

The Seven Years' War (AKA The French and Indian War)

In the mid-1700s, the Seven Years' War involved all of the world's major colonial powers on five continents in a fight over territory, resources and trade routes. The biggest fight was between France and Great Britain, which both had significant claims in North America.

The Start of the French and Indian War

By the mid-18th century, both the British and French wanted to extend their North American colonies into the land west of the Appalachian Mountains, known then as the Ohio Territory. Each side already had fur traders doing business with Native Americans and pioneers living on the frontier. A group of wealthy English colonists had even formed an investment company to sell farmland in Ohio. The French believed they had exclusive rights to the land since their explorers had been there first. They tried to force the English out by capturing several of their trading posts and destroying an Indian village that supported English traders in 1752.

For years, the American colonists had been asking for permission to raise an army and end the French threat once and for all. The king had been suspicious of their motives and denied their requests, but when the French built Fort Duquesne near present-day Pittsburg, he gave in and allowed the colonists to form a military force known as a militia. The Virginia militia, under the command of Major George Washington, was mobilized to ask the French to vacate the Ohio territory peaceably. When the French refused, Washington didn't have a large enough force to overpower Fort Duquesne. Washington returned the following year with more men and proceeded to build his own stockade nearby, called Fort Necessity. The French captured the new fort, and when word reached England, King George II declared war. The year was 1756.

France's Early Success

Though New France had a sparse population, they also had a series of forts throughout the territory and Indian allies who were fighting on their behalf. Britain decided that the colonial militia needed more experienced leadership, and dispatched General Edward Braddock to the area. Braddock was killed in a surprise attack while en route to his first battle, and France continued to win victories for the next three years.

One French victory during this time, in 1757, became known as the massacre at Fort William Henry. The residents of the fort had surrendered to the French, but during their retreat as prisoners of war, they were attacked by France's Indian allies. In spite of the French commander's attempt to stop them, the Indians scalped hundreds of British soldiers, and carried off another 200 women, children and servants as slaves.

England's Victories

England didn't gain the upper hand until 1758. A new British battle plan called for an increase in the number of soldiers fighting in the war, a new strategy that better suited the frontier, a naval blockade and an alliance with some Native American tribes. This plan coincided with an outbreak of smallpox among France's Indian allies that year. Finally, British forces were able to capture a series of forts including Ticonderoga, in upstate New York, and Quebec, a major French city in modern-day Canada. By 1760, England controlled all of New France. The battle for America was over, and France had lost.

Since hostilities continued in other parts of the world for a few years, the French and Indian War technically didn't end until 1763. In the Treaty of Paris, France had to give England all of Canada and the eastern half of Louisiana. In exchange, they retained control of a few Caribbean sugar islands and two fishing islands along the Canadian coast. Spain gained control of the western half of the Louisiana Territory. Spain also traded Florida in exchange for Cuba. The Mississippi River was left open to all of the nations.

The War's Effect on the Colonists

Even though the English had won the war, the financial cost of the fighting had saddled England with enormous debt. King George III and Parliament felt it was only fair that the colonists help pay for the war through a series of new taxes. The colonists resented the new taxes, which the colonial assemblies hadn't authorized.

In addition, though many colonial leaders gained valuable military experience during the war, they had received lower pay than the "British Regular" soldiers. The colonists resented being treated as second-class citizens, especially after the heavy casualties they had suffered.

Worse yet, even though Britain now controlled all the land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River, the King issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which prohibited settlement beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Passed to restore order and prevent further conflicts with the Indians, it reignited the very issue that had started the war in the first place.

When British Regulars returned to the colonies to enforce the new taxes and the Proclamation line, it seemed to the Americans like they were worse off than before. In the end, the most significant effect of the French and Indian War may have been the changed relationship between the colonies and England.