

17.42 Paper 1

Modified prompt:

The Seven Years War can serve as a case study as to the larger causal effects of war, especially “inadvertent war.” Using larger historical contexts and events, and the events of the Seven Years War as source material, an analysis of the key factors in the war can be identified. Concrete plans for how the war could have been forestalled can then be promulgated; these are the suggestions that would have been delivered to Mme. Lebon.

Meritocracy and Transparency as Deterrents of Inadvertent War

The large-scale destruction and death that is wrought by continental and world wars is rarely desired by the governments and people of the countries that are eventually enveloped by them. The causes of these conflicts are often manifold and complexly interrelated, suggesting that in order for such conflicts to occur multiple causal events must align. For example, with respect to World War I, one could easily argue that without the strong adherence to alliances, conflict would not have broken out, while the argument could also be made that inflexible military strategies and improper understanding of the implications of mobilization precipitated the conflict. However, neither of these explanations has the explanatory power if taken singly to explain the outbreak of a war that ostensibly the *majority* of participatory powers did not find desirable to enter. In cases where war—which is operatively defined here as armed conflict between two sovereign states—is undesired (i.e. the governments of the powers involved do not *seek* war for new territorial conquest or for aggrandizing tactical aims; such a war cannot, therefore, be one which is attributed to defense) identifying factors which lead to war are

commonly related to misunderstandings¹. The question is thus: which factors can we isolate to avoid these misunderstandings? Specifically, how could we prevent the outbreak of the Seven Years War which will break out in several years despite the aims of both governments to keep the conflict isolated to the North American continent. This paper focuses on the creation of a meritocracy, with individual accountability, to minimize political interference by individuals and parties with individual aims and the facilitation of increased transparency and effective dissemination of information such that misunderstandings and misconceptions have the greatest likelihood of being resolved.

To qualify the Seven Years War as an inadvertent war and thus an appropriate case study, it is critical to define the outlooks of both governments going into the conflict. Smoke argues that neither British nor French policy-makers wanted a war; the actions during the prelude to the war are also indicative of this (e.g. the British tried to blockade French ships only in Newfoundland to keep the situation isolated to the North American sphere).² Furthermore, the rationale behind both British and French escalation of the conflict appears to be motivated by defense (e.g. of the North American river systems vital to French trade) rather than aims for expansion. The events that occurred in North America are the focus of this discourse, as those events precipitated later escalation and are regarded as the causal factors in the war; *c'est à dire*, the prevention of the initial escalation of conflict—especially by correction of misconceptions—is the goal here, rather than the damping of the conflict once it had reached the international and European arenas.

The creation of a committee to promote and ensure meritocratic government appointment

¹ The logic is that if neither government is desirous of a war, the causality of the war likely results from a lack of understanding of the status quo situation or the intentions of the other side, as knowledge that neither side wishes to engage in a war should serve as a deterrent to both.

² Smoke, Richard, *War Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 197.

The power of individuals to effect change within a political system, especially without individual accountability, is profound. For example, Chancellor Bismarck of 19th century Prussia was able to effectively provoke and isolate three wars [to Prussia and the other bellicose power] to secure and unify the German states through a combination of propagandist efforts, skillful international diplomacy, and political legerdemain regarding intentions and alliances (i.e. provoking Austria to attack Prussia by convincing the Austrian government of a treaty between Prussia and Italy against the Austrians). Limiting the ability of one person to effect such change should create a damping effect on the war-making capability of the system, not only because checks of power take time to implement but also because meddling for individual vested interests can be better controlled against. In the case of the Seven Years War, the colonial governors Shirley, and Dinwiddie especially, proved themselves to be ineffectual representatives of the British crown, serving individual interests over the interests of the empire as a whole.

Dinwiddie himself, as a stakeholder in the Ohio Company, which sought to extort profit from the French-held lands in the Ohio valley, had significant motivation to keep the French out of the Ohio territory, which was, at the time, under French control. In a series of letters, Dinwiddie portrayed the French as invading British controlled lands and attacking Crown soldiers, instead of defending the ambiguously delineated territories that were controlled by the French and clashing with agents of the Ohio Company. His claims, plus those of Shirley—which claimed the French were invading what is now Maine—led the British government to hold an altered view of the status quo in the North American continent (i.e. the British government officials felt themselves to be much more on the defensive than the offensive actions that Dinwiddie was taking would indicate to the French; the British were also misled to believe that the British claim to those lands was stronger than it was). Furthermore, the directions given by

the British government to the ambitious Dinwiddie indicated a proclivity for a defensive strategy, which Dinwiddie disregarded, effectively pulling the British government into the fight.³

Other facets of the management of the conflict were left in the hands of people unqualified for that position. For example, the young Washington, who was sent to the contested area in the third British attempt to negotiate / gain control of the area, not only lacked military experience but also did not speak the language of the people with whom he was negotiating, which led to his eventual signing of an admission to the “assassination” of Jumonville, which the French later propagandized.⁴

In this case, an official who had been chosen based on his credentials and ability to perform his duties in accordance with the interests of the British Empire would have served Britain well; instead, Dinwiddie was able to manipulate the system, portraying the French as the aggressors and successfully assigning the authority of the British government to his conflict. Had Dinwiddie been more accountable for his actions, been restricted as to the degree to which his personal interests could conflict with his official capacity, and had he been less able to extend his influence both in the Americas (i.e. sending troops in the name of the Crown) and in regards to British politics (i.e. portraying the French as the unconditional aggressors), tensions between the French and English may not have escalated to the extent that they did. On the French side, economic interests also may have influenced, as with the actions of the “Grande Societé” of fur traders, showing how such vested interests and private groups can effect war.

³ Higonnet, Patrice, “The Origins of the Seven Years’ War.” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 40, No. 1, (Mar., 1968), 64.

⁴ Parkman, Francis, “France and England in North America Volume II.” (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1983) 1484.

The net result of the manipulations and lack of consistent information that was sent is that both the French and British governments received information that indicated aggressive intents from the other country. As such, each government acted in a manner its policy makers considered defensive; the governments acted to protect what they viewed as vital life-lines in the mercantilist society of the day. With each side acting “defensively,” the escalation of conflict falls into a “security dilemma” pattern, because as each side attempts to secure and substantiate its holdings, the opposing side views those defensive attempts as further indication of offensive intentions, especially when the intelligence received indicates aggression by the other side. The lack of accountability due to the long time periods required to send messages and the large distance between the government and reporting party makes the character and ability of those sent in official capacity all the more important.

Transparency and Effective Dissemination of Information

However, the tensions that sparked the pre-Seven Years War conflict in North America were not solely the work of misguided officials in the New World. Looking at the perspectives of the two incendiary parties at the start of the Seven Years War, it is clear that there were several gaps between the knowledge and beliefs held by policy-makers and the reality that existed outside of the boardroom. Notably, the progression of British and French attacks follows the classic spiral model of escalation, wherein each power attempts to check the actions of the other with force.

An indication of the dialogue that was not occurring is the fact that during the crucial period of unrest in the North American colonies surrounding the alleged assassination of Jumonville and the rising tensions in the Ohio Valley, there was no representation of substantial

political clout in either court, leaving a communication void.⁵ This lack of discourse allowed the machinations and reports of the officials in North America to hold near complete control on the British and French opinions of the situation and of the intentions of the opposing side.

To elucidate the political situation and machinations of each government, a diplomatic committee should be formed such that each court has a permanent presence in that of the other country; the committee should be composed of multiple delegates who command significant respect and clout so that an individual's absence or death does not leave a power vacuum. Furthermore, press from the opposing country should maintain a presence in the court as well so that an additional level of transparency and accountability is added. This type of transparency is one of the hallmarks of modern democracies as it decreases the level of secrecy a government can maintain. Fewer secrets results in fewer perceptions of "windows of opportunity/vulnerability" and also can lead to a greater degree of understanding between nations as they are further exposed to the customs and thought processes of the other.

However, one of the most critical elements of misunderstanding is the status quo ante-bellum state itself. Both English and French government officials clearly felt threatened by the "encroaching" of the opposing sides' people onto "their" territory; an academic emphasis on the actual balance of power and the relative importance of the territories in question would possibly have contextualized the conflict to an extent that the possible losses would not have justified war. Historians looking back on the conflict that started in North America see the stakes in that situation as very low; however, both governments risked great conflict over those paltry stakes. Had contemporaries been able to clearly express which power holds were most critical and

⁵ Higonnet, "The Origins of the Seven Years' War." 69.

which factors in the international sphere were sub-critical, escalation of events over trivialities could have been possibly avoided. More controversially, a perspective on the actual balance of power and actual presentation of “windows of opportunity” could have had a great impact. Britain and France had fought for centuries over the control of their sovereignties and seemed to continually fear an overtaking that has not yet occurred. At the time of the Seven Years War, the British naval was far superior to that of the French, while the French land troops were far superior to that of the British. Ostensibly, neither side was in grave danger from the actions of the other, and a shift in power over, for example, the Ohio Valley would not have shaken the political framework unduly. Considering the loss of North American territories by the French at the conclusion of the war did not cause the dissolution of the French as a major international power, the power shifts that initially threatened could have been deemed insignificant.

Overall, the initial stages of the Seven Years War, namely in the North American theatre, can be aptly labeled as the result of gross misunderstanding and miscommunication. The deconstruction of power by meritocratic means to keep the influence of individuals in check and the institution of committees and academic forums to apprise the respective governments of the actual state of events and of intentions could also have prevented the “spiraling” of the conflict towards world war. The programs proposed here could also have applicability in other inadvertent war situations, where misunderstandings and individual actions have a large degree of freedom and influence.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.42 Causes and Prevention of War
Spring 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.