Chapter 6: Conflict on the Edge of the Empire, 1713-1774

Overview
Between 1689 and 1763, Britain and France were at war with one another more than half of the time. The world’s two most powerful nations struggled for world dominance. The imperial wars exposed a widening division between the political economy of the colonies and the mother country. Britain increased her power over the colonies, raised their taxes, and stationed a permanent army in North America to protect her possessions. Britain’s attempt to strengthen control resulted in colonial resistance and rebellion. The colonists rested their resistance on the British constitution and their rights as Englishmen. Economics and politics had become inseparable. The overarching question was: just how did the British constitution apply to the colonists; what were their rights within the empire?

Key Topics
• The Imperial Wars of the eighteenth century and their impact on colonial society
• Relationships among French, English, Spanish, and various Indian tribes and how those relationships affected imperial conflicts in North America
• The sources of the French and Indian War in the Ohio River valley, why the French empire crumbled from within, and how the British achieved dominance
• British attempts to reorganize the colonial empire at the end of the French and Indian War
• The basis for growing colonial resistance to British regulation, its origins in British political and constitutional thought, and the development of new theories of government
• The series of British acts and colonial responses that brought Britain and the colonies to the brink of war

Review Questions
✓ What effect did the Imperial Wars of the eighteenth century have on the American colonies? Which regions were affected the most? What were the conflicts among the British, French, Spanish, and various Indian tribes on the North American continent about? Over the course of the century, who gained the most, and who lost the most?
✓ What role did the colonies play in these conflicts?
✓ How and why did Britain attempt to reorganize its colonial empire at the end of the French and Indian War? Why did the colonists resist?
✓ How did the colonists justify their resistance to British attempts to reorganize the empire and make them pay for their own defense? What was the source of those theories of resistance, and how did they change as tensions increased?
✓ What was the series of events that brought Britain and the colonies to the brink of war in 1774? To what extent were they the product of poor leadership? Differing theories of government? Different social experiences?

Annotated chapter outline
**Susannah Willard Johnson Experiences the Empire:** Caught up in the international conflict known as the French and Indian War, Susannah Willard Johnson became an eye-witness to one aspect of the conflict. She was kidnapped by pro-French Abenaki Indians. For Susannah the abstractions of war were replaced by the immediate challenge of staying alive.

**The Wars for Empire:** Between 1689 and 1763, Britain and France were at war with one another more than half of the time. The world’s two most powerful nations struggled for world dominance. Britain increased her power over the colonies, raised their taxes, and stationed a permanent army in North America to protect her possessions.
The imperial wars had a profound impact on British colonists. Although they were patriotic to the cause, colonists felt the burden of the cost of war in terms of increased taxes and the number of colonists fighting the war.

**The Victory of the British Empire:** The European powers contended with one another for market domination and a steady supply of food and raw materials. The French and Indian War began in political chaos.

- Indian tribes, with agendas of their own, played the British and French against one another and the colonies of Virginia and Pennsylvania also entered the fray for control of lands along the Ohio River.
- From the beginning of the war the advantage was with the French, but the French began to lose control: they alienated many of their Indian allies and the British committed more troops to the field.
- In 1757 Britain’s war aim shifted from simply regaining territory it had already claimed to seizing all of New France and thereby eliminating French competition in North America.
- The Treaty of Paris 1763 saw France cede all of her North America claims east of the Mississippi River to the British and all of her claims west of the river, including New Orleans, to Spain. Britain also acquired Florida from the Spanish.

**Enforcing the Empire:** The French and Indian War reinforced Britain’s need to act more forcefully in dealing with the colonies and exercise more control over them. She set out with a new resolve to enforce a set of assumptions about how an empire should function and what the role of colonies should be.

- Great Britain changed her policy regarding the Indians.
- Parliament established the Proclamation Line of 1763. Colonists were prevented from moving west of a line drawn down the crest of the Alleghenies.
- Parliament passed four pieces of legislation designed to make the colonists pay for a portion of the cost of maintaining a British army in North America.

**Rejecting the Empire:** Colonial resistance to the legislation was swift and forceful. A coalition of elite leaders and common people, the colonists rested their resistance on the British constitution and their rights as Englishmen.

- Colonial protests over the Stamp Act cut across class lines; wealthy merchants and planters as well as working men and women and the poor joined in the protest in order to protect what they perceived as their rights.
- The Declaratory Act proclaimed Parliament sovereign over the colonists in all cases whatsoever. Parliament was determined to tighten its control over the colonies.
- The Townshend Revenue Act (1767) was an external tax seen by colonists as a conspiracy designed to deprive them of their liberties. Once opposition was organized, colonial assemblies organized to protest the legislation. Imports to the colonies were dramatically reduced and the Townshend Duties were repealed.

**A Revolution in the Empire:** A pattern had been established: each attempt by Parliament to enforce its policies was met with an organized colonial opposition. Britain responded with punitive measures, colonists mobilized larger and larger segments of the society including women. Economics and politics had become inseparable.

- The Boston “Massacre” and the Boston Tea Party brought about a crisis. Parliament passed five laws in 1774, known as the Coercive Acts, designed to punish the colonists.
- The first continental congress was convened in Philadelphia September 5, 1774. The delegates met for seven weeks, got to know one another, learned how to achieve unity, and discussed a national boycott of British goods. They adopted the “Declaration of Rights” which stated their rights, liberties, and immunities as citizens of Great Britain. Their final decision was to reconvene in March 1775.
Conclusion: As a result of Britain’s changing imperial policies, the colonists had developed their own political economy, one that linked self-government, limited government, and prosperity. The revolution could only come about if Britain proved unwilling to compromise on issues of governance and if the colonial radicals could convince the moderates that there was no other alternative but revolution.

Analytical reading These questions refer to the passage “Contesting the Townshend Duties” on pages 140-142.

1. Define the term “republicanism” as used in this passage.
2. How does “republicanism” relate to “constitutionalism”?
3. How did the advocates of “republicanism” view humans and human nature?

Lecture Strategies Explore the relationship of frontier violence to the almost continuous struggles between Great Britain and France for supremacy in North America. Understanding the wars for empire, your students will then be equipped to grapple with the intellectual and political and economic questions that the break-up of the colonies and the American Revolution pose. You might also go back to the textbook’s prologue and examine the themes of the book in light of the wars for empire and the colonists breaking away from Great Britain. Examine the connection between government (Parliament and its legislation designed to enforce its authority over the colonies) and the colonial economy and the way the interplay of these two forces shaped the colonists’ lives. As the relationship became more unworkable and certainly less beneficial where the colonists were concerned, a radical change seems almost predictable. At the same time, it is interesting to look at the philosophical roots of the American revolution, and this is an opportunity to refer back to the Enlightenment in America and prepare them for the philosophical meanings of the Declaration of Independence. In order for them to master this material, your students should master the concepts of constitutionalism and republicanism.

Supplements: Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.

Penguin Classics


Documents Collection see Era Five: The American Revolution

Benjamin Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.” 1751
James Otis, The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved 1763
The Crisis Comes to a Head: April 19, 1775
A Freelance Writer Urges His Readers to use Common Sense 1776
Abigail Adams and John Adams Letters; Abigail Adams Letter to Mercy Otis Warren
Petition of “A Grate Number of Blackes of the Province” to Governor Thomas Gage and the Members of the Massachusetts General Court 1774
Joseph Warren, “Account of the Battle of Lexington” 1775
Rights of Women in an Independent Republic
The Rise of Partisan Warfare in the South 1778

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.