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1

ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE AND UNION

Empires gave birth to states, and states stood at the heart of empires.

David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 15

Expansion was the essential condition for the growth and prosperity of America.

Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, 104

Nothing but disunion can hurt our cause.

George Washington, April 15, 1776

JUMONVILLE GLEN, MAY 1754

The world changed profoundly the moment Tanaghrisson's hatchet crashed against the skull of the French officer. After splitting the head of his unresisting captive, the Seneca "half-king" washed his hands in his victim's spilled brains and impaled the head on a pike in a starkly symbolic declaration of hostilities against the French. Tanaghrisson hoped that his provocative act of violence would escalate the brewing clash between France, Britain, and diverse Indian tribes of eastern North America for control of the Ohio Country, a large domain centered on the Ohio River watershed and extending to the Great Lakes. Tanaghrisson aimed to enlist the British in securing his control over at least a part of the territory, both in the name of his tribe and in the name of his own increased power and prestige.

Bearing witness to this shocking act of brutality was twenty-two-year-old colonel George Washington, entrusted by the colonial Virginia legislature to lead a military expedition to the strategically critical Forks

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of the Ohio, meeting point of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers, in order to blunt further French encroachment on lands claimed by Virginia. The expedition had departed from Alexandria, Virginia, in early May 1754, marching through the dense forests of the mountains of western Maryland and Pennsylvania along an Indian path known as Nemacolin's Trail in honor of the Delaware chief said to be its originator. Washington encamped at a clearing in southwestern Pennsylvania known as Great Meadows, a small island of open space in a vast ocean of forest. There he rendezvoused with Tanaghrisson, whom he first had met on an expedition to the Ohio Country the previous November. On that journey Washington had warned the French – who had recently evicted a small British force from the forks of the Ohio and who had begun construction of an outpost on that spot they would name Fort Duquesne – against remaining in the Ohio Country. Returning the following spring, he had enlisted Tanaghrisson – an ambitious Seneca leader of dubious authority – and his followers in a campaign against the French.

On May 6, Tanaghrisson informed Washington of the presence of a French detachment camped for the evening a mere seven miles away. Washington gathered forty men and, along with Tanaghrisson and his band of warriors, marched all night in the rain to arrive at the camp at dawn. From a stone outcropping above a densely wooded glen, Washington's force fell upon the French-Canadians who slumbered below. Those who escaped into the forest fell to the blows of Indian hatchet men positioned behind the trees. About ten French-Canadians perished in the attack; none of Washington's men or his Indian allies died.

Taken captive after the brief and bloody struggle was the young French commander, Lieutenant Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville, an aristocrat and brother of the commander of French forces at Fort Duquesne, about fifty miles away. Washington, nominally in charge of the attacking force, watched helplessly as Tanaghrisson slaughtered the French commander. News of the attack soon made its way back to the French garrison at the Forks of the Ohio via a sole survivor of the attack who had escaped to tell the tale.

It was only by accident that the young and inexperienced Washington had been named commander of such an important mission. He was to be second-in-command to fifty-four-year-old Joshua Fry, an Oxford

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scholar who promised to bring some sense of subtlety in confronting the French, aided by Washington's extensive knowledge of the western country gained from his previous two trips to Ohio as a surveyor and explorer. Yet shortly before the expedition departed, Fry was thrown from his horse and killed, thrusting command of a mission critical to both Virginia and the British Empire onto the dashing and rugged Washington. An accomplished horseman, Washington faced no danger of being thrown from his horse.

Washington had a personal as well as patriotic interest in wresting the Ohio Country from the French and their Indian allies. After his brother Lawrence's early death in 1752, Washington had inherited a substantial share of the Ohio Company, a joint stock company of elite Northern Virginia gentry who saw in the western country the next great speculative real estate bonanza. These men, among them Virginia lieutenant governor William Dinwiddie, had been agitating London for some time to assert more strongly Virginia's claim to the Ohio Country, only one part of a more than half-century-long confrontation between Britain and France for imperial control of North America. Washington's own claim to Virginia's western lands, which he had received from his late brother, was itself based on a 1609 document extending the colony's reach westward to the South Sea, and north and west to the Great Lakes and beyond.[1] Washington had mapped and surveyed the Ohio Country for the shareholders at age sixteen, taking care to note for future personal reference what constituted its most valuable lands. As a young and physically robust member of the Virginia gentry, Washington was a natural participant in the imperial thrust west.

Although Washington eagerly sought new wealth in the western lands, he hardly was impoverished before that endeavor. He had inherited approximately two hundred slaves and ten thousand acres of land in Virginia along the Potomac River after his father's death in 1743. Yet the diminished fertility of the soil, exhausted by a century of tobacco cultivation, meant that Washington would need to find new sources of wealth if he hoped to realize his ambition to rise to the top of the Virginia economic and cultural elite. The defeat of the French and Indians in the name of Virginia and the British Empire would redound immensely to

[1] Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500–2000* (New York, 2005), 14.

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his personal benefit. Like his late father and brother, Washington saw military service, notwithstanding its hazards, as the surest path to political and economic success.

Knowing that the attack on Lieutenant Jumonville's force would generate a strong response, Washington and his force dug in at Great Meadows. There he ordered his men to build a small stockade, which he named Fort Necessity, chiefly as protection for his gunpowder supplies. Refusing to assume a position exposed to enemy fire from the surrounding forest, Tanaghrisson and his followers soon departed, leaving Washington and several dozen largely inexperienced Virginia conscripts to confront a few French-Canadians and a much larger number of their Native American allies. On July 3 the enemy attacked, hiding behind the trees as they fired down on Washington's troops, who made easy targets in the shallow rifle pits surrounding the stockade. Making matters worse, rising streams from torrential summer rains soon flooded the low-lying fort and its trenches, making the soldiers' flintlock muskets inoperable and resistance thereby impossible. After the deaths of about thirty of his men, Washington surrendered on July 3, 1754. In the aftermath, the French commander (and brother of the slain Jumonville) graciously spared Washington's life, allowing him and his men to return to Virginia after Washington signed a confession acknowledging his responsibility for the "assassination" of Jumonville and swearing never to return.

George Washington's botched mission to western Pennsylvania provided the spark that reignited the Anglo-French-Indian war in North America, which by 1756 had become a global conflagration known internationally as the Great War for the Empire. By any measure, it was an inauspicious beginning to a military career. Through his experience with Tanaghrisson he had learned of the hazards of entangling alliances. In spite of his failure, Washington emerged from the incident with undiminished confidence in his abilities. In a letter to his brother Jack, he wrote of the assault on Fort Necessity in rapturous terms, noting that he had "heard bulletts [sic] whistle … and there was something charming in the sound."[2] Paradoxically, Washington's reputation soared in the wake of the failed expedition, thanks in large part to the publication in

[2] Fred Anderson, ed., *George Washington Remembers: Reflections on the French and Indian War* (Lanham, Md., 2004), 74.

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Map 1. The Struggle for North America.

June 1754 of a stirring memoir of his trip to the Ohio Country the previous winter. Washington later repudiated his signed confession to the execution of Jumonville, blaming his interpreter for a faulty translation of the French in the original document.

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The defeat of the Virginia regiment on the Ohio frontier provoked a strong response from the British government. It had desired to reescalate the ongoing war with France, and yet the humiliation of the Virginians seemed to require a strong response lest the power and prestige of the whole British Empire be called into question. At the instigation of the duke of Cumberland – son of George II and architect of the scorched earth policy that had laid waste to Scotland after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie and his Scots rebels at Culloden in 1742 – an imposing invasion force was gathered. In May 1755, General Edward Braddock and two regiments of the elite Coldstream Guards marched into a newly constructed stockade built on a bluff on the Potomac River near Will's Creek that Braddock named Fort Cumberland, in honor of his patron the duke of Cumberland. There Braddock and his troops, aided by colonial militias and Native American allies, prepared for an assault on the French forces and their Native American allies at Fort Duquesne, about one hundred miles to the west. Brushing off the failures of the Virginia militiamen, British officials confidently expected that a few French soldiers and their Indian allies would be no match for battle-hardened British regular troops.

Washington eagerly embraced another attempt to expand the Anglo-American Empire into the Ohio Country, notwithstanding his signed pledge not to return there. He had a substantial personal stake in the outcome of the battle to control the region. He envisioned an all-water route to Ohio via the Potomac River, conveniently passing by his Virginia estate at Alexandria, which he anticipated would become a key *entrepôt* for goods moving both upriver and down. Later in life he would become a vigorous proponent of the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, a waterway running parallel to the Potomac River designed to transport goods upriver in the days before steam power. (Remnants of that canal survive today, repurposed as a hiking and walking trail.) Washington speculated in western lands, eventually owning more than sixty thousand acres west of the mountains, making him one of the largest absentee landowners of his time.[3] He keenly understood that "[l]and is the most permanent estate and the most likely to increase in value."[4]

[3] Thomas Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986), 82.

[4] Richard Norton Smith, *Patriarch: George Washington and the New American Nation* (Boston, 1993), 9.

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Thus in 1755 he joined Braddock's expedition as an adjutant and guide, anticipating the advantages a successful expansionist thrust west would give to the British Empire, his home colony of Virginia, and to his own personal reputation and fortune. In this regard, Fred Anderson notes that Washington was "an advocate of empire long before he became the hero of a revolution."[5]

FRANKLIN'S VISION

Joining Washington in Braddock's imperial enterprise was Benjamin Franklin, marking the first time that the trajectories of the two men crossed. Like Washington, Franklin was a zealous imperialist who aimed to remove the Native American and French enemies blocking the migration of Pennsylvanians, Virginians, New Yorkers, and other Anglo-Americans into the seemingly limitless territories west of the Appalachian Mountains. Since the late 1740s Franklin had devoted a substantial portion of his considerable energies to the cause of colonial union, which he believed essential for westward expansion, colonial security, colonial prosperity, and his own speculative success in western lands. The previous summer at Albany he had almost single-handedly turned a congress of northern colonies aimed at strengthening the fraying Anglo-American alliance with the Six Nations of the Iroquois confederacy into a de facto constitutional convention, securing passage of a colonial Plan of Union that created a central governing authority with the power to tax and entrusted with handling expansion and security concerns. The congregants resolved unanimously "[t]hat an [sic] union of the colonies is absolutely necessary for their preservation."[6] Yet the colonial legislatures, lacking the looming threat of Indian attacks that had helped to spur passage of the plan in Albany, were much less eager to join a colonial union. The absence of an immediate security threat, combined with intracolonial rivalries and a zealous determination of local elites not to give up one iota of local autonomy to a distant central government, doomed the plan to defeat. Indeed, in most of the colonies it was never formally considered. In London, where Franklin hoped that Parliament would impose the plan of union on the colonists,

[5] Anderson and Cayton, *Dominion of War*, 107.
[6] Leonard Labaree, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1962), 5:400.

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the scheme was received skeptically and quietly shelved. Long-standing British fears of creating a colonial union that might someday slip the leash of imperial control prevented consideration of what might have been a transformative move for the history of the British Empire.

Rejection by both colonial legislatures and by Parliament did not quash Franklin's dream of union. He had first conceived of it in the 1740s. After making himself independently wealthy via his various printing and publishing enterprises, Franklin retired from active participation in private business and devoted himself to two main tasks: first, gaining a better understanding of the mysterious force known as electricity and, second, facilitating the expansion of British North America west of the Appalachian Mountains. In a series of published works, Franklin began to evolve a powerful vision regarding the future both of the North American colonies and of the British Empire. He first gave expression to this vision in "Plain Truth, or Serious Considerations on the Present State of the City of Philadelphia and Province of Pennsylvania" (1747). In it, he voiced concerns that Philadelphia was isolated and vulnerable to attack. The solution was for the colonies to unite for common defense. "At present we are like the separate Filaments of Flax before the Thread is form'd, without Strength, because without Connection; but UNION would make us strong, and even formidable."[7]

A more famous statement of his vision appeared in "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind," written in 1751 but not published until 1754. In it, he imagined the British North American colonies formed into one imposing union along a rapidly expanding western frontier. Franklin's awareness of the opportunities available as a result of North America's favorable geography is at the heart of his argument. The abundance of land and other forms of economic opportunity in North America would lead to the proliferation of large families and a consequent doubling of the population approximately every twenty years, something Franklin termed "the American multiplication table." Access to the lands west of the mountains and the limitless opportunity it represented would result in earlier marriages and larger families than was the case in England, where a shortage of tillable soil limited growth. Only with sufficient living room could the prosperity of

[7] Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1969), 44.

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the coastal regions be maintained and extended. Franklin conceived a vision of a fast-growing, rapidly expanding domain that would be the embodiment of human freedom, political justice, and material progress. "Observations on the Increase of Mankind" remains, in the words of Gerald Stourzh, "the first conscious and comprehensive formulation of 'Manifest Destiny.'"[8]

Franklin further elaborated his vision regarding the advantages of colonial union in "Plan for Settling Two Western Colonies," written apparently sometime in 1754 and forwarded to the duke of Cumberland in 1756. In it, Franklin described the Ohio Country as being well known as "one of the finest in North America" and absolutely essential for the future prosperity of the colonies in that "our people … cannot much more increase in number" east of the mountains, a startling claim when one recalls there were only about 2.5 million white colonists at that time. The future was found in Ohio, and if the French were to win it permanently, it would block westward expansion, thereby "preventing our obtaining new subsistence by cultivating new lands … discourag[ing] our marriages, and keep[ing] our people from increasing; thus (if the expression may be allowed) killing thousands of our children before they are born." He argued, "If two strong colonies of English" were settled in the Ohio Country they would provide security from attack and check the "dreaded junction of the French settlements in Canada, with those in Louisiana …"[9] In short, Franklin envisioned western expansion as a way for the colonies to escape being encircled by the Gallic menace. As was stated at the Albany Congress, "[I]t seems absolutely necessary that Speedy and Effectual measures be taken to Secure the Colonies from the Slavery they are threatened with."[10] Significant, too, is Franklin's recommendation that the western land claims of the colonies (some of which extended to the Pacific Ocean) be curtailed in the name of practicality: "A single old colony does not seem strong enough to extend itself.… it cannot venture a settlement far distant from the main body, being unable to support it. But if the colonies were united … they might easily, by their joint force, establish one or more new colonies, whenever they should judge it necessary or advantageous

[8] Stourzh, *Franklin and American Foreign Policy,* 59.
[9] Labaree, ed., *Franklin Papers*, 5:458.
[10] Labaree, ed., *Franklin Papers*, 5:373.

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to the interests of the whole."[11] As Gerald Stourzh observes regarding the text, "Expansion for defense and expansion for its own sake are merged into one powerful case for the immediate settlement of the western country."[12]

To be realized, Franklin's vision of an expanding British North American empire required a colonial union. This seemed so crystal clear to Franklin that he could not grasp why many colonists resisted it. Such is the fate of the visionary. This sentiment found its most famous expression in a letter he wrote to fellow unionist James Parker in 1751, in which Franklin laments the resistance of the colonists to the idea of union while noting the effectiveness and longevity of the Six Nations Confederacy: "It would be a very strange Thing, if six Nations of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union, and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their Interests."[13] The lesson Franklin learned from the example of the Six Nations Confederacy was not about "democracy," as is sometimes asserted by contemporary scholars, but rather about the importance of union to the establishment of the imperial control of North America.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Franklin's vision was his conception of an emerging parity between England and the colonies. He proposed that the colonists be treated as equals to citizens of the mother country, candidly admitting in a letter to Peter Collinson in May 1754, "May I presume to whisper my Sentiments in a private Letter? Britain and her Colonies should be considered as one Whole, and not as different States with separate interests."[14] Over time, Franklin saw the colonies not only as a source of raw materials and agricultural products, as had been the case until then, but also as a burgeoning market for British manufactures. In 1760, he wrote to the Scottish philosopher Lord Kames, "I have long been of the opinion that the foundations of

[11] Labaree, ed., *Franklin Papers*, 5:459.
[12] Stourzh, *Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, 73.
[13] Labaree, ed., *Franklin Papers*, 4:119.
[14] Labaree, ed., *Franklin Papers*, 5:332.

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