The French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the Counterfactual Hypothesis: Reflections on Lawrence Henry Gipson and John Shy
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History is not fiction. Historians reject the liberty, essential to historical novelists, of inventing personalities and other details about a past era. Instead we must stick to what we can prove, or reasonably infer, from the data we study. Thus whenever someone begins to speculate heretically about "might-have-beens," historians almost instinctively react by erecting this principle into an impassible barrier. "We cannot have the events other than they are," A. J. P. Taylor has recently pronounced with doctrinal certainty. "Some historians like to play at the game 'if it had happened otherwise.' This only goes to show that they would be better employed writing romantic novels where dreams come true."¹ But, one might ask, is that what historical novelists really do? War and Peace, for example, derives its overwhelming impact from Leo Tolstoy's artistic discipline which deliberately subordinates fictional invention to genuine history. Tolstoy created individuals and incidents, but he accepted the reality of the larger events of the age of Napoleon. American historical fiction follows the same pattern. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Mitchell, and Kenneth Roberts never felt at liberty to undo the founding of Massachusetts, the Revolution, or the Civil War.

Yet paradoxically most of us attempt in practice what we reject in theory. To make sense out of the past, historians do fantasize about their subject. Every time a historian evaluates a particular decision or policy option in terms of contemporary alternatives, he is thinking counterfactually because he has to, unless he is prepared to assert that real choices did not exist in the past or that, if they did, historians should ignore them. Traditional military histories and good biographies are largely written in these terms. Although this quality resembles the literary imagination in major respects, it serves a different function for
historians. Generally speaking, historical novelists remain faithful to
great events while they invent or embellish particulars. By contrast, the
historian must adhere to the details of the past while speculating about
larger patterns. To explain his data, he must ask whether it could have
fallen together in some combination other than what actually occurred.
Only by posing this question can he decide which of his verifiable
"facts" were decisive and which were peripheral in generating the larger
"events" he hopes to reconstruct.

This essay argues through a single complex example that we might be
better historians if we render explicit what we already do implicitly.
Because counterfactual thinking embarrasses us, even terrifies us by its
sheer lack of rules, we employ it haphazardly rather than systematically.
The predictable result is sloppy scholarship. We can reduce this
difficulty only by devising ways to validate counterfactual hypotheses.
And in the last analysis, they can be formulated and assessed only in
terms of the data from which they arise. Had George III invented the
airplane, he might have won the War for Independence. But this
particular counterfactual argument is absurd on its face because it
violates what we already know about the science of the period. Other
might-have-beens are more plausible and merit serious attention. One of
them has managed to influence nearly every attempt to understand why
the Revolution happened when it did.

II

The late Lawrence Henry Gipson was one of few American historians to
erect counterfactual arguments into explicit research tools. Throughout
his lengthy career he often repeated one major point: "that the
American Revolution," as he put it in 1948, "was an aftermath of the
Anglo-French conflict in the New World [between 1754 and 1763]."
Had Canada remained French after 1763, he asked, "would not
Americans have continued to feel the need as in the past to rely for
their safety and welfare upon British sea power and British land power,
as well as upon British resources generally?"2 Britain's honest, rational,
but expensive attempt to administer vast new territory acquired largely
for the benefit of the older colonies clashed inevitably, Gipson believed,
with their lessened sense of dependence. Britain had to ask them to
accept in time of peace a series of impositions they had not felt even in
time of war. The result was revolution, for despite the Empire's
manifest needs, the colonies responded by demanding "greater auton-
omy than ever."3

In Gipson's hands, an avowedly counterfactual assumption became a
basis for sorting out the importance of particular events—in this case,
for deciding that the Canada cession outweighed the Stamp Act, for
example, as a cause of the Revolution. This particular counterfactual
argument is essential to his entire history. It enables him to convert the Revolution into an enormous tragedy in which the British Empire destroys itself through an excess of altruism, decency, and concern for order.4

But this assumption did not originate with Gipson. Indeed, few organizing principles in American history can boast of lengthier genealogies, for the argument antedated the Revolution itself by at least one generation. "I have been told by Englishmen . . . that the English colonies in North America, in the space of thirty or fifty years, would be able to form a state by themselves entirely independent of Old England," Peter Kalm, the Swedish naturalist, reported after visiting New York in 1748. "But as the whole country which lies along the seashore is unguarded, and on the land side is harassed by the French, these dangerous neighbors in time of war are sufficient to prevent the connection of the colonies with their mother country from being quite broken off."5 "The possession of Canada, far from being necessary to our Safety, may in its Consequence be even dangerous," warned William Burke after the fall of Quebec. "A Neighbour that keeps us in some Awe, is not always the worst of Neighbours."6 Even high French officials seemed to agree. Britain's conquest of New France will "be one more cause acting to hasten her ruin by favouring the defection of her colonies in North America," one of them observed as early as 1758; "they will soon be richer than Old England and will undoubtedly shake off the yoke of the mother country."7 Had Canada remained French, lamented Governor Thomas Hutchinson in 1773, "none of the spirit of opposition to the Mother Country would have yet appeared & I think the effects of [the Canada cession] worse than all we had to fear from the French or Indians."8

Because the Empire did collapse not long after the Peace of Paris, historians, ever alert for an apt quotation, have seized passages of this sort and endowed them with prophetic power. And because this particular counterfactual argument is neatly lodged in the sources themselves, scholars have embraced it through the unexceptionable device of quoting what they read. In this way a counterfactual argument has acquired the analytical function of a verifiable "fact." Partly for this reason, the Canada cession has emerged as a major cause of the Revolution across the entire interpretive spectrum. It characterizes not just Gipson's "imperial" approach, but even George Bancroft's fervently nationalistic account.9 It is a staple item in American textbooks. Yet the argument never has attracted thorough analysis, probably because it is counterfactual, and historians are not quite certain how to handle such material. Since it already plays an important role in our understanding of the Revolution, it demands careful investigation. It can, in fact, be approached in several ways, all derived from other available data of the pre-Revolutionary era.
First, Gipson's argument assumes that the "Gallic Peril"\textsuperscript{10} had to discourage colonial resistance to Britain. Its removal would thus stimulate opposition. If so, we ought to learn something from the earlier political behavior of colonies exposed to this danger or isolated from it. The outbreak of Queen Anne's War did not prevent the Massachusetts assembly from embarking upon a bitter quarrel with its governor in 1702-04, nor did it deflect the assembly of vulnerable New York from a path of remarkable radicalism a few years later.\textsuperscript{11} King George's War generated a similar response in New York, where the governor found himself pathetically impotent by 1748.\textsuperscript{12} The aftermath of that war is also instructive. Although Britain returned Louisbourg to France, thus strengthening the Gallic Peril, and although French expansion assumed alarming dimensions shortly after the peace, this threat did not forestall the eruption or continuation of serious political crises in New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina.\textsuperscript{13} To be sure, these controversies remained local, not intercolonial, but the will to redress perceived grievances was quite apparent in them all. Unlike the situation after 1763, no common target emerged against which all the colonies could direct their energies at the same time. On the other hand, Virginia provides a stunning example of a province all but immune to the French threat until after 1750. Instead of stimulating demands for independence, this security reinforced what must have been the most harmonious political system in the Empire. Between 1720 and 1753, no issue of consequence ever divided the governor from the assembly. Virginia remained loyal to the imperial connection despite the lack of an overriding military need. Ironically, the Pistoie Fee controversy spoiled the record of harmony in 1753, just as the colony was being drawn into the Anglo-French contest for control of the Ohio Valley.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, contrary examples also existed, especially the Massachusetts of Governor William Shirley who used war and expansion to solidify his immensely successful system of political management. But the point remains that war with France could strain imperial relations as easily as it could bolster them.\textsuperscript{15}

Still another approach to this question involves analysis of a somewhat broader range of quotations about the impact of Anglo-French tensions upon colonial politics, and vice versa. Benjamin Franklin flatly denied that the acquisition of Canada would jeopardize colonial loyalties, while a Boston newspaper essayist suggested that the continuing presence of French Canada along the colonial frontier might actually inspire Versailles to stimulate colonial resistance to Britain.\textsuperscript{16} Other spokesmen, both British and colonial, were more explicit. During the parliamentary debate on repeal of the Stamp Act, a proponent of British sovereignty declared, "ask France what Occasion She wou'd wish for y[ou]r Destruction, she will answer, let Divisions be kept up and fomented between you and your Colonies ... as the surest Means to
her of compassing the great Object of her Ambition.”

“Do you think that all your rival powers in Europe would sit still and see you crush your once flourishing and thriving colonies, unconcerned spectators of such a quarrel?” the Virginia planter, George Mason, warned the London merchants even more bluntly in 1766. “Recollect what happened in the Low Countries a century or two ago. Call to mind the causes of the [Dutch] revolt [against Spain].”

European powers, fearing that Britain had “grown too powerful” in the last war, could only applaud “civil discords” within the Empire, echoed John Dickinson during the next crisis, because these disensions “would afford opportunities of revenging all the injuries supposed to be received from her.”

Thus while Gipson and his sources contend that elimination of the Gallic Peril had to generate an imperial crisis, these other writers perceived an opposite connection. Imperial strife might revive the Gallic Peril for Britain. And, of course, the Franco-American alliance of 1778 very nicely proved their point.

A third consideration is equally telling. The French government may have left North America by 1763, but the French Canadiens remained behind, very much alive and still dangerous. Colonists did not protest Britain’s decision to garrison North America with regulars after the war because the need seemed obvious. If the Canadiens rebelled, the cycle of war could begin anew. Indeed, the Quebec Act of 1774 alarmed the northern colonies precisely because, in their view, it did revive the Gallic Peril. The Loyalist Daniel Leonard grimly stoked their smoldering fears. If we challenge Britain to war, he observed in December 1774:

Inconceivably shocking the scene; if we turn our views to the wilderness, our back settlements a prey to our ancient enemy, the Canadians, whose wounds received from us in the late war, will bleed afresh at the prospect of revenge, and to the numerous tribes of savages, whose tender mercies are cruelties. Thus with the British navy in the front, Canadians and savages in the rear, a regular army in the midst, we must be certain that whenever the sword of civil war is unsheathed, devastation will pass through our land like a whirlwind.

As Leonard realized, Britain in 1775 possessed the maritime dominance she had used to crush the French in the previous conflict plus all the geographical assets of New France as of 1754. The colonies could avoid conflict with Canada only by preserving peace with Britain. In other words, the Revolution erupted despite general recognition that it would almost certainly produce another Canadian war. Only a quick conquest of their troublesome neighbor could avert this fate, Congress assumed, and when that failed by 1776 the Gallic Peril had revived—only to stimulate rather than retard the revolutionary cause. For, as James Hutson has recently argued, the Declaration of Independence came
when it did because Patriots feared a mythical "Partition Treaty" between Britain and France. In exchange for Canada, France would help Britain subdue her rebellious colonies, a prospect so terrifying to American leaders that nothing short of independence seemed likely to sway France in their favor. But in fact, Canada soon became a staging ground for British regulars instead of angry French habitants, but this development was hardly predictable in the decisive years 1775-76. And Indian behavior along the frontier, coordinated out of British territories that had once formed New France, actually did resurrect for the colonies many of the specific difficulties of 1754 with no Empire to turn to for aid. Lord North certainly understood the military value of Canada. So long as the Empire holds Canada, he wrote in 1778, the colonies "will be always obliged to pay attention to Great Britain."

III

Removal of the Canada cession as a milestone toward revolution leaves rather different markers behind. To oversimplify the options a little, it returns the Stamp Act and other specific issues to the central place that Patriots always gave them. Instead of pretexts for the manifestation of a selfish American nationalism, as Gipson saw them, these particular crises again emerge as causes of the Revolution. Without them there would have been no revolution and no American nation, at least not in the immediate future.

Yet Gipson was correct in one sense, for important links can indeed be established between his "Great War for the Empire" and the American Revolution. The best research on this question proceeds from John Shy, whose Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution (Princeton, 1965) deserves recognition as one of the most perceptive contributions to Revolutionary history since World War II. He shows that Britain's victories over France generated a great fund of colonial good will towards the mother country. The army itself remained quite popular in the colonies until it was sent to Boston in 1768. Outside New England, these favorable attitudes persisted into the 1770s, including a surprising willingness to enlist in the king's forces. Properly exploited, these loyalties could have been mobilized to tighten imperial bonds. Instead a persistent misapplication of means to ends, with the army usually involved somewhere along the way, finally dissipated the good will. Somehow particular policy decisions, seemingly rational in themselves, consistently missed the point at the level of implementation.

In a separate essay, Shy has also taken an explicitly counterfactual approach to the coming of the Revolution. By comparing the policy suggestions of Henry Ellis, a hard-liner on imperial issues, with those of
Thomas Pownall, an avowed friend of the colonies, he shows that even Pownall’s proposals would have badly antagonized America. His conclusion exudes pessimism about the Empire’s prospects for surviving the crisis, for he can find no likelihood that Britain’s ruling class could ever have agreed on a colonial policy leading anywhere but toward Lexington and independence.²⁵

Yet Shy’s book, taken in conjunction with other recent studies, suggests a startling pattern about British policy formation in the 1760s, a pattern no one has quite pieced together so far. He demonstrates that the Quartering Act of 1765 was a useless, ill-conceived irritant in imperial relations. The quartering of British soldiers had raised serious tensions early in the war, but colonists had resolved them by erecting public barracks for the redcoats in major provincial cities, while the assemblies had regularly voted essential supplies. Yet after the war General Sir Thomas Gage began to worry about his lack of power to quarter soldiers in smaller communities while marching them from one post to another. Although the problem had not yet arisen, he asked London to obtain legislation enabling him when necessary to quarter troops in private homes. Eventually the ministry, nervous over this challenge to traditional English liberties, gave the problem to Pownall, who claimed expertise on the subject because he had been governor of Massachusetts during its quartering dispute of 1758. Accordingly, Pownall’s statute addressed the problems of 1758, which had already taken care of themselves, rather than the new theoretical issue of 1765. The Quartering Act met no real needs. It did create real problems by compelling colonial legislatures to do what so far they had all done voluntarily. Thus it gratuitously antagonized assemblies that were proud of their record of cooperation with the army while, ironically, it also denied Gage the one power he had requested—to quarter soldiers in private homes.²⁶

Surprisingly, this bizarre sequence of events is beginning to look like the norm rather than a silly exception. The Proclamation of 1763, the Sugar and Currency Acts of 1764, and in a looser way even the Stamp Act all had similar origins. A decent case can be made for the Proclamation of 1763, but it also dated back to wartime treaties with particular Indian tribes, protecting their lands against white encroachment.²⁷ The Sugar Act with its attack on smuggling is another matter. Alarmed by colonial trading with the enemy early in the war, the Board of Trade began to collect data from which the customs commissioners compiled a full report in 1759. Significantly, the most recent item in the report dated only from 1757. In fact, the smuggling problem was also taking care of itself, for as British forces overran Canada and the Caribbean, hardly any place remained worth smuggling to by 1760. Yet after the war the Board of Customs and the Treasury both used this
report to help draft the Sugar Act. London’s response was again anachronistic. The Sugar Act was more germane to the difficulties of 1757 than to the changed realities of 1764.28

The Currency Act is comparable. Virginia’s emissions of paper money early in the war prompted London merchants to protest loudly lest the value of planter debts depreciate. Nothing happened at the time because Virginia needed paper to carry on the war, and in any case her paper held its value until 1762, when it dropped slightly in the wake of a London fiscal crisis. The merchants immediately complained, the government dug out their protests of several years back, and Parliament finally embalmed them in the Currency Act of 1764—another mischievous irritant soon regretted even by many of its merchant supporters. Yet the ministry continued to enforce what several of its influential members fully recognized as a bad law, rather than appear too soft toward the colonies in the wake of the Stamp Act crisis.29

In less specific terms the Stamp Act can also be traced to the gloomy years of French victory, 1754-57, when the traditional requisition system had revealed its inability to provide badly needed revenues. All royal (and some nonroyal) governors pleaded with London to obtain a general parliamentary tax upon the colonies. Instead Britain found a different answer by 1758—William Pitt’s subsidy policy in which Parliament used specie grants to reimburse particular colonies in direct ratio to their military efforts. By offering valuable rewards to specie-poor colonies, it actually stimulated competition among them in support of imperial goals. Its achievements far surpassed anything that requisitions had ever accomplished. At an annual expense to Britain of £200,000 (later reduced to £133,000), the colonies raised about twenty thousand provincials per year through 1762, paying about half the cost themselves. Yet by adopting the Stamp Act after the war, Britain in effect honored the panicicky demands of 1754-57, not the solid achievements of 1758-62.30

Thus Britain possessed, in effect, two sets of imperial precedents after 1763. To govern her colonies she could extend the lessons of victory by continuing to do what had won the war. Or she could revert to earlier, more strident suggestions about how she ought to have won the war. Without major exception, London by-passed the lessons of victory to embrace projects stimulated by fear of defeat. With the Gallic Peril finally eliminated from North America, Britain espoused reforms once deemed necessary to meet that threat. In the process she alienated her mainland colonies—and thus revived the Gallic Peril. Parliament’s subsidy policy stands out in this respect. With reasonable efficiency it provided provincial troops in large numbers, probably stimulated a dramatic rise in colonial importations of British goods, helped to stabilize paper currencies, and encouraged hearty cooperation with the mother country—all of this while respecting traditional colonial liber-
ties. Yet after the war London regressed, almost without reflection or debate, to the attitudes of 1754-57, which in turn rested upon still earlier assumptions and demands that had never worked properly and which were, in any case, quite inadequate to the needs of the 1760s.

Fiscal considerations alone probably cannot explain this choice. Direct taxation of the colonies promised to raise only about a fourth of the annual £400,000 needed to maintain ten thousand redcoats in America after 1763. Well-placed subsidies might have fielded as many provincials at less cost to Britain by stimulating a larger voluntary response from the colonies. The contempt of redcoats for provincial troops discouraged the search for alternatives, as did the king’s wish to save as many regiments as he could from demobilization after the war. Yet it remains quite remarkable that, so far as I know, the subsidy option was never even considered. Apparently English leaders thought of subsidies not as acceptable instruments of policy, but as desperate wartime expedients justified only by a terrible emergency. Despite their conspicuous success, in other words, they could not compete as legitimate precedents with earlier failures or risky, untried suggestions.

Thus with amazing consistency Britain’s imperial policies of 1764-66 carefully addressed the specific problems of 1754-57, most of which were well on the way toward resolving themselves through various informal mechanisms. But if London was running only a decade behind the times during the Stamp Act controversy, this gap tended to widen, not narrow, as imperial relations worsened. The second colonial crisis (1767-70) found Charles Townshend unearthing the concerns of 1748-54, when the Board of Trade had identified the lack of an independent salary for the governor as the crucial weakness in several royal colonies, especially New York. Even more dramatically than the quartering problem, this issue had been dead for fifteen years, but Townshend’s memory of his youthful experience at the Board of Trade after 1748 kept it alive for him. Not surprisingly, his policy did not strengthen a single colonial governor. It did unravel informal accommodations that had worked reasonably well in most northern colonies for years. Then in the final crisis of 1774, Parliament reached back even farther to the early years of the century. The Massachusetts Government Act resurrected the Board of Trade’s ancient nostrum of depriving charter governments of special privileges by act of Parliament. This time the Empire came apart with the charter, possibly a fitting response when a policy of 1701 had emerged as Britain’s brightest idea for 1774.

IV

This sketch of counterfactual possibilities suggests, finally, that we should seek the origins of the Revolution less in inexorable trends propelling the colonies into nationhood no matter what Britain did, and
more in British public attitudes that relentlessly confronted the colonies with a series of disturbing choices. From 1758 to 1763 Britain came close to resolving her imperial difficulties. But restricted to a set of ideas that had long been institutionalized and bureaucratized among colonial administrators at the Board of Trade, she proved incapable of even recognizing her own achievements, much less perpetuating them.

As Parliament’s uncompromising insistence on complete sovereignty indicated, English politicians could not easily distinguish the realm from the Empire and hence were not willing to concede genuine rights to the colonies as against Parliament. In other words, English statesmen had severe difficulty thinking either imperially or federally. The war provided a catalyst for all kinds of change, but evidently it could not alter the habitual way that politicians looked at old problems, not even when it forced them to make specific decisions which, by 1763, were in fact liquidating those problems. In this sense, rather than Gipson’s, the Revolution truly was a paradoxical aftermath of the Great War for the Empire. Britain may actually have lost her colonies because, in the last analysis, the English simply did not know how to think triumphantly.

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Professor Murrin’s most recent publication is a review essay in History and Theory 11 (1972).

4. For what was probably Gipson’s last affirmation of the importance of the Canada cession, see his The British Empire before the American Revolution (Caldwell, Id.: The Caxton Printers, 1936-72), XIII, pp. 346-47.
7. The Marquis de la Capellis, as quoted in Guy Fregault, Canada: The War of the Conquest, Margaret M. Cameron, transl. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 231-32. For other French examples, see George Bancroft, History of the United States from the Discovery of the Continent (Boston, 1834-74), IV, pp. 460-61.
10. The phrase is Edward Channing's, *A History of the United States* (New York, 1905-25), II, Ch. 5.

27. Ibid., IX, pp. 41-54; cf. Shy, *Toward Lexington*, pp. 45-83.


31. Colonial imports from Britain in 1760 were nearly double those of 1756, when in turn they had exceeded the total for every previous year except 1753. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 757. Because exchange rates turned on the balance of payments within a particular colony, specie subsidies and British expenditures for the army obviously helped to stabilize colonial paper. Cf. Ernst, "Genesis of the Currency Act," pp. 55-56. Despite their importance, parliamentary subsidies have attracted little attention so far. Pargellis mentions them only to contrast the effectiveness and efficiency of regulars against the higher cost and wastefulness of provincials. Lord Loudoun, pp. 352-55. Gipson barely notes the existence of this policy during his lengthy discussion of the war years. Instead he withholds the question until he reaches the immediate background of the Sugar and Stamp Acts, and then he couples it with the liquidation of colonial war debts after 1763. The artistic effect of this strategy is to contrast British generosity during the war with colonial parsimony after the war. At no point does he regard subsidies as an available policy option, and indeed he never really evaluates their impact. Ibid., X, pp. 38-110.


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**A NEW RECORD OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION**