, both the British and the French were in agreement that it had been Duquesne's army that attacked British territory first. While the British move can be labeled as defensive, this move by the French just escalated the conflict further. "Where motives are consistently defensive, escalation might be more difficult to control than in cases where at least one party admits to offensive motivations."¹⁰ If two countries keep making bigger and bigger defensive moves, the conflict will eventually escalate into

10 Smoke, 208

war. One of the countries needs to back down. Here, the French should have been the ones to do it because they were the initial aggressors. They should have just admitted that Duquesne acted out of line instead of trying to back him up. Then they could have worked toward a compromise.

Even at this point, neither nation wanted the conflict to end in a war, and both still believed that a peaceful resolution could be found. When it became clear to the French that the British would not back down after their display of power, they finally started opting for negotiations. However, before proper negotiations began, the French wanted a two year armistice to be agreed upon. This, however, was a problem.

“For the English, an armistice was unacceptable because it would have enabled the French to send their fleet to Quebec unscathed, thereby reversing the balance of power in North America, something which would be catastrophic if the negotiations failed. For the French an armistice was crucial for without it they could not be sure of being able to reinforce in Canada the troops which would soon be outnumbered by Braddock's men.”¹¹

Although the French were trying to negotiate, they were proposing something that was very unfavorable for the British.

Here, the blame is on both countries. The French should not have been trying to push something that was unfavorable to the British and should have gone straight into negotiations. Yet one of the problems was that they did not realize how much the British were against the armistice. In this case, the British should have made that clearer, and realizing France's willingness to negotiate, should have been a little more eager to negotiate themselves.

If the French were afraid of Braddock's troops going unanswered, and the British were worried about the six battalions the French were going to send, they both should have tried to strike a deal with each other. The French could have agreed to keep from sending their troops if the British agreed to call back Braddock. Although it may sound unreasonable to call Braddock back, he was originally sent in response to a French “invasion,” an invasion that the British now knew was not happening. The British

11 Higonnet, “The Origins of the Seven Years War”, 84

could have blamed Dinwiddie and Shirley for the misperception, and called Braddock back without bearing too much shame. This would have decreased the tension of the situation greatly. They then could have proceeded to make a compromise on the issue of Ohio, as discussed above.

Unfortunately, this of course is not what happened. As the French kept calling for an armistice, the British kept refusing, and once the French fleet set sail in the May of 1755, the war could no longer be prevented. The French and British governments both failed to keep the petty conflict from escalating.

The outbreak of the Seven Years War was unfortunate in the sense that numerous things went wrong. Had the governments not been so reluctant to negotiate, had Dinwiddie, Duquesne, and perhaps even Shirley not served as governors at the time, the Seven Years War would probably never have happened. We must learn from this that even a petty conflict can turn into a fully blown war if the proper attention is not given. In the future, we must be wary of ambiguous agreements between nations that allow local leaders to make their own interpretations, of leaders who create conflict to defend their own personal motives, of decisions that will unnecessarily escalate a conflict, and of the reluctance to take the time to sit down and negotiate. Hopefully, by keeping these lessons in mind, a foolish war such as the Seven Years War will never repeat itself again.

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