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On the Relationship between the French and Indian War
and the American Revolution

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In one way or another, historians have been trying to connect the French and Indian War (or, if you prefer, the Seven Years' War) with the American Revolution for a very long time, but never, I think, altogether persuasively. There were those who said from the first that once the French had been forced out of North America, the British colonies would have no need of the British government for their protection and so would of course become independent, as if (contrary to a mass of contrary testimony) that was what the colonists wanted all the time. Others link the Ministry's quest for a revenue from the colonists to postwar financial problems. But the initial effort to raise revenue from the colonists was not meant to help pay off Britain's war debt but to help pay for the army Britain decided to keep in North America *after* the war. The issue of what to do with the oversized wartime British Army emerged out of the War; but the decision to maintain a major part of it in America and Ireland---and to make the Americans and Irish pay for it--- could have gone another way, with very different results.

Fred Anderson is the most prominent historian arguing today for a powerful connection between the two events. In *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (1984), he gave a wonderfully original and nuanced interpretation of the differences in both culture and military tradition that distinguished the Royal Army from the provincial troops that also served in the war. At

¹ Project Director's Note (June, 2015): When illness prevented the late Pauline Maier from participating in a debate on the relationship between the "French and Indian" or Seven Years War and the American Revolution planned for the June, 2013 Boston-Providence symposium "1763 and the Americas," she submitted in writing these remarks, which she had intended to deliver orally. These were delivered on her behalf by Amy Turner Bushnell.

the end, he suggested that the young Massachusetts soldiers who fought in the war, but who would be the “fathers” of their towns by the mid-1770s, found the arguments of the revolution persuasive because they coincided with their experience of what one of them called the “British cruelty” they had witnessed in the course of the French and Indian War. It was an interesting idea, and possibly true, but without a single piece of evidence to show that any colonist actually connected those dots.

In Crucible of War, Anderson returned to the subject, and provocatively called the Seven Years’ War “the most important event to occur in eighteenth-century North America” (xv). What we know as the American Revolution actually began, he argued, long before 1763 in the Ohio Valley, and what we understand as events that began an Anglo-American conflict that culminated with Independence were really post-war events, part of an effort to impose order on a much-enlarged British Empire that had taken shape in London during the course of the war.

I am not going to say Anderson is all wrong, but I think his argument is generally unpersuasive. My understanding of the issue owes a lot to Francis Parkman, the nineteenth century historian of France in America. In discussing the peace that ended the French and Indian War in Montcalm and Wolfe (1884), Parkman noted that “half the continent had changed hands at the scratch of a pen,” then explored the reactions in New England and above all in sermons since “the heart of early New England always found voice through her pulpits. Before me lies a bundle of these sermons,” he wrote, rescued from sixscore years of dust, scrawled on their title-pages with names of owners dead long ago, worm-eaten, dingy, stained with the damp of time, and uttering in quaint old letterpress the emotions of a buried and forgotten past. Triumph, gratulation, hope, breathe in every line, but no ill-will against a fallen enemy.

Parkman quoted the Boston pastor Thomas Foxcroft, who preached from the text “The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad,” and celebrated the conquest of Canada by “His Majesty’s victorious troops” as the beginning of a “lasting peace.” In the town of Lancaster, John Mellen, “boding nothing of the tempest to come,” called on his parishioners to “fear God and honor the King, and be peaceful subjects of an easy and happy government.” Mellen foresaw a glorious future: he even predicted that an America under the British flag would have an incredible sixty million people in another century and a half. (In fact, by 1910, the population of the United States alone was 92.5 million.) Indeed, one sermon after another saw the British victory as changing the future of North America and of the world. They anticipated “towns enlarged, settlements increased, and this howling wilderness become a fruitful field which the Lord hath blessed” once free British government replaced French rule. “Who can tell what great and glorious things God is about to bring forward in the world, and in this world of America in particular?” asked the Rev. Nathaniel Appleton in Cambridge:

Oh, may the time come when these deserts, which for ages unknown have been regions of darkness and habitations of cruelty, shall be illuminated with the light of the glorious Gospel, and when this part of the world, which till the later ages was utterly unknown, shall be the glory and joy of the whole earth!

I was so intrigued by these sermons “stained with the damps of time,” that several years ago I dug out and read several of them. Although some were written earlier than Parkman suggested---after the fall of Montreal, not the conclusion of the Peace---he essentially described them accurately. For Americans of the early 1760s, the French and Indian war was “the most important event to occur in eighteenth-century North America,” as Anderson says; it was a historical watershed that, by substituting British

for French rule, had dramatically reshaped the future of North America and its place in the world.

But they were wrong. The fulsome loyalty of 1761-63 gave way, and in 1776 the Americans declared their Independence. The obvious question is “Why?” The answer involves some looking back into the earlier period, when British plans for tightening control of the empire took form. To my mind, however, the answer to the question of “why” lies much more in an untidy tale of ill-conceived British policies and an imperial rigidity, due in no small part after 1774 to the influence of the king, that undermined efforts for accommodation and reconciliation. It is, indeed, hard to imagine a greater historical *disjunction* than that between the colonists’ dreams at the end of the French and Indian War and the future they embraced in 1776.

The decision for independence was greeted with fewer predictions of future glory than the British Victory in the French and Indian War. Most colonists made the decision to reject British rule with more regret than anticipation of future glory. To secure independence, moreover, would require an American military victory that was anything but certain. And yet 1776 proved to be the critical watershed in American history, not 1763. It led to a different story of conquest in North America, a different model of empire, and a growth of population and economic power under the flag of an independent United States. The American Revolution helped inspire subsequent revolutions in France, Haiti, and elsewhere that themselves had transformatory impacts.

In short, “the most important event to occur in eighteenth-century North America” was not the French and Indian War, but the American Revolution. And the first did not inexorably lead to the other.