A Clash of Empires
The Seven Years’ War and British America
The war on the frontiers heightened the existing political conflicts to a feverish pitch.
At daybreak on May 28, 1754, a detachment of Virginia militia commanded by a young George Washington came across a party of French soldiers in the Ohio backcountry (now near Unionville, Pa.). The encounter claimed the lives of 10 Frenchmen. The English writer Horace Walpole would later reflect that “the volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire.” Indeed the renewed contest between two old rivals, England and France, would draw into its vortex all major world powers over the next several years. By the time peace was finally negotiated in 1763, the so-called Seven Years’ War had claimed the lives of a million fighting men and countless civilians.

Once it ended, the contemporaries called it simply “the late war.” Generations since have known it variously as the French and Indian War (United States), the War of Conquest (Francophone Canada), the Third Silesian War (Germany), or the Third Carnatic War (India). Historians, searching for a name that would encompass the war in its entirety, settled on the Seven Years’ War (even though it spanned a longer period).

But to name a war is not to understand it. Often eclipsed by other grand narratives, the struggle became known as a prelude to the rise of the British Empire, the Revolutionary War, and the birth of the United States. Yet the Seven Years’ War was an epoch-making event in its own right, one Winston Churchill famously dubbed the “first world war.” The antagonists—Britain, France, the Six Nations of the Iroquois, Austria, Prussia, Russia, the Mughal Empire, Spain, and Portugal—were either self-styled empires or imperial powers. Their clash set off a complex political and cultural conflict that profoundly changed the world.

This exhibition draws on The Huntington’s vast collections on the topic to explore this conflict as it played out in British America.

A TANGLED WEB OF RIVALRIES
In the first half of the 18th century, American colonists were as proud of their empire as were their fellow British subjects on the other side of the Atlantic. Throughout the empire, every man felt he had “a fixed Fundamental Right born with him as to the Freedom of his Person and Property."

Because of this commitment to “English liberty,” London largely left its colonies to govern themselves. British America became as a result an arena of complex and often-chaotic diplomacy. A tangled web of rivalries emerged among a wide spectrum of players: French and British colonial governments, royal armies and provincial militias, governors and provincial assemblies, a variety of business interests, Protestants, Catholics, and Indian nations and tribes.

At the same time as tensions were growing between French and British colonists in the Ohio backcountry, another crisis was brewing in what is now upstate New York. The Mohawk Indians, members of the Six Nations of the Iroquois, had become disgusted with British colonists’ land grabs, the liquor trade, and diplomatic neglect. In 1753, in an unprecedented gesture, they broke off an ancient alliance that bound the league and the northern British colonies.

Alarmed, London authorized the colonial governors to repel the French “encroachments” with force and ordered them to fix the broken relations with the Indians. The plan did not go well. The military expedition to the Ohio territory (now parts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland), dispatched by the governor of Virginia in the spring of 1754, ended in defeat. And the colonial representatives called to Albany in the summer of 1754 to deal with the problems there, pursued their own agendas instead.
The events of 1754 convinced London that the colonies could not be trusted either with Indian diplomacy or military self-defense. In the spring of 1755, Gen. Edward Braddock, appointed commander-in-chief of American forces, traveled from England to Virginia. Given broad authority over military and civil affairs, he was to repel the French in the Ohio and New York and establish a “common fund” for the colonial defense.

But on July 9, 1755, Braddock's army was crushed by much smaller French forces while trying to take Fort Duquesne in western Pennsylvania. The New York campaign stalled, bogged down in a logistical quagmire and squabbles over authority. Braddock's defeat left British colonists in the Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania backcountry defenseless. The Delawares, Shawnees, and other Ohio Indians—supported by the French military—began raiding the settlements, hoping to drive the European settlers from their land. Hundreds of settlers were killed or taken captive, and thousands fled, creating an unprecedented refugee crisis. The war on the frontiers heightened the existing political conflicts to a feverish pitch.

In 1756, England finally declared war against France. Both crowns dispatched additional forces and new commanders-in-chief to America. The French commander, Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, arrived in Quebec four months before his English counterpart, John Campbell, the 4th Earl of Loudoun, who had to wait for different government departments to assemble his force. Three weeks after Loudoun's arrival, Fort Oswego on Lake Ontario fell to Montcalm's army.

Endowed with nearly vice-regal powers, Loudoun was charged with uniting the colonies and leading them in a conquest of New France. Both missions proved impossible. Loudoun, a skilled military administrator, set out to reform the armed forces. But the provincial assemblies and troops were threatened by his connection to the crown and routinely challenged his orders.

John June ( engraver), British Resentment, or the French fairly Coopt at Louisbourg, 1755, after the design by Louis Peter Boitard. This print expresses the high expectations of the 1755 campaign. Huntington Library.
In the summer of 1756, England was dragged into the war in Europe. The ensuing crisis in London made the politics of the American war even more complicated. In the fall the ruling cabinet fell, and William Pitt was swept into power, promising to disengage from the European conflict and focus on America.

The next year brought more bad news, however. In August, Loudoun failed to take Louisbourg, in Nova Scotia, and Montcalm’s forces besieged Fort William Henry in New York. What followed has become known as “the massacre of Fort William Henry,” immortalized later in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

**A GLOBAL STRATEGY**

In December 1757, Pitt offered a new strategy. Instead of fighting the French in Europe, British armed forces would attack their colonial interests across the globe. Vast amounts of cash were earmarked for subsidies to German troops, who were to carry on the European war, and for payments to American provincial troops and contractors. The campaigns in Europe and Africa justified Pitt’s hopes. In June, the French were driven back across the Rhine and also lost their fort in Senegal, their colony in West Africa.

Back on American soil, a multinational force—English, Irish, Scottish, and German regular army regiments joined by American provincial regiments—set out in the summer of 1758 under the command of Gen. John Forbes to take Fort Duquesne. The expedition was plagued by the same problems that had stymied Braddock. Forbes cannily rewrote the story, however, by broker ing a peace agreement with the Ohio Indians that severed the Indians’ longstanding ties to the French. Left without their Indian allies, the French abandoned Fort Duquesne in late 1758, four years after Braddock’s devastating defeat there. Fort Duquesne now bore the name of William Pitt; later it would become Pittsburgh.

The *Annum Mirabilis*, or “year of miracles,” 1759, brought a spectacular reversal of the years of defeat and humiliation. In January, when news of the fall of Fort Duquesne arrived in London, the bells rang out, and continued ringing through the year to celebrate the victories of the British army and navy in Europe, Africa, the West Indies, and North America.

Britons at home and in colonies saw these triumphs as a preordained victory of true Christianity and liberty over the tyranny, despotism, and licentiousness of the French. The victors on both sides of the Atlantic were united in the belief that their new empire had been blessed by God.

The era of good feelings produced by the victories was short-lived. Now saddled with crushing war debt and facing deep diplomatic isolation, England was mired in debates over the course of war and the terms of peace that ignited renewed partisan strife. In America, the imperial jubilation evaporated when London, in an attempt to make the Americans shoulder some of the debt incurred during the war, tried to levy taxes on sugar, stamped paper, and then tea. Equally ephemeral were the agreements with the Indians. The Britons’ dismissive treatment of allied Indians led to Pontiac’s Rebellion. In the wake of that brutal struggle, hatred and fear of Indians became a fixture of American popular culture for years to come.

*Olga Tsapina  
The Norris Foundation Curator of American Historical Manuscripts at The Huntington*
SUGGESTED READING


RELATED PROGRAMS

Olga Tsapina, Norris Foundation Curator of American Historical Manuscripts, will lead these special events relating to the exhibition:

“Ask the Curator”
Sun., April 25; Sun., May 30; and Sat., July 3, noon–3 p.m., Library, West Hall
Tsapina answers questions and conducts informal discussions about the exhibition with visitors. Free. No reservations required.

Lecture: “A Forgotten War: The Seven Years’ War and British America”
Wed., June 30, 7:30 p.m., Friends’ Hall
Free. No reservations required.

Curator Tour
Sat., July 10, 9–10:30 a.m., Library, West Hall
Members: $15, non-Members: $20. To register, call 626-405-2128.

William Hogarth (1697–1764), *The Invasion*, March 1756. This cartoon, printed when England was under the threat of a French invasion, reflects the prevailing French stereotypes. Huntington Library.