

For many years, throughout the 1600s and early part of the 1700s, the British pursued a policy of salutary neglect (healthy noninterference) toward its colonies. Britain enacted a series of Navigation Laws, but these attempts to regulate trade were minimally enforced. The colonists had a generally friendly attitude toward the British overall since they enjoyed the benefits of an imperial relationship without accompanying restrictions. However, this relationship was dramatically altered by the French and Indian War of 1754–1763. The course of the war itself significantly affected the political and ideological relationship of the colonists to their mother country, in as much as the colonists found the British imposition of restrictions and its hierarchical army to be repulsive to liberty, while the British saw the need for greater imperial control. However, it was the economic aftermath of the war, which left Britain with a staggering war debt and a need to raise new colonial revenues, that militated most heavily against colonial cooperation with the British.

The French and Indian War, called the Seven Years' War in Europe, had its antecedents in the settlement of the French and the British in the Ohio Valley region of the American continent. Both the French and British sought to control lands in the region, while Native Americans resisted the attempts of both to settle. The Indians largely played off of both sides to maintain an uneasy balance of power, but one group eventually decided to grant trading concessions to the British, giving England greater access to the interior of the continent. France saw this as a threat to its own territories and summarily constructed forts of defense, like Fort Duquesne. The British followed suit, building forts of their own. One such effort was to build Fort Necessity near Fort Duquesne, which George Washington led. At the fort, however, Washington became embroiled in a conflict with the French forces there; he was captured and forced to surrender in 1754. Thus began the French and Indian War.

The colonists had a largely friendly and amicable attitude toward the British at the outset. For example, General Washington praised the British General Braddock in a 1755 letter as a man of “abilities and experience” (Doc C). The long British policy of salutary neglect had meant that the colonists could enjoy the benefits of trade with and protection from the British without the discomfort of rigid control. However, this changed as the war progressed. In the second stage of the French and Indian War, beginning in 1756, Britain sought to impose greater control on the colonial war effort. British Prime Minister William Pitts tried to control the conduct of the fighting himself, “impressing” (forcibly enlisting) colonists to fight and imposing other restrictions on colonial freedom. A colonial soldier, for example, wrote in 1759 of how he was unlikely to get liquor or clothing and of how he was subject to “martial law.” He protested that he, too, was a man of English blood, but that he was not afforded the “Englishman’s liberty” (Doc D). This political control by Britain led to riots and colonial resistance; pretty soon, the consequences of it overwhelmed any benefits it may have offered, and William Pitt was forced to back down. However, for the rest of the war, the political legacy of repression remained in colonial minds and produced hostility to British control.

Another, ideological aspect of the interaction between Britain and its colonies furthered this hostility. The colonists themselves were organized into voluntary units of men fighting with relative equality. The British, meanwhile, were organized into hierarchical divisions in which rigid order was maintained. The Massachusetts soldier who protested political repression also noted this when he observed that the British troopers “are but little better than slaves to their officers” (Doc D). This ideological idea of a righteous American army juxtaposed with a rigid British one further augmented the colonial resistance to British oppression. The colonists not only saw British political interference in their affairs as illegitimate; they also resented British hierarchy.

The British, however, took from the war an entirely different perspective. The colonists may have seen themselves as great participants in the struggle; one sermon by Reverend Thomas Bernard in 1763 portrayed New England as the greatest helper of Britain in the effort. However, the British saw the colonists as lazy and unhelpful. The war had been fought for their benefit, but they had been largely inept thought the British. England was further outraged by the fact that some American merchants had actually sold supplies to the French West Indies during the war against France. The political and ideological lessons learned by the British, therefore, were that the colonists are too independent and must be made to act properly. The conclusion, then, was the greater imperial control was necessary.

While political and ideological differences may have contributed to the change from a friendly relationship to a hostile one, economics was a major factor as well. The 1763 Treaty of Paris gave Britain all of France’s territory east of the Mississippi, except New Orleans, and Canada (Doc A). This doubled the size of the British Empire and augmented the necessity of stationing British troops on the border to protect against Indian raids. This was at the same time that Britain faced a staggering war debt from seven years of fighting. Yet, the colonists largely refused to contribute to a war fought for their own defense. A 1763 British Order in Council found that the revenue from the colonies couldn’t even pay a fraction of the cost of collecting it. It also reported that “neglect, connivance, and fraud” had hampered revenue collection in a time of greatest need (Doc F). The British thence saw it as justified to seek new sources of revenue from the colonies. The principal vehicle for doing so was the 1765 Stamp Act, part of Prime Minister Grenville’s program to exert greater control over the colonies. The Act required that all paper products—from wills and deeds to playing cards—have a stamp on them. This was the first direct tax (a tax paid outright, rather than an indirect one incorporated into the full price of a good) imposed by Britain. All previous taxes could be construed by the colonists as measures imposed by Britain to regulate commerce. However, this act could not be interpreted that way; it could only be seen as an unequivocal attempt by Britain to raise revenue. This provoked outrage from colonists all over. Lawyers and influential members of society were affected; newspaper publishers, one of the most influential groups on public opinion, were outraged by the tax. The Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser even announced that it would

expire because of the “dreadful” tax (Doc H). A Stamp Act Congress was formed to resist the revenue measure, while Sons of Liberty terrorized collection agents. Such colonial protests continued as Britain further attempted to impose control, until these events eventually produced the American Revolution.

The French and Indian War transformed relations between the colonies and Britain from one of friendly respect to one of hostile distrust. During the course of the war, political repression by Britain and ideological opposition to Britain’s hierarchical army produced the seeds of American protest; at the same time, Britain saw the necessity of imposing greater control on its recalcitrant colonies. The economic results of the war, however, were even more disastrous. The costs of the fighting and protection of a newly enlarged territory forced Britain to impose new revenue measures like the 1765 Stamp Act so the colonists would pay their due share. However, the colonists bitterly resented this unequivocal British attempt to raise revenue without the consent of their colonial assemblies. In this way, the French and Indian War soured the rapport between Britain and its colonies that eventually produced the American Revolution.