

Colonists – A Struggle with both France and Britain

When open war broke out in 1756 pitting the English, their colonists, and Indian allies against the French, their colonists, and Indian allies no one could have foreseen the far-reaching ramifications that would ensue. This imperial clash, referred to as the French and Indian War in America and the Seven Years' War in Europe, was to determine not only which of the two great powers would claim dominance in the North American continent, but also brought the frontiersmen and their imperial masters face to face for the first time on such a large scale on American soil. Prejudices, rumors, and misunderstanding colored those encounters. The impressions made during this period would not soon be forgotten as the colonists then prepared to take the continent for themselves through revolution a mere twenty years later.

The American colonists in North America had enjoyed, for the most part, a large amount of autonomy in at least their daily lives prior to the French and Indian War. The system of mercantilism that dominated British economic policy affected with whom the colonists could trade and what they were allowed to manufacture, but as long as they were prosperous and profitable, the motherland kept her hands off of most other affairs. Governors were appointed to head each province, but these titles were mainly honorary in nature. The governors could have run their provinces if they chose, but most never even set foot on American soil and therefore it was left to the Lieutenant Governor, a provincial, to carry out the duties. The colonial assemblies also had large amounts of power and influence and were, largely, the ruling bodies. This structure was to the contentment to the colonists, and, while they respected England as the head of the empire, they did not look to her for guidance or direction. The problem with the colonists' self-sufficiency was that when England did step in, during the French and Indian War, clashes erupted over ruling rights and culture differences were underlined. The colonists were accustomed to self-rule and found it difficult to assume positions of inferiority to the British. The Britons were highly prejudiced against the provincials and thought them backwards, ineffective, and entirely inferior. While Britain and her colonies may have won the war against France, another point of major significance of the French and Indian War was the cultivation of resentment and dislike between the two groups.

The war began merely as a regional affair. The British and French colonists had frequent skirmishes along the frontier line. The British territory spread from the Atlantic to the Appalachian Mountains while the French controlled the interior. The British had reached a point where further expansion was difficult or impossible because of the French settlements. The French controlled the two major routes to the inner North American continent, the Mississippi River in the south and the St. Lawrence Seaway in the north. A third gateway to the west, also under French control, was Fort Duquesne at the intersection of the Allegheny, Ohio, and Monongahela Rivers (the location of present-day Pittsburgh). The Ohio Valley was the sight of many of the early clashes, which often ended in French victory. In the late 1740s, a group of French colonists and Ottawa Indians came down from the north and completely destroyed Pickawillany, a settlement built by Miami Indians to trade for British goods from a handful of Pennsylvanians who lived there. This slaughter signaled the first time that either the French or the British used Indian tribes against each other. The French had sent out expeditions to claim many of the rivers in the Ohio Valley, but England was still intent on expansion. George Washington, a colonel of the Virginia Militia, set out to lay claim to the forks of the Ohio River in 1754 and set up a camp named Fort Necessity. The French had already claimed the territory that Washington and his men were after and laid siege to the fort and defeated the Virginians handily. The British government didn't put too much stock in the ability of their colonists' militias when it came to fighting the French. They believed that their regular army could make short work of the French colonists that had been giving their colonists so much trouble. The defeats of the provincials were not seen as evidence of France's might, but rather as signs of the British colonists' lack of competency. The loss of Fort Necessity sent the war on its way to a global scale. General Lord Albemarle, the British Ambassador to France, wrote the Duke of Newcastle in September of 1754 stating his opinion on the lack of knowledge and experience that Washington and other colonial officers possessed, and pressing for the dispatch of good regular officers to be sent to North America to discipline and lead the colonial militias. Newcastle sent not only officers to the American continent, but also two regiments of British regulars under the command of General Edward Braddock, which arrived in February of 1755.¹