

THE ANGLO-FRENCH SEVEN YEARS' WAR, 1756-1763: AN INADVERTENT WAR?

I. BACKGROUND TO WAR

The Seven Years' War was a worldwide Anglo-French battle for empire. Americans call it the French and Indian War but it could be called the first world war. It saw fierce Anglo-French fighting in the Caribbean, South Asia, and West Africa, as well as North America. Britain won but with little enduring gain. Some background factors:

- A. Mercantilism. Before 1756 the European powers scrambled for gold to pay mercenaries, hence for trade surpluses, hence for empire.
- B. The incomplete partition of North America. France had Quebec and Britain had what later became the U.S. eastern seaboard. But who owned the Ohio Valley wilderness region? This was left undecided by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748).
- C. Military facts:
  1. Britain and France were the only powers with global military reach.
  2. The British navy was twice the strength of the French navy but France had far the stronger army.
- D. Chronology:
  1. During 1752-53 France destroyed a British trading post in the Ohio Valley and built two forts of its own there.
  2. During 1753-54 Britain sent three expeditions to the Ohio Valley to eject the French. All three failed.
    - > Fall 1753: A Virginian expedition to Fort Le Boeuf (one of France's two forts) was ignored, came home.
    - > February 1754: Virginians established a fort at Pittsburgh. The French conquered it and renamed it Fort Duquesne.
    - > June/July 1754: Virginians commanded by George Washington were defeated at Fort Necessity, surrendered and came home.
  3. In early 1755 Britain sent two army battalions under General Braddock from Britain to America to eject the French from the Ohio Valley. The British claimed Braddock's instructions were purely defensive; the French knew his instructions and thought otherwise as they thought the Ohio Valley was theirs.
  4. In May 1755 France countered by sending six battalions to America aboard 1/3 of the French battle fleet, stripped of its guns.
  5. In June 1755 Britain's Admiral Boscawen tried to intercept these six French battalions off Newfoundland.
  6. Britain and France halted negotiations and war erupted, May 18, 1756.
- E. This was a war of illusions. Three types of misperceptions to look for:
  1. Of one's own conduct, and the other's conduct and intentions.
  2. Of the other's likely response to one's own acts. Governments expected their threats to elicit compliance but they evoked defiance. Britain's deployment of Braddock evoked unexpected French counter-escalation (its six-battalion deployment); and this French counter-escalation evoked further unexpected British counter-counter-escalation.
  3. Of the value of the stakes in dispute. This value was greatly exaggerated by British and French leaders.

II. CAUSES OF THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR

- A. Misperceptions. Do these constitute a Jervisian spiral?
  1. Britain misperceived:
    - a. **The nature of the status quo** -- "Ohio belongs to us!"
      - > Virginia Governor Dinwiddie described the Ohio Valley as "British property" in communiques to London (making the French "invaders of British property" in one of his communiques). But Ohio wasn't British--its ownership was undetermined.
    - b. **French conduct**--Britain exaggerated the aggressiveness of French behavior.
      - > Dinwiddie told London "the French have invaded East of the Alleghanies!" (but they hadn't), and were preparing a more general invasion of North America (but they weren't).
      - > Massachusetts' Governor Shirley told London "the French have invaded Massachusetts!" (but they hadn't).
      - > Dinwiddie wrote London that the French were attacking "the forces of

this Dominion" in the Ohio Valley (but these forces were Ohio Company mercenaries, not British government troops). In his dispatches the Ohio Company fort-builders became "our people" and the fort was "our fort," wrongly implying that they were British government personnel and property.

- c. **French intentions**--Britain exaggerated French expansionism.
  - > Dinwiddie told London "the French are planning a general invasion of British North America!" (but they weren't).
- d. **British conduct**--Britain underestimated the aggressiveness of its own behavior.
  - > Dinwiddie failed to report his own fort-building in the Ohio Valley.
  - > Dinwiddie failed to report his collaboration with Indians fighting against the French in the Ohio Valley.

Consider that misperceptions like these can feed each other, as follows: misperceptions of the status quo --> misperceptions of another's actions --> misperception of the other's intentions --> misperception of how the other will react to punishment. Some of this probably happened here.

- 2. France suffered similar misperceptions, though we know fewer details.
  - 3. Additional beliefs and misperceptions (which ones grew from those above?):
    - a. Both sides saw the other as very expansionist.
    - b. Both sides thought a tough policy would persuade the other side to back down. In fact the other counter-escalated in response.
      - i. Britain thought France would not counter Braddock's 2-battalion deployment. But France did counter with 6 battalions.
      - ii. France thought Britain would not counter its 6-battalion deployment. But Britain did with Boscawen's naval attack on that deployment.
    - c. Both sides were reluctant to negotiate, because:
      - i. They thought the other would take their willingness to talk as a sign of weakness.
      - ii. They thought concessions would injure their credibility.
      - iii. They thought negotiations were pointless, wouldn't succeed.However, without talks misperceptions on both sides went undiscovered.
    - d. Britain exaggerated the value of the stakes at issue. Britain thought that by beating France it could consolidate control over North America. In fact Britain's victory cost it North America. With the French threat to Britain's North American colonies removed the British colonists felt less reliant on London's protection, hence less willing to tolerate rule from London. Hence they rebelled in 1775-1776. Washington & Co. stuck it to the Redcoats.
  - B. Non-settlement of disputes: the 1748 Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle had gaps.
  - C. Four windows of opportunity or vulnerability:
    - a. Britain saw a waning British worldwide military advantage over France. British leaders thought Britain was better prepared for war than France but also saw France building up its fleet.
    - b. France saw British power growing. The French saw Britain making alliances on the European continent (e.g., with Spain) and expanding into the Ohio Valley.
    - c. The British deployment of Braddock's 2 battalions to North America in winter 1755 caused France to perceive a tactical window: "We must deploy offsetting forces to North America before a war starts and Britain closes the seas; we can't do it later."
    - d. The subsequent French 6-battalion deployment to North America on disarmed French warships created dual British windows of opportunity and vulnerability: "We have a fleeting opportunity to destroy a third of the French fleet," and "If we don't strike the French will gain military superiority in North America!"
- Note: windows 'c' and 'd' were unwitting products of government decisions.
- E. Competition for control of cumulative resources; also, competition for security.
  - F. Expectation of a cheap, limited war.

III. OUTCOME: BRITAIN WINS WAR --> BRITAIN LOSES ITS AMERICAN COLONIES (HMMMM ... DON'T YOU HATE IT WHEN THAT HAPPENS?)

IV. ESCALATION OF THE SEVEN YEARS WAR

British leaders tried hard to limit the war to North America but failed.

GREAT WARS OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

1. The Seven Years' War: Anglo-French, 1756-1763. Britain v. France, Britain wins.
2. The Seven Years' War: Continental, 1756-1763. Prussia v. Austria, Russia, France, ends in a bloody draw.
3. American Revolution, 1775-1783. U.S. colonies v. Britain, U.S. wins independence. But this was not really a great war, more of a sidebar.
4. French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1792-1815. France vs. Austria, Prussia, Russia, Britain, others. France loses, French monarchy restored, several million people killed. Causes: revolutionary France and its oligarchic neighbors each feared subversion by the other; France attacked others when it felt it had a fleeting advantage. The French also hoped they could spread revolution throughout Europe. In short security fears and perceived offensive opportunities, plus windows, fueled the war.
5. Crimean War, 1854-56. Russia v. Britain, France, Ottoman Empire (Turkey); Britain, France, Ottoman Empire defeat Russia, 825,000 people killed. Main cause: a tangle of misperceptions. (1) "The Russians Are Coming!" The British and French held ill-founded fears of Russia. (a) They had illusions of Russian power: "Russia is the strongest state in Europe!" Russia actually was mired in backwardness, no where close to being top dog. (b) They had illusions of Russian expansionism: "Russia plans to carve up Turkey!" Russia had no such plans. (2) "The French are coming!" Russia, thinking back to 1792-1815, had ill-founded fears of a "revolutionary" France and wrongly thought that Britain and Austria shared these fears. (3) "The Turks Are Collapsing." Russia falsely expected Turkey's imminent demise. Turkey actually took decades to collapse. Other causes: (4) Religious conflict--"The Quarrel of the Monks," 1690-1852. Catholics and Orthodox Christians quarrel over control of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and other Christian holy sites in Palestine. France favors Catholics, Russia backs Orthodox. Landlord Turkey must referee. The trouble starts here. (5) Russia uses bullying tactics in against Turkey that lead others to wrongly believe Russia has wider aggressive intentions. (6) The French leader (Napoleon III) is an insecure and irresponsible demagogue who inflames religious issues to play to the French crowd--a symptom of the fact that France is in early process of democratizing? (7) Russia seeks agreement on how to partition Turkey, suggests a Russian-British agreement on terms of partition. Britain doesn't think the Ottoman empire's collapse is immediate and believes Russia's suggestions that it be partitioned is a veiled threat to destroy it. This causes false British alarm at Russian intent.
6. Wars of German Unification, 1864-1871. Prussia v. Denmark, 1864, Prussia wins. Prussia v. Austria, 1866, Prussia wins. Prussia v. France, 1870-71, 250,000 killed, Prussia wins.
7. World War I, 1914-1918. The Central Powers (Germany and Austria) v. the Triple Entente (Britain, France, Russia), 20 million people killed, Entente wins.
8. World War II, 1939-1945. The Axis allies (Germany, Italy, Japan) v. Grand Alliance (Britain, France, Poland, USSR, United States, others). 35-60 million people killed, Allies win.
9. Cold War, 1947-1989. Soviet Union v. NATO, Japan and others. Hot wars waged as part of the Cold War: Korea 1950-53 (2-4 million killed), Vietnam 1945-75 (2.5 million killed), Afghanistan 1979-92 (1 million killed), Angola 1975-91 (1 million killed), Cambodia 1979-89 (64,000 killed), Nicaragua 1983-91 (30,000 killed), El Salvador 1979-89 (70,000 killed), Guatemala 1954-96 (200,000 killed), Indonesia 1965 (500,000 killed), East Timor 1975-1999 (200,000 killed), and others. NATO wins.
10. The War of Civilizations ("War on Terror")? 2001-.

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