CHAPTER 6

The Duel for North America, 1608–1763

# Focus Questions

1. Where did France colonize in the New World? What was the focus of French colonization?

2. What region in North America did both France and Britain view as critical to their colonial empires?

3. What nations were the principal adversaries in the Seven Years’ War in Europe?

4. How did the Albany Congress portend the American Revolution?

5. What were the significant military engagements in North America of the Seven Years’ War and what was the outcome of each?

6. In what ways did British policy during and after the Seven Years’ War upset and unite the colonies?

7. In what ways did this era, especially the period 1754-1763, demonstrate both the problems and the possibilities of colonial unity (e.g., the Albany Congress of 1754, the boxed quote on page 111).

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** As part of their worldwide rivalry, Great Britain and France engaged in a great struggle for colonial control of North America, culminating in the British victory in the Seven Years’ War (French and Indian War) that drove France from the continent.

**Theme:** Before the Seven Years’ War, Britain and its American colonies had already been facing some tensions, as can be seen in sporadic British efforts to enforce trade laws and colonial reaction to the peace treaty in 1748. During the Seven Years’ War, the relationship between British military regulars and colonial militias added to the tensions. The French defeat in the Seven Years’ War created conditions for a growing conflict between Britain and its American colonies. The lack of a threatening European colonial power in North America gave the American colonists a sense of independence that clashed with new British imperial demands, such as stationing soldiers in the colonies and the Proclamation of 1763.

chapter summary

Like Britain, France entered late into the American colonial scramble, eventually developing an extensive though thinly settled empire economically based on the fur trade. During much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain and France engaged in a bitter power struggle that frequently erupted into worldwide wars. In North America, these wars constituted an extended military duel for imperial control of the continent.

The culminating phase of this struggle was inaugurated by young George Washington’s venture into the sharply contested Ohio country. After early reversals in the Seven Years’ War (French and Indian War), the British, under William Pitt, revived their fortunes and won a decisive victory at Quebec, finally forcing the French from North America.

The American colonials, who had played a large part in Britain’s imperial wars with France, emerged with increased confidence in their own abilities. The removal of the French and Spanish threat to British control of North America kindled increasing tensions between the colonists and Britain. The Ottawa chief Pontiac’s unsuccessful uprising in 1763 convinced the British of the need to continue stationing troops in America. But with foreign threats gone, the colonists were unwilling to pay taxes for British protection and increasingly resented Britain’s authority over them.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Compare the French Empire in America with those of Britain and Spain. The emphasis of the comparison might be on showing that France’s Empire was like Spain’s in having close relations with the Indians, like Britain’s in developing settler colonization, but different from both in focusing on trade and missions rather than on precious metals or agriculture.

REFERENCE: W.J. Eccles, *France in America* (1972).

* Explain how and why the British won the French and Indian War. The focus might be on the reasons for the early French successes (particularly the alliance with the Indians), as well as the reasons for the eventual British triumph (superior numbers, resources, leadership, and strategy—especially in the Battle of Quebec).

REFERENCE: Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (1988).

* Examine the French and Indian War, and the other colonial struggles, from the perspective and the historical situation of the Indians. Consider how they viewed the struggles between European powers, and how they tried to make tensions between settlers and colonial governments work to their advantage.

REFERENCE: Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991).

* Develop, in more depth, the chapter’s key paradox: that Britain’s victory over France—which the British colonists officially supported—actually created new sources of tension between Americans and the mother country.

REFERENCE: Alan Rogers, *Empire and Liberty: American Resistance to British Authority, 1755–1763* (1974).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Compare the image of the typical early French colonizer (the fur-trading *voyageur* or Jesuit priest) with the image of the typical Spanish colonizer (the *conquistador*) or English colonizer (the Puritan or tobacco planter). Consider how these images reflect the nature of each nation’s colonial effort.
* Approach several of the chapter’s issues from a Canadian viewpoint—especially that of a French-Canadian. Point out how the survival and growth of the aggrieved French-Canadian community reflects the losing side of the struggle for North America and discuss whether English-speaking North Americans might have ended up in the same condition had France won the French and Indian War.
* Focus on the Indian factor in the French Empire and the French and Indian War. Examine French relations with the Indians compared with British (and perhaps Spanish) and consider why most Indians supported France against Britain.
* What shaped the European alliances that formed during the eighteenth century? Why did France and Britain clash frequently? Why did France and Spain become allies a number of times? Why was Portugal no longer a major power in colonial affairs or the world?
* Examine the Seven Years’ War in Europe. Assess William Pitt’s statement that “America was conquered in Germany.” How much did the battles and conflict in the Old World shape the fighting in the New World?
* Use the activities of the young George Washington to illustrate the double role of the colonists as both British subjects and Americans. Discuss how Washington’s status as a colonial underling clashed with his status as a young Virginia aristocrat—and reflected all the colonists’ frustrations with their subordinate role.

# character sketches

## Samuel de Champlain (1567–1635)

Before founding New France, Champlain had served as a captain in the Spanish navy in the Caribbean and had written a book containing the first proposal for a canal across the Isthmus of Panama. His first French colony was established in Acadia (Nova Scotia). When the struggling colonists there became depressed during the harsh winter, Champlain organized an “Order of Good Cheer” that required the settlers to provide food and entertainment for each other several nights a week.

The Acadia settlement was abandoned in 1607 and a year later, Champlain established Quebec. The new colony numbered only about one hundred people during its first twenty years, despite the fact that Champlain constantly lobbied the French government for stronger support. Finally, Cardinal Richelieu helped reorganize the colony and the fur trade. After 1627, about three hundred settlers a year immigrated to New France.

**Quote:** “It was impossible to know this country without having wintered here, for on arriving in summer everything is very pleasant owing to the woods, the fair landscape, the good fishing…but winter in this country lasts six months!” (1610)

REFERENCE: William Jay Jacobs, *Champlain* (1994).

## Robert La Salle (1643–1687)

Born to a wealthy French family, La Salle, who became the greatest of the French-Canadian explorers, immigrated to New France at age twenty-three. Learning of the Ohio River from the Indians, he became convinced that it led to China. Subsequently, he talked about going to China so often that his neighbors called his estate *Le Chine* (“China”).

Selling his estate to get funds for an expedition south from New France, La Salle next enlisted the support of King Louis XIV. After La Salle’s venture bogged down on the Illinois River, he walked the thousand miles back to Canada to get new supplies and start over. He discovered the mouth of the Mississippi in 1682.

In 1684, Louis XIV sent La Salle back across the Atlantic to drive out the Spanish and establish a permanent settlement. But despite months of searching, he could not find the mouth of the river again. His desperate party landed instead in Texas, where La Salle was murdered by his mutinous men.

**Quote:** “I have chosen a life more suited to my solitary disposition, which nevertheless does not make me harsh to my people; though joined to a life among savages, it makes me, perhaps, less polished and compliant than the atmosphere of Paris requires.” (Letter to France, 1683)

REFERENCE: Robert Weddle et al., eds., *La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf* (2000).

## George Washington (1732–1799)

Before he became the commanding general in the American Revolution and the first U.S. president, Washington was a young Virginia gentleman, surveyor, and militia officer who played an important part in the French and Indian War. We examine here only his early career (up to 1763).

Washington’s father died when George was eleven, and almost nothing is known of their relationship. Washington grew up with various Virginia-gentry relatives, including his half-brother Lawrence, whose estate was at Mount Vernon. Lawrence also provided him with what little formal education he received. He learned mathematics and surveying and knew the Bible and some English literature, including contemporary novels such as *Tom Jones* and *Humphrey Clinker*. He traveled with Lawrence to Barbados, where he contracted a mild case of smallpox.

During his difficult mission into the Ohio country, he was shot at by Indians, nearly drowned crossing a river, and almost froze to death from exposure. After his service with Braddock, he married Martha Custis, a wealthy widow, and returned to managing their plantations as a twenty-seven-year-old patriarch. Solemn, soft-spoken, and extremely dignified in manner, he had a strong liking for fox hunts, fishing, cards, theatrical events, horse racing, billiards, and dancing.

**Quote:** “The Virginia Companies behaved like men and died like soldiers; for I believe out of the three companies that were there that day scarce thirty were left alive.…The English soldiers exposed all those who were inclined to do their duty to almost certain death; and at length, despite every effort to the contrary, [they] broke and ran as sheep before the hounds.” (Letter to Governor Dinwiddie on the Battle of Fort Duquesne, 1755)

REFERENCE: James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington: The Forge of Experience, 1732–1775* (1965).

# questions for class discussion

1. Why was the French Empire ultimately so much less successful than either the Spanish or the British Empires?

2. If France, instead of Britain, had won the “duel for North America,” would the thirteen colonies ever have become independent of Britain, or would they have been forced to stay within the empire for protection against France? Would Detroit, St. Louis, and New Orleans now be cities in Canada rather than in the United States?

3. How did the treatment of Americans by British officers and the military, during the war, contribute to simmering resentment against the mother country? Do the attitudes and behavior of the colonists during the war suggest that Americans felt less real patriotic loyalty to Britain and that the ties had become largely practical ones?

4. How important was William Pitt’s leadership in winning the Seven Years’ War? Is strong political leadership essential to military victory? Is strong political leadership or strong military leadership more important to winning a war? What about during revolutions?

5. From Britain’s perspective, were stationing soldiers in the New World permanently and issuing the Proclamation of 1763 good colonial policies? What problems were these policies trying to address? How else might have Britain solved those problems while limiting colonial contempt?

6. Should the French and Indian War be considered one of the major causes of the American Revolution? Why or why not?

**CONTENDING VOICES: ROYAL PROCLAMATION OF 1763 VS. GEORGE WASHINGTON (1767)**

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What did the British government in 1763 specifically prohibit the colonists from doing? Why?

2. How did Washington view the Proclamation? What opportunity did he think the British were missing?