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Julian Stafford Corbett

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ENGLAND IN THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR

CHAPTER I

THE FRENCH COUNTER-ATTACK OF 1759

A STRIKING feature of the operations against Quebec is that in spite of their extreme difficulty and the risk they involved, and in spite of the decisive importance of the objective, no direct attempt to interrupt or even to harass them was made from France. The conditions which produced this result have still to be dealt with, and are well worth study.

In the first place, they introduce us to a fresh principle of higher strategy which recurs in almost all great wars, and above all others tends to strategical confusion in their conduct. That law, or principle, is the tendency of limited wars to become unlimited in character. The process, as between two powerful and determined states, is almost inevitable. In a limited war, correctly conducted, a phase must be reached sooner or later in which one party begins to predominate in the limited area—that is, the area of the special object. The other party, as he feels himself unable to retain his hold in that area or shake that of his adversary, will seek to redress the balance by striking him at the centre of his power. In

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other words, the losing party will seek to destroy or cripple his enemy's resources for war at their base, and to inflict upon his home population suffering more intense than the attainment of the special object is worth. A war conducted on these lines is unlimited in character, since by acting thus we seek, through general pressure upon the national life of an adversary, to force him to do our will or to abandon his own.

It is this stage of a limited war which most severely tests the imperturbability of a government, and at the same time exhibits the highest function of the defensive. And here lies the second point, in which the home aspect of the campaign of 1759 is so significant. Pitt's success in the war, so far, had been due fundamentally to the clear-eyed determination with which he had differentiated and co-ordinated the offensive and defensive parts of his scheme. The vigorous offensive in the limited area had been given its utmost attainable intensity, and nourished to the last available man and gun by a cool insistence upon a rigid defensive at home, so far, at least, as that defensive was compatible with diplomatic demands. Though France had for a while hung back from the truth, it had been her interest from the first to make the war unlimited in character. She was so much the weaker in the limited area and upon the common lines of passage and communication, that general coercion was her only real chance of fighting the war to a favourable peace. It was with this object in view, as we have seen, that she had attacked Hanover, but the connection between Hanover and England had not proved sufficiently intimate to convert the character of the war. In Europe Pitt stubbornly refused to go beyond the general defensive attitude which was necessary to cover his offensive in America; and France had been provided by diplomatic

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means with preoccupations which as yet had made it impossible for her to break that defensive.

So far, the correct line for England to pursue had been comparatively clear and easy to follow; but when France, finding her first design for expanding the war ineffective, went a step further and decided to make a direct attack upon the British Islands, the case became more complex. The question at once arose whether the time had not now come for abandoning the defensive attitude which had hitherto sufficed. Pitt above all men was a believer in the supreme efficacy of the offensive. In our history he may be taken to stand for that faith, as Napoleon stands for it in France; and yet it was Napoleon who wrote, "The whole art of war consists in a well reasoned and strictly judicious defensive, followed by audacious and rapid attack." Such too was Pitt's faith. No man grasped more firmly than he the absolute dependence of the offensive upon a foundation of defence, and no one moreover knew better that where the offensive is not directed justly at the main object of the war, it is mere superstition and untutored instinct. To meet offence by quicker and more violent offence was the keynote of Pitt's method, but he never permitted the brilliance of the conception to blind him. He never forgot that to be tempted into taking the offensive in an area which was not the true area of the war, and in which the enemy was naturally the stronger, was not to show vigour, but to play stupidly into the enemy's hands. We have only to follow his handling of the new situation to see how true was his eye and how masterly his grasp of war.

That the French determined to resort in some form or other to their old deterrent device of an invasion, or at least a formidable demonstration, was known early in the year. Indeed they made no secret of it. Seeing

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that the whole object of the design was to divert British attention from America and to attract her main forces within reach of French weapons, she had every reason to sound her trumpets as loudly as possible. What she had to keep secret was not her intention, but the manner in which it was to be carried out.¹ Before ever Saunders and Wolfe had sailed for Quebec, our intelligence left no doubt that the French intention was at least serious enough to be reckoned with. Choiseul, who was now all-powerful at Versailles, had said they meant to play the Pretender again and make a serious descent upon England to ruin her credit, since in his opinion this was the only means France had left for maintaining the balance. It was English supplies that kept the war in Germany going, and they must be stopped. For it was only in Germany that France could secure the means of recovering the ground she had lost in America. There Frederick must be subdued, and the only way to subdue Frederick was to invade England, and so detach her from his alliance. Her eyes were not shut to the naval difficulties, but these she hoped to overcome by bringing in the other maritime powers, and particularly Sweden, who was as anxious as herself to see the horn of Frederick brought low.² The fleet was already arming, and forty thousand men were cantoned along the Channel coasts. Threats so definite as these had never failed to impress the peculiar tenderness of British strategy. The device had been tried again and again and had always had the effect of attracting to itself the mass of British effort. But, unlike his predecessors, Pitt was unmoved. He saw the old net being spread before his eyes, and refused to walk into it.

¹ Choiseul to Havrincour, June 7, *Newcastle Papers*, 32,891.

² Information from Paris, *Newcastle Papers*, *Add. MSS.* 32,888, f. 252, Jan. 20, 1759; Scheffer to Höpken (intercepted), *Ibid.*, Jan. 20, 32,887.

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The orders for Canada stood, and Pitt gave no more heed to the French threat than, as we have seen, slightly to strengthen his naval defensive by ordering Saunders to detach two of the line to reinforce Brodrick in the Mediterranean.

There was, however, one factor in the situation which caused Pitt real anxiety, and that was the uncertain and even menacing attitude of the neutral sea powers—Spain, Holland, Denmark, and Sweden. It may be taken as a law of maritime warfare, which cannot be omitted from strategical calculation with impunity, that every step towards gaining command of the sea tends to turn neutral sea powers into enemies. The prolonged exercise of belligerent rights, even of the most undoubted kind, produces an interference with trade that becomes more and more oppressive. But the process is usually accelerated as the sense of power inclines the dominating belligerent to push its privileges beyond admitted limits. In the present case the atmosphere was very highly charged, owing to the fact that the Dutch and those that followed them still claimed immunity for enemy's goods in neutral ships; while England asserted her traditional doctrine that enemy's goods were good prize everywhere upon the high seas. In the present war this old dispute received a special aggravation. For, as we have seen, France, in an effort to save her West Indian trade, had suspended her exclusive navigation laws, and had thrown open that trade to neutrals. Now, however willing England might be to relax the severity of her doctrine in order to keep well with her neighbours, this was a length to which she could not go. To permit neutrals, and above all the Dutch, to carry on for France her West Indian trade, was to render that trade almost invulnerable, and the islands themselves much more

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defensible. We argued that for a neutral in war time to carry on belligerent trade which was denied to her in peace was to better her position by the war, and to give illegitimate assistance to the belligerent. Our courts, therefore, had laid down from the first the famous "Rule of 1756" that during war neutrals may not engage in a trade with the colonies of a belligerent which is denied to foreign vessels in time of peace.

On this rule our courts acted with legitimate severity, to the especial annoyance of the Dutch, whose commercial position had always owed so much to their inveterate practice of fishing thus in troubled waters.¹ Added to this was the further provocation that the Dutch were the most confirmed dealers in contraband of war, and the result was that their ships were seized ruthlessly and condemned in our prize courts without mercy, and often with a stretch of justice. Danes, Swedes, and Spaniards fared little better. What the King's cruisers did might possibly have been borne, but the action of our privateers was outrageous beyond endurance. Every year it had been growing worse, and it is not to be denied that at this time there was a swarm of smaller privateers in the Narrow Seas who were not to be distinguished from pirates. No matter from what innocent port the luckless vessels came, they seized them regardless of their papers, and in some cases went so far as to capture vessels which had just been released by our own prize-courts. To increase the danger of the situation, it happened that the Princess Royal, who had been regent in Holland, had recently

¹ For the serious extent of this trade see Governor Thomas to Pitt, Antigua, Nov. 20, 1758, *Chatham MSS.*, 98. He says three Dutch convoys under French escort had passed between Martinique and St. Eustatius in the last four months.

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died, and we were deprived of her kindly influence. In Spain, too, the Anglophile King Ferdinand had sunk into imbecility. His end was obviously near, and the heir-presumptive was the Bourbon King of Naples, a strong partisan of France. Still General Wall maintained his ascendancy over Spanish policy, but it was expected not to outlast the frail life of the King.

This, then, was the uncertain element in the situation, and it was the only one which caused Pitt any real anxiety. He was honestly doing his best to check the abuses, but the privateers were incorrigible. What oppressed his mind from the first was a vision of the three northern powers uniting to protect their trade. He saw how easily on such a pretence they might gather a powerful combined fleet to escort their convoys down Channel, and then, having seen them clear, it would be open to them to run into Brest, join hands with the French fleet, and declare war. We should then be unable to keep command of the Channel or the North Sea, and the threatened invasion would become a real danger.¹

The vision does credit to Pitt's long sight and acute perception. It was far from fanciful. France was doing all she could at this time to tempt Sweden into taking a hand in her invasion project, and Denmark was actually approaching Holland as to the possibility of forming a maritime union and taking common action for the assertion of neutral rights. Pitt, who knew how to make concessions as well as to be bold, met the danger by

¹ Newcastle to Yorke, Dec. 19, 1758, and "Mem. for the King," Dec. 22. "Mr. Pitt's apprehensions that the Dutch and Danes may come into our channel without our having any certain knowledge of their object, and if the court of France should have any design to disturb us, these very ships may join and assist in it."—*Add. MSS.* 32,886.

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bringing pressure to bear on the prize courts to release as many ships as possible, and by restraining the excesses of the privateers by administrative action. In May, as the complaints continued and the crisis became more acute, he went so far as to hurry a severe Act through Parliament to restrain and punish their abuses, and to facilitate the release of captured vessels, while licenses were almost entirely refused to small vessels and the prize courts had a fresh hint to show every possible leniency. The resistance of the privateer owners was violent and formidable, but a few weeks after the Act came into operation means were found for reconciling them to the new measures, and at the same time of using their energy. The growing menace of invasion called, as it always did, for the formation of a defensive flotilla, and a number of them were taken into Government pay and attached to squadrons under the command of naval officers who could direct their energy into more profitable channels. By these means the air was cleared. The neutral powers were pacified, and the special danger passed.¹

Still in spite of these measures as the spring advanced the seriousness of the general outlook only increased. Week by week signs that the French were in earnest

¹ Waddington, vol. iii. p. 425; Beatson, vol. ii. pp. 201–203. Beatson says: "Great numbers of these privateers were very small, and some of them were commanded by men remarkable only for brute courage and entirely devoid of every principle of honour or humanity, &c." They actually robbed the Marquis de Pignatelli, Spanish Ambassador to Denmark, on his way to Copenhagen in a Dutch ship. The new Act came into force on June 1, and was entitled, "An Act to explain and amend an Act of 29 George II. for the encouragement of seamen . . . and for the better prevention of piracies and robberies by private ships of war." Commissions were limited to ships of over 100 tons and 10 guns, with a discretionary power to grant them to smaller vessels made in favour of the Channel Islands, whose fishing craft had been doing real service against the French coastwise traffic.

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grew in intensity. Troops were gathering about the Flemish ports, and a flotilla was being prepared in those of the Channel. Yorke, in Holland, assured the Government it meant nothing, but Newcastle's intelligence was too good, and he had no illusions. "The design," he wrote "of making an attempt here, and perhaps at the same time in Ireland and Scotland, goes on, but the particular time of its execution is not yet determined. These things are not given out to frighten us, but are under their serious consideration. You know, I suppose, that flat-bottomed boats are preparing all along the French coasts."¹ Yorke persisted in his scepticism, while at home the Government was acting on its convictions. The French were assuring all the allied courts that, owing to the great fleets which England had sent out to the West Indies and Canada, it would be impossible for them to be superior in European waters. But Anson's labour had never ceased. On April 5th he was able to promise the King that he would have thirty of the line ready for the Channel Fleet in May, and that the French between Brest and Rochefort would have no more than twenty-seven. He proposed to send Boscawen, who was still at home, to look into Rochefort with ten sail, and to order a cruiser squadron to Bordeaux to destroy a convoy of victuallers which had gone thither for provisions.² His cruisers upon the French coasts were supplying him with excellent information, and at the same time actively operating against the coastwise trade upon which the equipment of the French invading forces must principally depend. The effect of Anson's energy and Pitt's politic concessions to the neutral powers was that the control of the home waters was soon in little danger.

¹ Newcastle to Yorke, April 3, *Newcastle Papers*, 32,889.

² "Mem. for the King," April 5, *ibid.*, 32,889

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The more immediate anxiety was from Toulon, where the French preparations were more advanced. The probable intention of the squadron was to seek to join the Brest fleet, and if this were carried out the control of the Channel would become more difficult to secure. It was therefore decided to give Boscawen three of the line and send him down to join Brodrick before Toulon and take command. In accordance with this plan he sailed on April 14th.

So far, it will be observed, the measures taken to repel, or rather prevent, the threatened disturbance were purely naval. Pitt refused to take the invasion seriously. For him it was but a menace, intended to cover some ulterior action by the French fleet, possibly in the West Indies, Canada, or elsewhere. The situation, in his eyes, was met by confronting it with a fleet capable of dealing with the threatened attack. Everything else was courageously ignored. Formidable as was the display of military movement along the French coasts, there was no calling out of the militia, no raising of volunteers, no issue of orders for driving the coast country, nor indeed any of the traditional measures by which governments had been used on these occasions to further the enemy's object by creating a scare at home and disturbing the current of national life. It was Pitt's conviction to make the defence purely active, to picture the country to itself as only waiting eagerly for the tortoise to dare to show its head. The army must, therefore, take its part in the play beside the fleet, and be deprived of any appearance of waiting to be attacked. So of land defence there was no sign, nor any considerable movement of troops, except the formation of another camp in the Isle of Wight.

It was his old device, and it had never failed him. With the Channel fleet getting rapidly ready for Hawke's