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The French & Indian War

In the mid-18th century, the French and the British spent seven years battling for control of the North American frontier. This conflict would transform the continent's cultural landscape, establish the victor as Europe's leading superpower, and even set the stage for the American Revolution.

Prior to the arrival of European colonists, North America was inhabited solely by Indigenous people. Across thousands of years, hundreds of independent nations emerged with their own territories and languages. Each had their own forms of government and economic systems, as well as strategic alliances and feuds with other nations. Many also had political and economic relationships with the European colonists who began arriving on the continent in the late 15th century.

By the 1700s, the East Coast of what would become the United States was home to 13 thriving British colonies, while the land to the north and west was claimed by France. The two powers had different approaches to colonization: While the British wanted to clear vast areas of land for agriculture and settlements, the French were mostly migratory trappers who made a living trading with Native Americans. The French, unsurprisingly, generally had better relationships with the local tribes.

Though it's called the French and Indian War in the US, that's really a misnomer. The conflict was actually between the British and French, with various Native American nations aligning themselves with either side. Tensions among all of these groups intensified in the 1750s, as each attempted to stake a claim to the Ohio River Valley. Each had a different motivation: The British hoped to expand their colony westward; the French wanted to access the area's abundant natural resources and waterways; and the Indigenous people of the region wanted to remain on their ancestral lands.

In 1753, a young major named George Washington asked the French to leave the area but was chased away. When he and his regiment returned the next year to build a fort, they discovered the French were doing the same. During the brief struggle that followed, British troops killed a French officer. In retaliation, the French managed to capture the British fort. It wasn't long after that both countries began rallying troops to send to

In 1756, Britain officially declared war on France. And at first, things weren't looking too good for them. The French built strong alliances with Native American nations like the Huron, who taught them how to use camouflage to hide themselves in combat. The British, who were used to fighting in straight lines on open fields, were caught off-guard by this strategy and suffered heavy losses for the first two years. But their luck changed in 1758, when British statesman William Pitt was appointed commander of the army. Under his leadership, troops and military funding increased significantly. Pitt then set his sights on the biggest French forts in North America. Every fort they captured meant fewer resources and less security for the French. During this time, the British also aligned themselves with the Iroquois, a formidable Indigenous nation who just so happened to have a longstanding feud with France's allies, the Huron.

By 1760, when the British made it to Montreal, one of the final French strongholds in North America, the French were vastly outnumbered. Though the war was effectively over at that point, it would be another three years before France and Britain signed the Treaty of Paris. The treaty was a major victory for the British, with the French forced to surrender all of their territory from the Mississippi River to the Appalachians and in present-day Canada. The Native Americans who fought on the side of the victors won some concessions too, like unrestricted travel between Canada and New York, though they would ultimately be betrayed by the colonizers in their ruthless expansion westward.

But this war and its resolution were just a small part of a much larger battle for global domination. France and Britain were facing off in regions all over the world, including Brazil, India, Senegal, and many more, as each attempted to become the world's biggest imperial power. Still, Britain's near-absolute control of North America would be short-lived. As they were about to learn, maintaining control of faraway territories is a costly endeavor—and 12 short years later, colonial discontent over wartime expenses would spark the American Revolution.