The French and Indian War

by Alan Brinkley

This reading is excerpted from Chapter Seven of Brinkley's *American History: A Survey* (12th ed.). I wrote the footnotes. **If you use the questions below to guide your note taking (which is a good idea), please be aware that several of the questions have multiple answers.**

Study Questions

1. Do you have any questions?
2. Why did the French get along with most Indian groups better than the British did?
3. Why did France and Britain come into conflict in North America?
4. Mr. Brinkley refers to three principal powers in North America. What made the Iroquois one of these powers?
5. Why did the French and Indian War begin?
6. Who lost the French and Indian War? Why?

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CONTINENT

In the late 1750s and early 1760s, a great war raged through North America, changing forever the balance of power both on the continent and throughout the world. The war in America was part of a titanic struggle between England[1] and France for dominance in world trade and naval power. The British victory in that struggle, known in Europe as the Seven Years' War, rearranged global power and cemented England's role as the world's great commercial and imperial nation. It also cemented its control of most of the settled regions of North America.

In America, however, the conflict was the final stage in a long battle among the three principal powers in northeastern North America: the English, the French, and the Iroquois. For more than a century prior to the conflict—which was known in America as the French and Indian War—these three groups had maintained an uneasy balance of power. The events of the 1750s upset that balance, produced a prolonged and open conflict, and established a precarious dominance for the English societies throughout the region....

New France and the Iroquois Nation

The French and the English had coexisted relatively peacefully in North America for nearly a century. But by the 1750s, religious and commercial tensions began to produce new frictions and conflicts. The crisis began in part because of the expansion of the French presence in America in the late seventeenth century.... The lucrative fur trade drew immigrant French peasants deeper into the wilderness, while missionary zeal drew large numbers of French Jesuits[2] into the interior in search of potential converts. The [southern part] of the Mississippi River valley attracted French farmers discouraged by the short growing season in Canada.

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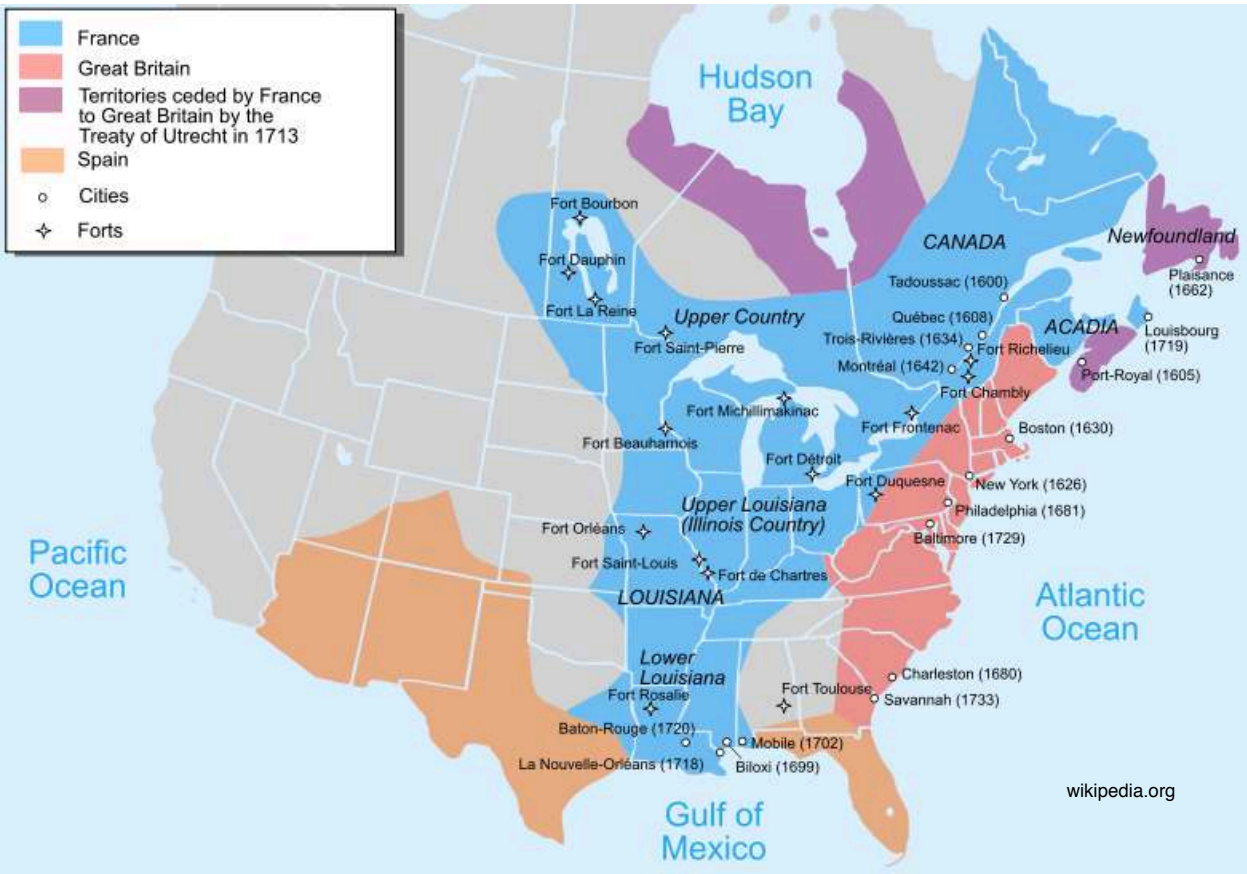
[1] Mr. Brinkley would have been more accurate if he had written "Britain" rather than "England."

[2] The Jesuits are a Catholic religious order. Pope Francis is a Jesuit.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the French Empire in America comprised a vast territory. [French explorers including Joliet, Marquette, and de La Salle mapped the region from the Ohio River to the Rocky Mountains. By the mid 1740s,] the French had... revealed the outlines of, and laid claim to, the whole continental interior.



To secure their hold on these enormous claims, they founded a string of widely separated communities, fortresses, missions, and trading posts. Fort Louisbourg, on Cape Breton Island, guarded the approach to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Would-be feudal lords established large estates (*seigneuries*) along the banks of the St. Lawrence River; and on a high bluff above the river stood the fortified city of Quebec, the center of the French Empire in America. To the south was Montreal, and to the west Sault Sainte Marie and Detroit. On the lower Mississippi emerged plantations much like those in the southern colonies of English America, worked by black slaves and owned by "Creoles" (white immigrants of French descent). New Orleans, founded in 1718 to service the French plantation economy, soon was as big as some of the larger cities of the Atlantic seaboard; Biloxi and Mobile to the east completed the string of French settlements.

But the French were not, of course, alone in the continental interior. They shared their territories with a large and powerful Indian population—in regions now often labeled the "middle ground"—and their relations with the natives were crucial to the shaping of their empire. They also shared the interior with a growing number of English traders and settlers, who had been moving beyond the confines of the colonial boundaries in the East. Both the French and the English were aware that the battle for control of North America would be determined in

part by which group could best win the allegiance of native tribes—as trading partners and, at times, as military allies. The Indians, for their part, were principally concerned with protecting their independence. Whatever alignments they formed with the European societies growing up around them were generally marriages of convenience, determined by which group offered the most attractive terms.

The English—with their more advanced commercial economy—could usually offer the Indians better and more plentiful goods. But the French offered something that was often more important: tolerance. Unlike the English settlers, most of whom tried to impose their own social norms on the Native Americans they encountered, the French settlers in the interior generally adjusted their own behavior to Indian patterns. French fur traders frequently married Indian women and adopted tribal ways. Jesuit missionaries interacted comfortably with the natives and converted them to Catholicism by the thousands without challenging most of their social customs. By the mid-eighteenth century, therefore, the French had better and closer relations with most of the tribes of the interior than did the English.

The most powerful native group, however, had a rather different relationship with the French. The Iroquois Confederacy—the five Indian nations (Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Onandaga, and Oneida) that had formed a defensive alliance in the fifteenth century—had been the most powerful tribal presence in the Northeast since the 1640s, when they had fought—and won—a biter war against the Hurons. Once their major competitors were largely gone from the region, the Iroquois forged an important commercial relationship with the English and Dutch along the eastern seaboard—although they continued to trade with the French as well. Indeed, the key to the success of the Iroquois in maintaining their independence was that they avoided too close a relationship with either group and astutely played the French and the English off against each other. As a result, they managed to maintain an uneasy balance of power in the Great Lakes region.

The principal area of conflict among these many groups was the Ohio Valley. The French claimed it. Several competing Indian tribes (many of them refugees from lands farther east, driven into the valley by the English expansion) lived there. English settlement was expanding into it. And the Iroquois were trying to establish a presence there as traders. With so many competing groups jostling for influence, the Ohio Valley quickly became a potential battleground.

Anglo-French Conflicts

As long as England and France remained at peace in Europe, and as long as the precarious balance in the North American interior survived, the tensions among the English, French, and Iroquois remained relatively mild. But after the Glorious Revolution in England,[3] the English throne passed to one of Louis XIV's principal enemies, William III, who was also the [ruler] of the Netherlands and who had long opposed French expansionism.... The result was a series of Anglo-French wars that continued intermittently in Europe for nearly eighty years.

The wars had important repercussions in America. King William's War (1689-1697) produced a few, indecisive clashes between the English and French in northern New England.

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[3] The Glorious Revolution took place in 1688.

Queen Anne's War, which began in 1701 and continued for nearly twelve years, generated more substantial conflicts: border fighting with the Spaniards in the South as well as with the French and their Indian allies in the North. The Treaty of Utrecht, which brought the conflict to a close in 1713, transferred substantial areas of French territory in North America to the English, including Acadia (Nova Scotia)[4] and Newfoundland. [Other territorial disputes involving Spanish, French, and English claims in Europe led to further conflict.] The English colonists in America were soon drawn into the struggle, which they called King George's War; and between 1744 and 1748 they engaged in a series of conflicts with the French. New Englanders captured the French bastion at Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island; but the peace treaty that finally ended the conflict forced them (in bitter disappointment) to abandon it.

In the aftermath of King George's War, relations among the English, French, and Iroquois in North America quickly deteriorated. The Iroquois (in what in retrospect appears a major blunder) began for the first time to grant trading concessions in the interior to English merchants. In the context of the already tense Anglo-French relationship in America, that decision set in motion a chain of events disastrous for the Iroquois Confederacy. The French feared that the English were using the concessions as a first step toward expansion into French lands (which to some extent they were). They began in 1749 to construct new fortresses in the Ohio Valley. The English interpreted the French activity as a threat to their western settlements. They protested and began making military preparations and building fortresses of their own. The balance of power that the Iroquois had strove to maintain for so long rapidly disintegrated, and the five Indian nations allied themselves with the British and assumed an essentially passive role in the conflict that followed.

For the next five years, tensions between the English and the French increased. In the summer of 1754 the governor of Virginia sent a militia force (under the command of an inexperienced young colonel, George Washington) into the Ohio Valley to challenge French expansion. Washington built a crude stockade (Fort Necessity) not far from the larger French outpost, Fort Duquesne, on the site of what is now Pittsburgh. After the Virginians staged an unsuccessful attack on a French detachment, the French countered with an assault on Fort Necessity, trapping Washington and his soldiers inside. After a third of them died in the fighting, Washington surrendered.

That clash marked the beginning of the French and Indian War, the American part of the much larger Seven Years' War that spread through Europe at the same time. It was the climactic event in the long Anglo-French struggle for empire.

The Great War for the Empire

The French and Indian War lasted nearly nine years, and it proceeded in three distinct phases. The first of these phases lasted from the Fort Necessity debacle in 1754 until the expansion of the war to Europe in 1756. It was primarily a local, North American conflict, which the English colonists managed largely on their own.

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[4] Many French-speaking residents of Acadia were forced to leave. Many Acadians went to Louisiana, where their name was gradually changed to "Cajuns."

The British provided modest assistance during this period, but they provided it so ineptly that it had little impact on the struggle....

The local colonial forces, meanwhile, were preoccupied with defending themselves against raids on their western settlements by the Indians of the Ohio Valley. Virtually all of them (except the Iroquois) were now allied with the French, having interpreted the defeat of the Virginians at Fort Duquesne as evidence of British weakness. Even the Iroquois, who were nominally allied with the British, remained fearful of antagonizing the French. They engaged in few hostilities and launched no offensive into Canada, even though they had, under heavy English pressure, declared war on the French....

The second phase of the struggle began in 1756, when the governments of France and England formally opened hostilities and a truly international conflict (the Seven Years' War) began....

Beginning in 1757, William Pitt, the English secretary of state (and future prime minister), began to transform the war effort by bringing it for the first time fully under British control. Pitt himself began planning military strategy for the North American conflict, appointing military commanders, and issuing order to the colonists. Military recruitment had slowed dramatically in America after [an early British defeat]. To replenish the army, British commanders began forcily enlisting colonists (a practice known as "impressment"). Officers also began to seize supplies and equipment from local farmers and tradesmen and compelled colonists to offer shelter to British troops—all generally without compensation. The Americans had long ago become accustomed to running their own affairs and had been fighting for over two years without much assistance or direction from the British. They resented these new impositions and firmly resisted them.... By early 1758, the friction between the British authorities and the colonists was threatening to bring the war effort to a halt.

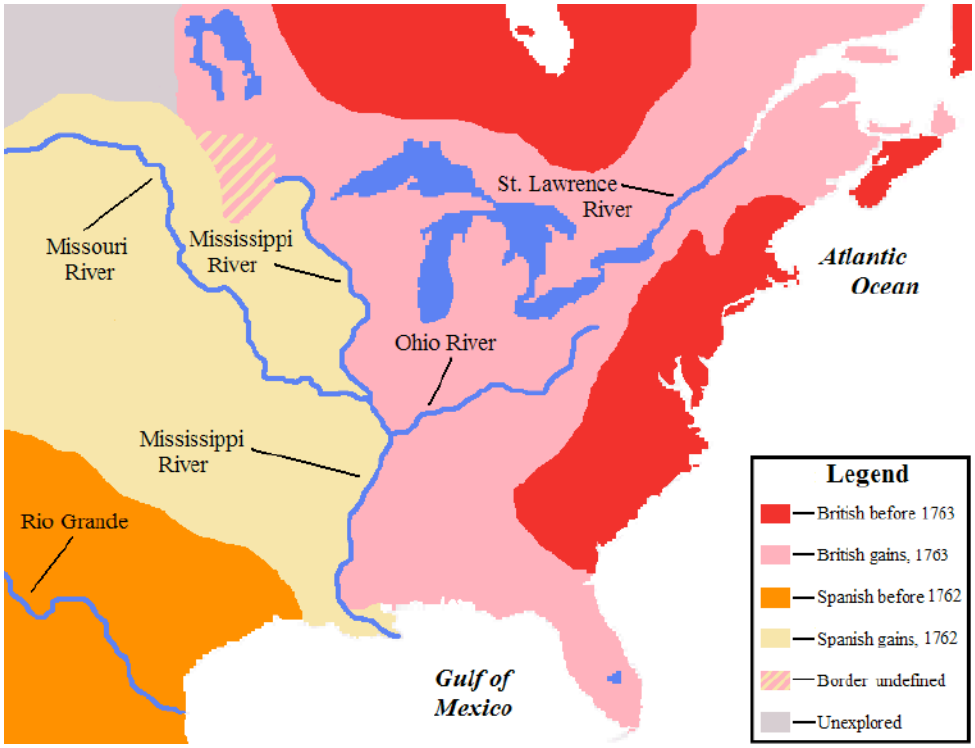
Beginning in 1758, therefore, Pitt initiated the third and final phase of the war by relaxing many of the policies that Americans found obnoxious. He agreed to reimburse the colonists for all supplies requisitioned by the army. He returned control over military recruitment to the colonial assemblies (which resulted in an immediate and dramatic increase in enlistments). And he dispatched large numbers of additional troops to America.

Finally, the tide of battle began to turn in England's favor.... The dramatic fall of Quebec on September 13, 1759, marked the beginning of the end of the American phase of the war. A year later, in September 1760, the French army formally surrendered... in Montreal....

Peace finally came after the accession of George III to the British throne and the resignation of Pitt, who, unlike the new king, wanted to continue hostilities. The British achieved most of Pitt's aims nevertheless in the Peace of Paris, signed in 1763. Under its terms, the French ceded to Great Britain some of their West Indian islands and most of their colonies in India. They also transferred Canada and all other French territory east of the Mississippi, except New Orleans, to Great Britain. They ceded New Orleans and their claims west of the Mississippi to Spain, thus surrendering all title to the mainland of North America [see map next page].

The French and Indian War had profound effects on the British Empire and the American colonies. It greatly expanded England's territorial claims in the New world. At the same time, it greatly enlarged Britain's debt; financing the vast war had been a major drain on the treasury. it also generated substantial resentment toward the Americans among British leaders who were

contemptuous of the colonists for what they considered American military ineptitude during the war. They were angry that the colonist had made so few financial contributions to a struggle waged largely for American benefit; they were particularly bitter that some colonial merchants had been selling food and other goods to the French in the West Indies throughout the conflict. All these factors combined to persuade many English leaders that a major reorganization of the empire, giving London increased authority over the colonies, would be necessary in the aftermath of the war.



The war had an equally profound but very different effect on the American colonists. It forced them, for the first time, to act in concert against a common foe. The friction of 1756-1757 over British requisition and impressment policies, and the 1758 return of authority to the colonial assemblies, established an important precedent in the minds of the colonists: it seemed to confirm the illegitimacy of English interference in local affairs. For thousands of Americans—the men who served in the colonial armed forces—the war was an important socializing experience. The colonial troops, unlike the British regiments, generally viewed themselves as part of a "people's army...." Their army was communal, not a coercive or hierarchical organization. The contrast with the British [soldiers], whom the colonists widely resented for their arrogance and arbitrary use of power, was striking; and in later years, the memory of that contrast helped to shape the American response to British imperial policies.

For the Indians of the Ohio Valley, the third major party in the French and Indian War, the British victory was disastrous. Those tribes that had allied themselves with the French had earned the enmity of the victorious English. The Iroquois Confederacy, which had allied itself with Britain, fared only slightly better. English officials saw the passivity of the Iroquois during the war (a result of their effort to hedge their bets and avoid antagonizing the French) as evidence of duplicity. In the aftermath of the peace settlement, the Iroquois alliance with the British quickly unraveled, and the Iroquois Confederacy itself began to crumble from within. The Iroquois nations would continue to contest the English for control of the Ohio Valley for another fifty years; but increasingly divided and increasingly outnumbered, they would seldom again be in a position to deal with their white rivals on terms of military or political equality.