The Seven Years War and the Great Awakening: Crash Course US History #5

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History.

And today we're going to discuss the events that led to the events that led to the American revolution.

So, we'll begin with the Seven Years War which, as Crash Course World History fans will remember, Winston Churchill referred to as as the "First World War". The Americans called it "The French and Indian War", the Prussians called it "The Third Silesian War", Swedes called it the Pomeranian War.

For today, we're just going to call it the Seven Years War on account of how it lasted for nine years.

(Intro)

So, here at Crash Course, we take a broad view of history. And rather than talking about the minute details of wars, we try to focus on the important stuff: Causes, effects, any time Vladimir Putin might show up, and teacup kittens.

And as and far as causes go, the Seven Years War was really like most wars, about economics.

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Is this economics class? Because I don't remember signing up for it.

Yeah. This is economics class, Me From the Past.

It's economics and religion and psychology and anthropology and astronomy and physics and ecology and literature. That's the great thing about history. You can't put the past into little boxes that you study for 50 minutes a day until the bell rings.

You can't separate what happened from what people wanted and believed and valued.

Right. So mercantilism was the key economic theory of the British Empire in the 18th century. Because while Adam Smith and David Ricardo were talking up free trade and economic liberalism, by 1750 no one was really listening.

Mercantilism was basically the idea that the government should regulate the economy in order to increase national power. This meant encouraging local production through tariffs and monopolies and also trying to ensure a favorable balance of trade.

And colonies were an awesome way to create this favorable trade balance because they both produced raw materials and bought back finished goods made from those raw materials. But for it to work, you always need more and more land so you can have more raw materials and more colonists to buy finished goods.

By the way, it's important to understand the centrality of slavery in this colonial economy.

I mean, the most important colonial trade goods were tobacco and sugar. And both of those crops relied heavily on slave labor. And slaves themselves were a key trade good in the so-called triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the colonies.

As one historian put it:

"The growth and prosperity of the emerging society of free Colonial British America were achieved as a result of slave labor."

So, Britain's greatest rival in the 18th century was France. Like, on paper, the Spanish had a more significant empire in North America. And they had certainly been there longer. But their empire was really sparsely populated. In fact, by 1800, Los Angeles, the most populous town in Spanish California, had a population of 300 and only 17 freeways.

The French colonies were considerably more populous, but even so, by 1750, there were only about 65,000 French colonists, most of them in the St. Lawrence River Valley, thereabouts.

I don't know. Maybe it was somewhere over here. This isn't a terribly detailed map.

And also, I'm not looking at it.

But the French were moving into the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys and forming alliances with American Indians there to try to dominate the fur and deer-skin trades. And that proved problematic.

So, wars usually have really complicated causes, and it's very rare that we can refer to one thing as making them inevitable.

Fortunately, the Seven Years War is the exception to that rule.

Stan, I think I just used the word "exception", which means it's time for a "Mongol-tage."

I guess they heard there was an exception in town

So, in 1749, the Governor of Virginia award a huge land grant to something called the Ohio Company, which was basically a real estate development firm designed to benefit the Governor of Virginia's friends.

The Native Americans and their French supporters thought this was bad form, because they thought they had rights to the land. So, the Ohio Company asked the French to recognize their land claims, and the French were, like, "Non."

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The actual fighting began when the British, or more precisely British colonists led by a 21-year-old militia colonel named George Washington - Yes, that George Washington - tried to eject the French from the forts they were constructing in Western Pennsylvania. The first attempt in 1754 was a disaster. Washington built and then abandoned the ironically named Fort Necessity with the loss of one-third of his men.

It was followed by the equally unsuccessful attack on Fort Duquesne, now located in downtown Pittsburgh, where the French and Indians pounded the British, killing two-thirds of General Braddock's forces, and also General Braddock.

Things didn't go much better for the British for the next two years, although they did take control of part of Nova Scotia and kick out more than 11,000 French Acadians, many of whom died in what is called "The Expulsion." Some of those who didn't ended up in Louisiana, and became Cajuns.

But anyway, the tide began to turn for the British in 1759 when they captured French Forts Duquesne - finally - Ticonderoga and Louisbourg. The biggest victory of all came in September, when the British trounced the French at the Plains of Abraham near Quebec. Montreal surrendered the next year.

The rest of the battles aren't that important, unless you were fighting in them. And I'm sure you can count on the French and Indian War aficionados to fill the gaps in in comments.

But suffice it to say, the British were victorious in North America, the Caribbean, Europe, and as far away as India. The war continued officially for three more years and ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1763.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, the most obvious result of the war was territorial changes, particularly in the green areas of not-America.

And even though Britain won the war, they arguably got the short end of the territorial stick.

Under the terms of the Peace of Paris, Britain got Canada from France and Florida from Spain. In return, France got Guadalupe and Martinique, Caribbean sugar islands that were much more valuable, at least monetarily, than Canada.

Sorry, Canada, but if you want to be valuable, grow some sugar. And not sugar beets, either, Canada. Real sugar.

And Spain got Cuba, with its awesome sugar trade, and the Philippines with its proximity to China, which were much more valuable than Florida. I mean, at the time Florida did not even have Disney World. Instead, it had yellow fever.

But the real losers of the war were not the British or the Spanish or the French, but the Native Americans. The shuffling of territories meant the French were out of the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys. and the American Indians were stuck with the British who kind of sucked.

And as the British moved west, Native Americans felt compelled to fight back.

Oh, it’s time for the Mystery Document?

The rules here are simple.

If I'm wrong about the author of the Mystery Document, I will be shocked by electricity. If I am right, I will be shocked by my knowledge of 18th century primary sources.

Okay. Here we go:

"We humbly conceive that it is contrary to the maxims of good policy and extremely dangerous to our frontiers, to suffer any Indians, of what tribe soever, to live within the inhabited parts of this province while we are engaged in an Indian war, as experience has taught us that they are all perfidious, and their claim to freedom and independence puts it in their power to act as spies, to entertain and give intelligence to our enemies, and to furnish them with provisions and warlike stores. To this fatal intercourse between our for pretended friends and open enemies, we must ascribe the greatest of the ravages and murders that have been committed in the course of this and the last Indian war. We, therefore, pray that this grievance be taken under consideration and remedied..."

Enough!

Usually you either know it or you don’t. And I don’t. The author is clearly not an Indian. The first-person plural makes me think the author is probably not an individual, which makes it harder. Certainly, we’re getting a taste of tension between colonists and Native Americans on the frontier. But who is writing about this tension, I have absolutely no idea

Stan, you get to shock me. Who is it?

Are you serious? I told you, it has to be an individual person! Fine. Gah!

So, after the end of the Seven Years War, American Indians organized an armed revolt. In 1763, Indians, particularly from the Ottawa and the Delaware tribes, launched what has come to be known as Pontiac’s Rebellion.

Now, of course, the rebellion ultimately failed to dislodge the British, but the Native Americans did manage to besiege Detroit and kill hundreds of settlers. And that convinced the British that if they wanted to avoid future conflicts, they should slow down the colonists' settlements in the territories.

So, the British Parliament issued the Proclamation Line of 1763 which forbids settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains and reserved that territory for Indians.

Now, that sounds like a sensible policy until you remember that the British colonists had just finished fighting a war in order to get the right to move into that very territory.

So, the settlers duly ignored the Proclamation Line and got down to settling.

The other big outcome of the Seven Years War was that it set up the American Revolution. I mean, you've just seen colonists ignoring the British Parliament.

We’ll talk more about that next week.

But around the end of the Seven Years War, new ideas like republicanism were taking root in the colonies. Republicanism initially meant supporting a government without a king, but in the colonies it came to mean something broader.

Now, they didn’t believe that everyone was equal. Republicans believed that only property-owning citizens possessed "virtue" which was defined in the 18th century not as being, like, morally good but as a willingness to subordinate one’s personal interests to the public good.

This type of republicanism harkened back to a Roman ideal. Only, you know, without Caesar stabbing and togas.

Stan, I wish you wouldn’t.

And a second type of political philosophy grew out of ideas that in the 18th Century were called "liberalism." For classical liberals, the main task of government was to protect citizens’ natural rights, which were defined by John Locke as life, liberty, and property.

For liberals like Locke, governments were the result of a social contract, whereby individuals would give up some of their liberty in exchange for a government protecting their natural rights.

So, republicanism and liberalism were undermining traditional political authority.

And so was the "Great Awakening", in which Americans awakened from being very religious to being super religious.

The Great Awakening took place in the early decades of the 18th century, and it was a revitalization of religious feeling, energized by revival meetings and the introduction of new denominations. In the early part of the 17th century, most of the English colonists were Anglicans, unless you count the Catholics running Maryland.

But by the time of the Great Awakening, they were also

Presbyterians and Baptists and Methodists. Oh my!

Even the Old Line Congregationalist churches were challenged by so-called New Light ministers who placed less of an emphasis on predestination and more on an individual's experience of salvation or being born again.

So religion became much more emotional in the colonies, especially after the arrival of the Englishman George Whitefield who went on a preaching tour from 1739 to 1741. The main thrust of his sermons was that humans need only repent to avoid the horrors of damnation and be saved. And he believed that salvation was within each individual.

It's worth noting that this rise in religious fervor was not confined to America or even to Christianity.

Like, for instance, Wahhabism, the Islamic reform movement that's still closely associated with Saudi Arabia, began in the Middle East around the same time.

So one of the keys in the American Revolution was a breakdown in respect for authority. And this was fueled partly by economics, partly by political philosophies that undermined faith in governance from afar, and partly by religious revivals that criticized not only church hierarchies, but also other aspects of colonial society.

I mean, if people were going so far as to criticize their religious leaders and established religious norms, is it any wonder that they would criticize the acts of a Parliament working an ocean away? We'll find out next week. Thanks for watching.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

If you have questions about today's video, you can ask them in comments, where they will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course. And as we say in my hometown: Don't forget to be awesome!