

Causes & Prevention of War

THE ANGLO-FRENCH SEVEN YEARS WAR, 1756-1763

I. BACKGROUND TO WAR

- A. Mercantilism. The European powers scrambled for specie (gold) to pay mercenaries, hence for trade surpluses, hence for empire.
- B. A worldwide Anglo-French contest for empire. This contest saw Anglo-French clashes in the Caribbean, South Asia, West Africa, and North America.
- C. The incomplete partition of the world. Who owned the Ohio valley region in North America? This hadn't been decided.
- D. Military facts: The British navy was twice the strength of the French navy, but France had far the stronger army.
- E. Chronology:
 1. During 1752-53 France destroyed a British fort 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.
 3. In early 1755 Britain sent two battalions under Braddock to America to eject the French from the Ohio Valley. The British claimed Braddock's instructions were purely defensive.
 4. In May 1755 France countered by sending six battalions to America.
 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.
- F. This was a war of illusions. Three types of misperceptions to look for:
 1. Of one's own and the other's conduct and intentions.
 2. Of the other's likely response to one's own acts. Compliance with threats and submission to punishment was expected, but defiance was elicited.
 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).
 - - Massachusetts Governor Shirley told London "the French have invaded Massachusetts!" (but they hadn't).
 - - Dinwiddie told London "the French are planning a general invasion of British North America!" (but they weren'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. 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.
 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, 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 the English North American colonies removed, the English colonists felt less reliant on London's protection, hence less willing to tolerate rule from London. Hence they rebelled in 1775-1776. Washington et al. stick it to the Redcoats.
- B. Non-settlement of disputes: the gaps in the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748).
- 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.