From Fellow-Nationals to Foreigners: British Perceptions of the Americans, circa 1739–1783

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A CONSIDERABLE body of scholarship has established that most of the colonists in British North America continued to see themselves as Britons, or even as part of the English nation, right until the eve of Independence. In the last decade or so of the colonial period, the Americans, far from growing away from the mother country, seem to have been more keen to assert their British-ness, prompting some historians to interpret the American Revolution as a crisis of integration rather than disintegration.1 The colonists embraced a new identity—that of Americans—only reluctantly and in response to the refusal of successive British governments after 1763 to recognize and accommodate their desire for what they saw as the full rights of Britons. But if changes

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on the American side have been well charted, British attitudes have been less thoroughly explored. True, there is no shortage of studies of British views on the justice and propriety of the war against the colonies; the background and thinking of those Britons who sympathized with the Americans have attracted particular attention. Only recently, however, have changing British ideas on the status of the Americans begun to interest historians.

When did the British come to regard Americans as foreigners? There are many difficulties involved in trying to answer this question. Perhaps most obvious, there was no single British perspective; at any given time there was a multiplicity of opinions, and gauging which views were general and which were idiosyncratic is by no means easy. It can readily be imagined that merchants who traded with the colonies probably had little difficulty in conceiving of their inhabitants as part of the British nation. After all, such merchants were accustomed to thinking in terms of a transatlantic whole: John Wright, in the preface to his account of the currencies of the colonies, explained that his work was intended "for the general Use of all His Britannic Majesty's Subjects, whether residing in Europe or America." By the same reasoning, it can be seen why Britons who lived

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more insular or locally oriented lives were less likely to be so inclusive. Indeed, it must be conceded that many Britons almost certainly thought of the colonies rarely, if at all, and therefore had no formed view of whether the Americans should be seen as fellow-nationals. Even in 1776, when relations with the Americans were distinctly topical so far as the press and politicians were concerned, a visitor to Wales noted that the people he met “know as little as they care.”

Nor was there a single defining moment when the general view—insofar as we can discern it—was transformed; but rather a long drawn-out process of change. This process, moreover, should not be seen as one of linear progression. There was no smooth and uninterrupted transition in the way in which Britons in Britain looked on Americans; a jagged, broken and faltering movement—like a drunkard lurching forward and then tottering back—is a more appropriate image. There seem to have been times when most of the British chose to be inclusive and times when they were more parochial. Wartime crises and triumphs tended to bring these shifts into sharp relief.

The chronological boundaries of this process are difficult to pin down. Even the acknowledgment of American Independence by the British state in 1782–1783 did not stop some Britons from trying to revive the idea of the British as a transatlantic people. The earl of Shelburne continued to harbor hopes of a constitutional connection with the Americans even as he negotiated the peace treaties, and in the years immediately after the War of Independence he sought to give the United States a special position in trade with Britain and its remaining colonies, which would effectively have allowed the Americans to continue to enjoy the status of Britons for commercial purposes. Shelburne’s initial proposals ran aground in a hostile House of Commons in March 1783, and his failure is a sign that by this stage the majority of MPs saw the independent Americans as foreigners, but this did not end hopes that some form of Anglo-American union could be restored. Joseph Chamberlain’s late-nineteenth-century vision of “Greater Britain,” incorporating Britain, Canada, and the United States, is a reminder of the persistence of this type of thinking.


If the end of the process is not clear-cut, neither is its beginning. Timothy Breen has suggested that Americans began to formulate a new identity in response to an assertive English nationalism that seemed to be marginalizing the colonists. He sees this exclusive English nationalism as emerging from the mid-eighteenth century. P. J. Marshall has shown that the Seven Years' War, and the constitutional clashes between Britain and the colonies that followed it, led to a British reassessment of the Americans. Eliga Gould, by contrast, has argued that the beginning of the Seven Years' War witnessed a great swelling of British inclusiveness, as British politicians and the British public turned away from Continental Europe and embraced the North American colonies with a new fervor. Only with the coming of the War of Independence, in Gould's view, did this sense of an extended, transatlantic British nation break down.8

Opinions expressed in the press, in Parliament, and in private diaries and letters suggest that the nature and course of the American war itself were the vital determinants of the movement in British thinking. The fighting after the initial skirmishes at Lexington and Concord gave a great boost to changing attitudes on the British side. Long before the formal recognition of the United States in the peace negotiations, many Britons—perhaps most Britons—seem to have seen the Americans as a distinct and separate people. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, this owed very little to the Declaration of Independence, the implications of which seem to have been largely ignored in Britain. The key event was neither Lexington nor the Declaration, but the Franco-American alliance and the broadening of the conflict from 1778, when first the French, then the Spanish, and finally the Dutch became enemies of the British. Many years ago, Colin Bonwick demonstrated the way in which this connection between the Americans and the European powers, especially France, caused acute problems for British radicals who had supported colonial claims.9 But the American association with France—and subsequently with Britain's other European foes—was not just a difficulty for radicals; it convinced a wide spectrum of Britons that the Americans were no longer part of the same nation. The French alliance flew in the face of the Gallophobia that had united Britons and Americans for generations, and the breach widened as America came to be associated with the other European powers that had joined the war as enemies of Britain.

During the eighteenth century, it must be acknowledged, Americans were often identified as different from metropolitan Britons. Given the

9 Bonwick, English Radicals and the American Revolution, esp. 108–09.
local situation of the colonists, and their distance from the mother
country, some measure of variation was inevitable. Sometimes their sta-
tus as a frontier people made them appear as purer and less corrupt:
Sylas Neville, a warm supporter of colonial resistance to the claims of
the British Parliament, pronounced in April 1768 that “the body of the
people in America are much more virtuous and understand the nature of
Liberty better than the body of the people here.” Less favorably, dis-
tance from the metropolitan center could lead the colonists to be por-
trayed as unpolished and lacking refinement; upper-class army officers
were inclined to be scornful of the dullness of life in the colonies and
the unsophisticated nature of their inhabitants (“All the Women are
exceedingly Vulgar,” was one distinctly unflattering verdict on the ladies
of Philadelphia’s “best society.”) The transportation of British and Irish
convicts to the colonies was also cited as a reason for regarding the
Americans as distinct. The numbers involved were not in fact very great;
an estimated 30,000 crossed the Atlantic between 1718 and 1775, out of a
total of perhaps 217,000 migrants from the British Isles to North
America in roughly the same period. But this did not stop some con-
temporaries from assuming that the character of the colonies had been
fundamentally affected. Samuel Johnson is reported as having viewed
the Americans in 1769 as “a race of convicts.” Unsurprisingly, this line
of thinking became more prominent once the War of Independence
began: “a scape Gallows race, the genuine progeny of their worthy
Ancestors from Newgate and the Old Baily,” was how they were to be
described by one army officer. Other in-comers were similarly seen by
some Britons as compromising the Britishness of the colonies. Sig-
nificant numbers of Germans arrived in the course of the eighteenth
century: by the end of the colonial period about 10 percent of the popu-
lation of British North America was German-speaking, and in
Pennsylvania, the most cosmopolitan province, one-third. This develop-
ment was almost bound to cause comment, and in November 1775
William Innes, a London merchant who sat briefly as MP for Ilchester,

11 Robert Hobart to Charles Hotham, Jan. 31, 1778, Hotham Papers, DD
HO4/19, Hull University Library.
12 For convict numbers see A. Roger Ekirch, Bound for America: The
Transportation of British Convicts to the Colonies (Oxford, 1987), 23; for total numbers
of British and Irish migrants, see James Horn, “British Diaspora: Emigration from
Britain, 1680–1815,” in Marshall, ed., Eighteenth Century, 32 (table 2.2).
13 James Boswell, The Life of Johnson, ed. Christopher Hibbert (London, 1979),
176.
14 Patrick Campbell to Duncan Campbell of Glenure, Feb. 10, 1777, Campbell
of Barcaldine Muniments, G. D. 170/1176/10/1, National Archives of Scotland,
Edinburgh.
told the House of Commons that he refused to accept the claim that the colonists, as "the offspring of Englishmen," were "entitled to the privileges of Britons." The Americans, Innes argued, were no longer simply descendants of Britons, but had been diluted by foreign elements, particularly "Germans innumerable." The presence of large numbers of African slaves was another distinguishing feature of the colonies. By the middle of the eighteenth century, there were nearly a quarter of a million blacks in mainland British North America, concentrated particularly in the southern provinces. In South Carolina there was a black majority. Antislavery sentiment in Britain did not crystalize into a powerful abolitionist movement until after the American war, but slavery attracted adverse comment much earlier. Edward Kimber, whose accounts of his travels in the colonies appeared in the pages of the London Magazine in the 1740s, pictured slavery in the form of an African "under the Torture of the Whip, inflicted by the Hands, the remorseless Hands of an American Planter." After going on to consider slavery in other settings, Kimber concluded that "in Britain, and Britain only, thy Name is not heard." The North American Indians similarly marked out the colonies as different from Britain. By the middle of the eighteenth century, their influence on the colonists in the long-settled and well-established areas of the tidewater was limited; but Native American customs and practices unquestionably had an impact in the zone of cultural interaction that was the back-country. And as interest in the Indians increased in the British Isles, cartoons and paintings that sought to embody America chose a figure that was obviously meant to be a native.


BRITISH PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICANS

Yet none of these distinguishing features necessarily made white Americans non-British. Distance and lack of sophistication did not have to disqualify Americans from being considered as Britons; it could easily lead to their being regarded as “provincials,” in much the same way that Devonians or Lancastrians might be seen by Londoners. The transported convicts were mainly from Britain, so their presence hardly made the colonies less British. Disparaging comments about the Germans and their influence on the character of the colonies were not common; Innes’s claims, it should be noted, were made once the American war had begun, and Innes himself took a particularly hard line on colonial issues.18 There had, admittedly, been earlier expressions of unease about the Germanification of Pennsylvania—especially from Benjamin Franklin—and some worries were voiced about the reliability of the German arrivals in the event of a war with the French. But Naturalization Acts from 1740 to 1761 demonstrated the determination of the British state to assimilate the Germans, and turn them, effectively, into Britons. The Germans themselves, it might be added, were far from resistant to integration. While they retained their own customs and cultures, and spoke German in the home and other social settings, they usually used English in their business and official dealings and even, in some cases, anglicized their names. This readiness to adapt might help to explain why there is little evidence that Britons generally saw German immigration as a serious threat to the British-ness of British North America.19 So far as slavery was concerned, Edmund Burke, in a well-known speech, claimed that it had the effect of making the colonists more jealous of their liberty—a liberty derived from their British, or English, constitutional heritage.20 As for the Native Americans, their use as a symbol or personification of America owed much to the lack of any easy alternative way of identifying Americans in caricatures. The Frenchman could be a dandified figure, bedecked with fleurs de lis; the

Spaniard appeared in sixteenth-century ruff, doublet, and hose; but the American had no obvious features that distinguished him from a Briton.  

During much of the eighteenth century, North American Indians usually entered the consciousness of Britons in Britain not as a people whose influence had in various ways diluted the British-ness of the colonists, but rather as exotic outsiders. They were sometimes depicted as allies, or potential allies, sometimes as “noble savages,” but for much of the time they appeared as partners of the French, and more particularly as the barbarous and merciless tormentors of the colonists on the frontier—colonists who in these circumstances were often portrayed as fellow-Britons in need of protection.

If the Americans could be regarded as part of the nation, it must be acknowledged that British-ness itself was a somewhat problematic concept for much of the eighteenth century. It elicited varying degrees of enthusiasm from the different peoples of the British Isles. The Scots and the Welsh, for the most part, had little difficulty in regarding themselves as British. The Scots embraced British-ness as an opportunity for partnership with the English, and the Welsh, as the descendants of the original Ancient Britons, were accustomed to thinking in terms of a larger British whole. The Protestant Irish were also able to see themselves as British: the Presbyterians who were concentrated in Ulster had strong connections with Scotland, from where many of their ancestors had migrated, and the Anglicans often enjoyed equally strong cultural and social links with England. The Catholic Irish, on the other hand, were very loath to conceive of themselves as British, at least until a start was made in dismantling the penal laws directed against them (a process that effectively began during the American war). More surprisingly, perhaps, many of the English were also reluctant to embrace British-ness, preferring in speech and writing to use “England” and “English” where “Britain” and “British” would have been more appropriate. Over time, however, it seems that at least some of the English became more willing to adopt a British persona. Admiral Sir Edward Hawke’s descriptions of the conduct of his men are suggestive of this change. In his report of the victory off Cape Finisterre in October 1747, Hawke referred to his sailors behaving “with the very greatest spirit and resolution, in every

21 See Colley, Britons, 133–34.

respect like Englishmen.” When he wrote of his triumph at Quiberon Bay in November 1759, his language was more inclusive: he praised his men for demonstrating “the strongest proofs of a true British spirit.”

The components of British-ness, and the importance attached to them, naturally varied over time. Nonetheless, there were some standard elements. Allegiance to a common monarch was clearly one, as we can see from public demonstrations of loyalty to the crown, on both sides of the Atlantic. The Massachusetts assembly exemplified this point in February 1768 when, in a circular letter to other colonial legislatures, it described George III as “our common head and father.” Jonathan Clark has even argued that nationality was defined by allegiance in the early modern period and that this form of national identity “extended far beyond the bounds of nineteenth-century ethnic nationalism.” This was perhaps correct in a strictly legal sense—Calvin’s Case of 1608 effectively defined nationality in terms of allegiance to the crown. But the legal niceties do not seem always to have been acknowledged in popular perceptions. In 1759 and 1760 no one seriously imagined that the people of newly conquered territories in Canada had been turned into Britons simply by taking an oath of allegiance to King George. By the same token, the natives of Gibraltar and Minorca and the Acadians of Nova Scotia, while subjects of the British crown, were not generally regarded as part of the British nation.


26 For continuing descriptions of the Acadians as “French inhabitants” see Geoffrey Plank, An Unsettled Conquest: The British Campaign against the Peoples of Acadia (Philadelphia, 2001), esp. 54.
Britons the Americans did not automatically become foreigners on their renouncing allegiance to George III in 1776. As a British periodical remarked, the history of the year 1778 was dominated by "the History of the British Nation, however separated, or into whatever divisions unhappily thrown."27

Common blood, in short, seems to have been more important than common allegiance. The collective conception of Americans as descended from people born in the British Isles was a prime qualification for their being regarded as fellow-Britons, especially as the ties of language and consanguinity were often reinforced and refreshed by continuing connections—familial, commercial, educational—with the mother country. The presence in the colonies of inhabitants who had neither direct nor distant connections with the British Isles does not—as we have seen—appear to have undermined seriously the assumption that as "kith and kin" the Americans were British. Naturalized foreigners were able to secure the rights of the king's natural-born subjects, both in Britain itself and in North America. While peoples incorporated into the empire through conquest might remain "foreigners," foreigners who came to the British Isles or the British colonies could, over time, become British. This seems to have been the case with the French Huguenots who came to the British Isles and the British colonies, particularly after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, and also, though perhaps to a lesser extent, with the German settlers who flocked to North America from the 1680s.28

That the vast majority of non-British arrivals were Protestants made their acceptance and eventual assimilation much easier. Catholics, it must be said, although subject to many restrictions and penalties, were able to live both in Britain and in the colonies without insufferable molestation, especially in times of peace. Indeed, in some places they seem to have been well integrated into largely Protestant communities.29

27 Annual Register, 21 (1778), "Preface," iii.
But individual Catholics, or even small numbers of Catholics, were not seen in the same way as Catholics in large numbers, or Catholics generally. Most Protestants, whatever their view of their Catholic neighbors or acquaintances, seem to have despised and feared Catholicism. Popery, as it was usually termed, was denounced as superstition and idolatr y; and Catholics, where they were gathered in sufficient strength, were widely assumed to be a threat to Protestantism and the liberty that went with it. “Wherever Popery is predominant, it is destructive of the religious and civil Liberties of mankind,” a British newspaper proclaimed in November 1745.\footnote{Craftsman, Nov. 9, 1745. See also Westminster Journal, Oct. 25, 1745, for the view that in Protestant countries “There will be no Inquisition, no Burning, no Dragooning.”} Catholics were also seen as potential allies of Britain’s great Catholic enemies, France and Spain: “Mass Houses” were particularly at risk of attack when an invasion by either of these powers was feared.\footnote{See, e.g., Alan Saville, ed., Secret Comment: The Diaries of Gertrude Savile 1721–1757, Thoroton Society Record Series, 40 (Nottingham, 1997), 266 (entry of Jan. 25, 1746).} For much of the eighteenth century, therefore, it was difficult for Protestants to conceive of Catholics as truly British, and fear of Catholicism promoted the unity of Protestants of every hue. This is not to deny or minimize the tensions between the different Protestant denominations in the extended British nation. The hostility of colonial Dissenters to the Anglican episcopacy was shared by many Dissenters in the British Isles. For their part, High Anglicans, on both sides of the Atlantic, were inclined to look on Protestant Dissenters as dangerously subversive, or even as outsiders. But the internal divisions within Protestantism were generally eclipsed by the pull of Protestant solidarity in the face of perceived Catholic threats, with the result that for many Britons a common Protestantism, whatever its denominational variations, was one of the key defining features of the nation. Eighteenth-century evangelical revivalism, it might be added, notwithstanding its fissiparous tendencies, was a transatlantic phenomenon, and in this sense it can be seen as reinforcing the perception that Britons in the British Isles and Britons in North America were all part of one Protestant community.\footnote{For Protestant divisions see esp. Clark, Language of Liberty, chaps. 2, 4. For colonial resistance to an Anglican bishop, see Patricia U. Bonomi, Under the Cape of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America (Oxford, 1986), 199–209. For the opposition of Scottish Presbyterians to the hierarchy of the Anglican church, see Richard J. Finlay, “Keeping the Covenant: Scottish National Identity,” in T. M. Devine and J. R. Young, eds., Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives (East Linton, U. K., 1999), 122–33. For the links between Protestantism and national identity, see Colley, Britons, esp. chap. 1, and the essays in Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, eds., Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850}
Closely connected with this religious bond was a commitment to what contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic described as “British Liberty” or “English Liberty.” This was shorthand for a constitutional tradition that evoked Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights. It emphasized well-established legal protections for the subject, such as trial by jury and habeas corpus. It also gave prominence to the vital role of representative institutions as safeguards for freedom from arbitrary government. As John Wilkes’s North Briton explained, “Parliaments are, by the constitution of our government, the guardians of liberty.” To Americans, as was to become evident over the next decade, their assemblies were the local equivalents of the British Parliament and had the same function in protecting the liberty of the king’s subjects.

Both common Protestantism and common commitment to constitutional securities against executive authority drew strength from a comparison with France. The French were Catholics and possessed no legal safeguards or effective representative bodies to protect them from their all-powerful monarchs; they were therefore “slaves.” The British, on the other hand, as Protestants who were blessed with such protection, were “free.” This contrast, unsurprisingly, was particularly emphasized during periods of Anglo-French conflict, and it acted as a strong ideological adhesive so long as Britons in Britain and Britons in America saw themselves as confronting a powerful French military threat. Richard Price, the Welsh Dissenter, waxed lyrical in 1759 on “the Liberty we are blessed with” and dreaded the consequences of French victory, which he took to be “our becoming, what they are, ignoble and miserable slaves. . . . Oh! frightful prospect! Can any British heart bear to view it with patience?” Two years before, William Henry Lyttleton, the governor of South Carolina, had said much the same to his assembly. The French, Lyttleton announced to a no doubt receptive audience, were an enemy


33 Wilkes, C. Churchill, et al., The North Briton. From No. 1 to No. XLVI Complete (London, 1762), 331. This collection was dedicated to “The English Nation, the Glorious Protectors of Civil, and Religious Liberty.”

34 This point, though usually accompanied by acknowledgment of the British Parliament’s role as a supreme legislature, is made in some of the earliest pamphlets attacking parliamentary taxation; see, e.g., [Oxenbridge Thacher], The Sentiments of a British American (Boston, 1764), 4–6; [Thomas Fitch], Reasons Why the British Colonies, in America, Should Not Be Charged With Internal Taxes . . . (New Haven, 1764), 37–38.
"whose constant Aim, & unwearied Endeavour it is, to establish Tyranny & Superstition, on the Ruins of Law, Religion and Liberty."  

In the War of the Austrian Succession of 1739–1748, the American colonists seem generally to have been viewed by the British people not simply as fellow-subjects of King George but as fellow-Britons. True, when soldiers raised in North America served against the Spanish in the Caribbean, they called themselves “Americans” and were identified in these terms by the troops from Britain engaged in the same operations. Indeed, in 1745, Peter Warren, the officer commanding the Royal navy squadron in North American waters, worried about the “vulgar notion” in Britain that the colonists would sooner or later seek independence. But descriptions of the colonial troops serving in the Caribbean as “Americans” were probably as much geographical as political—a device to distinguish them from the soldiers who had come from "Europe." And despite Warren's concerns about British public opinion in 1745, when, later that same year, the fortress of Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island was taken by New England troops cooperating with Warren's ships, one British newspaper referred approvingly to “Our countrymen and kinsmen of New England,” and another to the courage of “Englishmen, in whatever latitude they are born.”

There were, to be sure, special circumstances that helped to account for this enthusiastic inclusiveness. In 1745 the war in Europe was going badly for Britain. In May an allied army led by the duke of Cumberland was defeated at Fontenoy, and Marshal de Saxe's French forces were beginning to overrun the Low Countries. Invasion remained an anxiety. News of any victory over the French at this time was perhaps bound to

38 See, e.g., the comments of Lewis Moreton, Mar. 27, 1741, in Ducie of Tortworth Papers, D340a C2443, Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester.
be rapturously received. The political aspects of the enthusiasm also need to be recognized. Supporters of a new militia in England felt justified by the success of the New England irregulars. Opponents of the government could celebrate a victory that owed little or nothing to a corrupt ministry and a great deal to the efforts of pure, virtuous, and uncontaminated New Englanders. There was also much disquiet in Britain at campaigns in Flanders and Germany that seemed to benefit allies on the Continent, and George II’s Hanoverian homeland, rather than promote obviously British objectives. At least some of the public approval of the capture of Louisbourg was based on the perception that this was a victory that advanced unambiguously British interests. This perception was a lot easier to sustain if the victory itself could be portrayed as a success for exclusively British arms—a portrayal that required the New England troops who played such a vital part in the triumph to be defined as “British.”

But, for whatever reasons, Britons in Britain seem to have been disposed in the Austrian war to view the colonists in North America as part of their own nation—as Britons living across that Atlantic. We can perhaps glimpse this sentiment in the duke of Bedford’s conviction in November 1746 that the “entire expulsion of the French out of the Northern continent of America” was the only way to give security to the British colonists. The desire to safeguard North America owed something to parochial concerns—as the Corporation of Liverpool noted when Louisbourg was captured, this was an acquisition that would be of considerable importance to protecting British trade with the colonies. But Louisbourg’s seizure was also seen as significant because it reduced the capacity of the French to threaten a people who were fellow-Britons, or even fellow-Englishmen. As Commodore Warren put it, unchecked the French and their Native American allies “will be able to drive the English into the sea.” Or, as a pamphlet published in London explained in 1746, the colonists were “the Outsettlers of our own Nation,” and the

42 See the “Hymn to Victory on the taking of Cape Breton,” in Gentleman’s Magazine, 15 (1745), 357, which refers to Flanders, where “The British blood is spilt in vain, / For not the British cause is fought.” Note, however, that some Britons clearly recognized that Britain’s interest lay in preserving a balance of power in Europe, and especially in keeping the French out of the Low Countries; see Bob Harris, “American Idols: Empire, War, and the Middling Ranks in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain,” Past and Present, No. 150 (1996), esp. 125; Gould, Persistence of Empire, chap. 1.
victims of the cruelties committed by the French and their Native American allies were "our People."  

There are echoes of the same inclusiveness in the Seven Years' War, particularly in its early stages. From 1748, when the War of the Austrian Succession ended, senior British politicians realized that another conflict with the French in North America was more or less inevitable. This led, perhaps no less inevitably, to a fresh recognition of the value of the colonies to Britain, and an increasing fascination on the part of the British public. Interest reached a new height when the French started to assert their claim to the Ohio Valley and threaten the British position in Nova Scotia. Books and pamphlets on America appeared in ever larger numbers: a recent study identifies twenty-four such works published in Britain in 1752, twenty-three in 1753, forty-two in 1754, fifty-nine in 1755 and eighty-eight in 1756. Periodicals and newspapers also carried American items. In July 1755 we find the Reverend George Ridpath, a Church of Scotland minister, recording in his diary an avaricious appetite for any American news and information: "Looked over the magazines for accounts of North American affairs"; "Read account of Cape Breton in magazines"; "Am reading the Account of our North-American Colonies, the state of which I want to be well acquainted with."

At this time, the struggle against the French was almost everywhere going badly. In July 1755, before formal hostilities had begun in Europe, General Braddock's regular regiments were routed in an ambush near Fort Duquesne. The following year, the loss of the Mediterranean base of Minorca, the threat of invasion, and the hiring of German troops to help defend the country, generated a political storm in Britain. The Newcastle ministry, and aristocratic government generally, came in for strong criticism. Poor harvests added to the air of crisis. In this fevered


atmosphere, the creditable performance of American troops under the command of William Johnson at Lake George in September 1755 inevitably encouraged British depictions of the colonists as brave fellow-Britons.48

Eliga Gould sees this period as a vital time in the history of Greater Britain. Even before the “Diplomatic Revolution” of 1756, he argues, it was recognized that the defense of Britain could no longer be based on resisting the French in the Low Countries—the relative ease with which Marshal de Saxe had advanced through the Netherlands in the previous war had already demonstrated the fragility of the so-called barrier system. Now the new Franco-Austrian alliance threatened to give the French access to the Austrian Netherlands without putting them to the trouble of active campaigning. In these circumstances, the British were obliged to look much more to their own resources. One consequence of this was the reform and revitalization of the militia in England and Wales; another was an increased emphasis on the North American colonies as a source of national wealth and power that had to be secured. With this concentration on the colonies came a growing conviction, Gould maintains, that the Americans were part of an extended British nation.49

By the end of the Seven Years’ War, however, the situation had begun to change. Paradoxically, this might have owed something to the military cooperation between Britons and British Americans that had led to such enthusiastic inclusion of the Americans in the British fold in the aftermath of the Louisbourg triumph of 1745. While the Austrian war had seen American troops cooperating with the Royal navy, the Seven Years’ War saw large numbers of British and American soldiers campaigning side by side. Several historians have highlighted the friction between British army regulars and American provincials during the fighting in North America between 1755 and 1760, and suggest that it had a detrimental long-term impact on relations between Britons and Americans.50 The ill-effects should not be exaggerated, however; much

48 As Francis Jennings has written, the “British home and colonial public were hungry for anything that could be interpreted as victory”; Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies and Tribes in the Seven Years’ War in America (New York, 1988), 164. Johnson was voted £5,000 by the British Parliament in gratitude for his services, and made a baronet. For reports of Johnson’s success in British periodicals, see, for instance, Gentleman’s Magazine, 25 (1755), 473–74; London Magazine, 24 (1755), 544–46. See also the comments in Henry Seymour Conway to Robert Wilmot, Oct. 29, Nov. 11, 1755, in Wilmot Horton of Catton Papers, D3155, WH 3449, Derbyshire Record Office, Matlock.
49 Gould, Persistence of Empire, chaps. 2, 3.
50 See Alan Rogers, Empire and Liberty: American Resistance to British Authority, 1755–1763 (Berkeley, 1974); Leach, Roots of Conflict, chaps. 5–6. For a particularly
of the friction was based on perceived military disparities. General Amherst's complaint in 1759 that "left to themselves" the colonial troops under his command "would eat fryed Pork and lay in their tents all day long" might suggest a British contempt for Americans, but it can just as easily be seen as the contempt of a professional soldier for amateurs, as can other similarly unfavorable observations on the colonials.51

The outcome of the conflict was probably more important than wartime tensions. The successes of the war in North America from 1758 were attributed by British politicians and the British press to the commitment of British regular troops; the role of the American provincials was usually underplayed.52 When Louisbourg was again captured, British regulars played the key role. British periodicals gave substantial coverage to this triumph, emphasizing the bravery of British officers and soldiers. The seizure of the strategically important Fort Frontenac that same year, accomplished by a force largely comprising American troops, was given much less extensive treatment. The capture of Quebec in 1759, by an army made up almost entirely of regulars, also led to great outpourings of praise for "our generals, officers and common men."53 In these circumstances, the view unsurprisingly began to take root amongst both the British public and many British politicians that the colonists (though still described as "our People") were incapable of their own defense.54 The Americans were depicted as a nonmartial people, in need of British protection—a marked contrast to the situation in the previous struggle, when the New England contribution to the capture of Louisbourg, as we have just seen, was joyously celebrated in Britain, and even with the beginning of the Seven Years' War, when Johnson's success on the shores of Lake George pointed to the fighting qualities of colonial troops.55


52 This is a point made effectively by P. J. Marshall in an unpublished paper on "The Thirteen Colonies in the Seven Years' War: British Perspectives." I greatly appreciate Professor Marshall's generosity in allowing me to read this paper.


54 London Magazine, 27 (1758), "Preface."

This downgrading of the Americans in British eyes was perhaps merely the prelude to a still more important postwar reassessment of the character of the colonists—a reassessment caused by the changing nature of Britain’s possessions overseas. With the acquisition of Canada, the great inland wilderness between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, more islands in the Caribbean, new bases in West Africa, and, from 1765, effective sovereignty in Bengal, the British empire was transformed. An empire based on British colonies of settlement in North America became an empire in which rule over subject peoples, incorporated by conquest, was an increasingly important feature. Pride at the expansion of the empire was tempered by anxiety about over-extension and by a recognition that this larger and more scattered empire was vulnerable to the attacks of France and Spain, the defeated powers of the Seven Years’ War. If the newly expanded empire was to remain intact, it needed to be controlled more firmly from the center—hence the assertion of the imperial role of the British Parliament in the years after 1763.56

The colonists themselves suffered as a result of these changes. Most obviously they suffered in that the interference of the British Parliament undermined long-established and much-cherished local autonomy. But the Americans might also have been disadvantaged because Britons, perhaps only subconsciously, started to perceive them less as distant parts of the same nation and more as another set of people to be ruled. British ministers, trying to grapple with the problem of regulating the frontier and avoiding conflict with the Indians, adopted a tone of neutrality, or even paternal sympathy for the natives, that suggests that they saw themselves as adjudicating between colonial Americans and the indigenous inhabitants. The earl of Egremont, the secretary of state responsible for colonial affairs, urged Amherst to treat the Indians with “Humanity” and “Indulgence” and decried the “the shamefull Manner” in which they were dealt with by unscrupulous American traders.57 Elements of this attitude of lofty even-handedness seem to have affected the general public. We can see this, perhaps, in Benjamin Franklin’s claim in February 1767 that “Every Man in England seems to consider himself as a Piece of a Sovereign over America; seems to jostle himself into the Throne with the King, and talks of our Subjects in the

56 Even during the war some commentators were calling for the British Parliament to play a bigger role in coordinating the empire; see Malachy Postlethwayt, Britain’s Commercial Interest Explained and Improved, 2 vols. (London, 1757), 1:469–70, where the lack of central control and uniformity in the British empire is compared unfavorably with the situation in the French empire.
Americans.⁵⁸ Britons, in other words, began to associate the Americans not so much with themselves as with other groups over which the British state claimed authority—from French Canadians and Native Americans to Bengalis. It was no coincidence, surely, that it was in 1763 that Lord Halifax expressed the opinion that “the people of England” considered the Americans “though H. M.’s subjects, as foreigners.”⁵⁹ When the colonists began to resist British efforts to impose greater central control over the expanded empire, it seems that more Britons adopted this attitude. After listening to the debates on the repeal of the Stamp Act, an exasperated opponent of repeal wrote in his diary that he could not understand why it was necessary to make such a concession to “foreigners.”⁶⁰

But such explicit expressions of exclusive Britishness were unusual. Many Britons no doubt regarded the Americans as different, but an awareness of difference did not necessarily lead to the colonists being viewed as foreigners. Halifax’s formula—the king’s subjects but nonetheless foreigners—was certainly not the only way of looking at the Americans. An alternative was to see them as occupying a midway position between fully fledged Britons and undoubted foreigners—as fellow-subjects but not quite fellow-nationals. It seems likely that this was how George Grenville conceived of the colonists. In one of his parliamentary speeches against the repeal of his Stamp Act, he protested that “The nation has run itself into an immense debt to give them [the Americans] their protection.” He apparently saw the colonists as beyond “the nation,” which he seems to have equated with the home territories; but it appears unlikely that he would have gone so far as to describe them as “foreigners.” Indeed, he subsequently conceived of the Americans as part of a “community” that was “bound to obey its legislature”—by which he meant the British Parliament.⁶¹

Still other Britons, even in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War, as relations between the colonies and Britain deteriorated, continued to see the Americans as emphatically part of the same nation. In 1763 members of the public in Britain subscribed generously to an appeal for funds for two colonial colleges. The success of the appeal, Peter Marshall has concluded, “suggests that colonial Americans were still being included in a comprehensive definition of Britishness, based on fear of popery, an

interdenominational Protestantism, and celebration of political and religious freedom.” 62 Many British parliamentarians continued to refer to the Americans as fellow-Britons or even as fellow-Englishmen. When Grenville proposed the enforcement of the Stamp Act in 1766, General Howard melodramatically told the House of Commons that “before he would imbrue his hands in the blood of his countrymen who were contending for English liberty he would, if ordered, draw his sword, but would soon after sheath it in his own body.” Four years later, in the debate on the repeal of the Townshend tea duty, Henry Seymour Conway, another senior military figure sympathetic to the Americans, similarly revealed his belief that the colonists were part of the same nation. “I have always considered it the birth-right of every Englishman,” Conway said, “to have a voice in framing every law by which he himself is to be taxed, and I cannot consider a fellow-subject in America less entitled to this inestimable privilege, than a fellow-subject in England.” Beyond Parliament, William Strahan, a London printer, expressed much the same sentiment. “I consider British Subjects in America as only living in a different Country, having the self-same Interests, and entitled to the self-same Liberties.” 63

Nor was this view confined to those who opposed parliamentary taxation of the Americans. Indeed, as Gould has demonstrated, politicians and pamphleteers keen to extract a revenue from the colonies were perhaps especially anxious to demonstrate that the Americans were British, in order to explain why they should contribute. 64 True, there were exponents of parliamentary taxation who based their case on the natural subordination, as they saw it, of colonies to the mother country (such as Charles Townshend) or the absolute right of the British Parliament and the crown together to exercise the sovereign power that the crown alone had possessed in the past (Sir William Blackstone and the earl of Mansfield). 65 But these were not necessarily generally held views. It was at least as usual for the colonists to be portrayed as fellow-Britons by supporters of parliamentary authority. Thomas Whately, writing in 1765, sought to justify taxation by the Westminster Parliament on the grounds that the colonists were part of the British Commons and

64 Gould, Persistence of Empire, esp. 119–20.
65 Simmons and Thomas, eds., Proceedings and Debates, 2:13 (Townshend), 130 (Mansfield), 140 (Blackstone).
were therefore subject to the “national Legislature.” Soame Jenyns, in another pamphlet defending the Stamp Act, also assumed that the Americans, as fellow-Britons, were liable to pay parliamentary taxes: “are they not Englishmen?” he asked of the colonists, “or are they only Englishmen when they sollicit for Protection, but not Englishmen when Taxes are required to enable this Country to protect them?” In 1768 a colonial agent reported that Lord Hillsborough, the newly appointed secretary of state for the colonies, had told him that so far as America was concerned, “he, and all his Majesty’s Ministers, had very great regard for that country, that they considered us all as Britons.” Early in 1775, on the eve of the conflict between Britain and the thirteen colonies, Samuel Johnson also conceived of the Americans as part of the same body as the mother country, and the British Parliament as representative of the whole nation, including its American component.66

So, when the American war began, the process whereby Americans came to be identified as foreigners by most metropolitan Britons, while already underway, was far from complete. Some British people, as a result of the changes in the nature of the empire during and after the Seven Years’ War, and colonial resistance to the imperial claims of the British legislature, had no doubt come to think of the Americans as non-Britons, or at least as less than fully British. But for many Britons, perhaps for most Britons, Americans, even if they had developed in ways that distinguished them from Britons in Britain, were still part of the same nation. Indeed, the constitutional disputes between Britain and the colonies in the period 1764–1775 served to emphasize the British-ness of the colonists more often than they identified them as foreigners. Opponents of parliamentary taxation argued that Americans, as Britons, should be taxed only by their own representatives in their own legislatures; supporters of parliamentary taxation maintained that the Americans, as Britons, were required to obey the British Parliament, even to the extent of paying the taxes that it imposed. Two very different versions of Britishness were in conflict in these disputes—the first libertarian, based on the rights of Britons everywhere to local self-government, the second more authoritarian, based on obedience to central British institutions—but the important point to recognize is that both sides used arguments that conceptualized the Americans as British.

66 [Whately], The Regulations Lately Made concerning the Colonies, and the Taxes Imposed upon Them, considered (London, 1765), esp. 109–11; [Jenyns], The Objections to the Taxation of our American Colonies by the Legislature of Great Britain, briefly Consider’d (London, 1765), 8; William Samuel Johnson to William Pitkin, Feb. 13, 1768, in “The Trumbull Papers,” Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th series, 9 (1885), 261; [Johnson], Taxation no Tyranny; An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress (London, 1775).
The coming of the American war, as James Bradley and others have amply demonstrated, deeply divided British opinion. Initially, at least, opponents and supporters of the coercion of the colonists were in many cases united in continuing to think of the Americans as part of the transatlantic British nation. While to opponents of the conflict, it was best understood in its early stages as a “Civil War,” to supporters of Lord North’s ministry the struggle was against “unnatural Rebellion”; yet, however far apart their views, at the beginning of the struggle both sides of the debate in Britain essentially conceived of the Americans as fellow-Britons. The principal inhabitants of Wallingford in Berkshire, petitioning the king in favor of reconciliation with the colonies in November 1775, referred to “our Brethren in America.” Samuel Kenrick, a Worcestershire Dissenter who similarly sympathized with the colonists, described the Americans in March 1776 as contending merely for their British rights: “All they have ever asked,” he wrote, “is not to be in the condition of slaves—but like other British subjects to be free & masters of their own property.” On the other side of the argument, the government-supporting corporation of Leicester insisted that only military defeat of the American rebels could restore to them “the two british Blessings of Law and Liberty”—which suggests that, even for advocates of coercion, the colonists, while rebels, could still be viewed as Britons.

The Declaration of Independence made remarkably little impact on British opinion. It was printed in many newspapers, but it was often given no prominence and usually appeared without commentary. The Morning Post, for instance, published the Declaration in full, but on the back page and underneath a report on a farce performed at a local theater, while the Stamford Mercury similarly relegated it to the back page, where it was presented undated, without any words of introduction or observation. There were letters in the periodical press denouncing or

67 Bradley, Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England and Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism. See also his essay on the “British Public and the American Revolution”; Colley, Britons, 137–42; Wilson, Sense of the People, esp. chap. 5; and Conway, British Isles and the War of American Independence, chap. 4.


70 Morning Post, and Daily Advertiser, Aug. 17, 1776; Stamford Mercury, Aug. 22, 1776. See also, e.g., Caledonian Mercury, Aug. 22, 1776, and Berrow’s Worcester Journal, Aug. 22, 1776.
defending the Declaration, but not many.71 Pamphlet attacks on the Declaration were published by the American loyalist Thomas Hutchinson and by the lawyer John Lind (substantially assisted by Jeremy Bentham, who provided an analysis that was incorporated almost verbatim by Lind)—but again the small number of pamphlets on this subject is striking.72 Perhaps the lack of interest in Britain can best be exemplified by the comments of Sarah Wells, the mistress of Sir Joseph Banks, who in a matter-of-fact manner wrote in October 1776 that “there is news from America but it is only to say that they have declared themselves independent people, & that the troops are all met in good Health.”73

In part, the muted response to the Declaration was a result of its long being anticipated. From the summer of 1775 reports from North America had claimed that the leadership in Congress was set on independence. That December, Lord Breadalbane wrote that he had seen several Americans “drinking the water at Bristol, who . . . could not conceal their hopes & even expectations of entire independency.” Breadalbane added for good measure that he had “no doubt of that being their Plan from the beginning.”74 But the Declaration was treated with remarkable lightness primarily because it seemed unimportant. Lord North’s ministers, though they sponsored Lind’s publication, appear to have taken the American claim of independence in their stride, regarding it merely as proof of the treasonable intent of the leaders of the insurrection. Government spokesmen and supporters of the coercion of the colonists continued to use the language of “rebellion” to describe the Americans, and they continued to see the aim of the war as forcing the colonists to accept the authority of the British Parliament, at least so far as regulation of imperial trade was concerned.

Opponents of the conflict with the Americans were embarrassed by the Declaration, not least because it was difficult to square with their argument that the colonists were only struggling for their rights as

71 See Gentleman’s Magazine, 46 (1776), 403–04, 450–51.
Britons. But Lord George Germain, North’s secretary of state for the colonies, almost certainly exaggerated when he claimed that the American assertion of independence “staggered” the ministry’s parliamentary enemies.75 When the marquis of Rockingham, leader of the largest opposition group, wrote regretfully in the autumn of 1776 that his aim had “always been to try to preserve a friendly union between the Colonies and the Mother Country,” this reflected not his upset at the Declaration of Independence in July but rather his fear that British military success at the battle of Long Island in August made it less not more likely that a “friendly union” might be restored. Rockingham and his party seem not to have considered the implications of the Declaration itself, probably because British victory at Long Island made it seem irrelevant. Their reaction, at least for some time, suggests that they regarded the Declaration as an unfortunate mistake, which if not mentioned too often would soon be forgotten. The Rockinghamites only gradually accepted the reality that the Americans could not be reincorporated, and it was not the Declaration of Independence that convinced them that this was the case but subsequent wartime developments.76 The other main component of the parliamentary opposition, the Chathamites, or Shelburnites as they became after Chatham’s death, while dismayed by the Declaration of Independence, refused to accept American secession until the fighting was over.77 As we have seen, in the peace negotiations of 1782–1783 Shelburne delayed recognizing American independence for as long as possible, and even then he pursued a course that suggests a desire to salvage a constitutional connection from the imperial wreckage. Beyond Parliament, supporters of American resistance to North’s government were similarly disinclined to accept that the Declaration of Independence signified a final parting of the ways. In 1777 the poet Thomas Day was still depicting the struggle as “no foreign war,” but rather a conflict of brother against brother; in the same year a pamphleteer was arguing that peace with America was the way to avoid the conflict with France that must otherwise arise—a conflict that he described as a “foreign war” to distinguish it from the struggle against the colonists.78

78 [Day], The Desolation of America: A Poem (London, 1777), 3; Matthew Robinson Morris, Peace the Best Policy; Or Reflections upon the Appearance of a Foreign War... (London, 1777).
Yet, despite the continuing use of inclusive rhetoric, implying that the Americans were still part of the British world, to be conciliated or coerced into remaining within it, in practice many Britons had come to accept that the Americans were a separate people—foreigners—long before the end of the war. The perceived weakness of American loyalism perhaps contributed to this process. There is now a rich literature on loyalism and its numerical strength. Estimates vary, but a careful calculation by Paul H. Smith suggests that about a fifth of Americans refused to renounce their allegiance to George III. Smith suggests that about a fifth of Americans refused to renounce their allegiance to George III. But what matters here is not so much reality as contemporary perception. Some ministers, as is well known, retained their faith in the essential loyalty of the bulk of the Americans right until the end: Germain, despite increasing evidence to the contrary, continued to base his recommendations to British commanders on the assumption that victory was assured if only the loyal majority could be mobilized. Most government supporters, however, accepted the limitations of loyalism much sooner. Initially over-optimistic reports of loyalist strength led to disappointment, followed by an over-pessimistic conviction that there were very few true “friends to government” in America. In February 1775, before the fighting began, William Howe had confidently asserted that “the insurgents are very few, in comparison of the whole people.” His experiences in America were gradually to turn him into a bitter sceptic so far as the loyalists were concerned. By January 1778 he was claiming dejectedly that “excepting in a few Instances,” nothing better could be expected of the Americans than “an equivocal Neutrality.” The letters home of many British officers serving in America are even more dismissive of the loyalists: “I am quite confirmed in my opinion that We have not a Friend in America” (James Grant); “I am persuaded England never had a Friend in this Country” (Charles O’Hara). As the hopes invested in the loyalists


81 [Anon.], The Detail and Conduct of the American War, 3d ed. (London, 1780), 12.

82 Howe to Germain, Jan. 16, 1778, CO 5/95, fol. 64, PRO.

83 Grant to Edward Harvey, July 9, 1776, Macpherson Grant of Ballindalloch Papers, bundle 2, Ballindalloch Castle, Banffshire; O’Hara to the duke of Grafton, Nov. 6, 1780, Grafton Papers, Ac 423/189, West Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds.
diminished, it became easier for the British to see the Americans as a unified whole rather than as a deeply divided people—a perception that helped the Americans to become “the enemy.”

On another level, we can see that the sheer scale of the American uprising was enough to persuade some British politicians and military commanders that the rebels would have to be treated as belligerents, much like foreign opponents. The capture by the Americans of significant numbers of British troops at Fort St. John in November 1775, and then in subsequent operations, no doubt encouraged this cautious approach. There were siren voices calling for a concerted policy of destruction, and the suspension of the customary laws of war to enable the rebels to be punished accordingly. But these recommendations were firmly rejected by successive British commanders-in-chief in America, who refused to countenance what one of them disapprovingly called a “War of devastation.” Prisoner exchanges and the granting of paroles to Continental army officers indicated that the Americans, while routinely labeled “Rebels,” were in practice being granted belligerent status. As reports of this aspect of the war percolated back to Britain, they probably helped to create a more general view that the colonists had, in effect, become a foreign enemy.

George Washington—quintessentially English though he appeared—can also be said to have contributed to this change in attitude. Before the 1776 campaign began, General Howe effectively acknowledged the American general as his equal by respectfully appealing to him to observe the spirit of the laws of war by cultivating “the most liberal Sentiments among all who place themselves under your Command.” Washington’s subsequent conduct as American comman-

84 The existence of even small numbers of loyalists could, of course, remind Britons of continuing connections with at least some Americans. See, e.g., concern about the hardships of Anglican clergymen in America (“our suffering Brethren”) in William Vyse to Thomas Seward, Apr. 5, 1776, Autograph Letters, S.MS.478, Salt Lib.
86 Henry Clinton to the duke of Newcastle, Sept. 21, 1778, Newcastle of Clumber MSS, NeC 2614, Nottingham University Library. See also William B. Willcox, Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence (New York, 1964), 251.
87 For exchanges and paroles, see Martin J. Clancy, “Rules of Land Warfare during the War of the American Revolution,” World Polity, 2 (1960), 212–13. Note, however, that Gould argues, in “American Independence and Britain’s Counter-Revolution,” Past and Present, No. 154 (1997), esp. 117, that reports of barbarities committed by the Americans led to their being seen by some commentators as no longer part of the British nation.
88 Carleton Papers, 30/55/229(1), PRO.
der-in-chief earned him many British admirers. Letters sent home by British officers in America praised his return of plundered goods to non-
combatants—a gesture that they compared favorably with the reputation for pillaging acquired by the British army, and particularly its Hessian auxiliary component. These views of Washington seem to have reached the wider public, leading to his elevation to the status of respectable symbol of American resistance. This is not to say that he was universally admired: public praise of the American general provoked the ire of government supporters, who sometimes physically attacked those who overtly toasted Washington’s health. But the very fact that this Virginian gentleman was the commander-in-chief of the American forces helped to counteract the early image of the rebellion as the work of leveling, democratical New England Puritans (“despicable Wretches,” none of whom “has the least pretence to be called a Gentleman,” as one English customs officer wrote from Boston in June 1775). By conferring a degree of respectability on the Americans, then, Washington made it easier for them gradually to become, in British eyes, an enemy much like any other.

Washington’s Continental army also played its part. While the principal opponent of the British army was the colonial militia—and the New England forces assembled around Boston in 1775 were in reality nothing more than an army of militiamen—it was easy for British officers to identify the colonists as an un-uniformed and undisciplined collection of rebels in arms: “one only dirty one’s fingers by meddling with them” was the disdainful verdict of Lord Rawdon. The New Englanders who captured Ticonderoga and Crown Point at the beginning of the war were likewise dismissed as “a Sett of ragamuffins.” Such views, expressed in letters home, inevitably had an impact on opinion in the British Isles. But once the Continental army emerged as disciplined, uniformed, and well-led, British attitudes began to change. The


90 See Adrian Henstock, ed., The Diary of Abigail Gawthorn of Nottingham, 1751–1810, Thoroton Society Record Series, 33 (Nottingham, 1980), 33; Leeds Intelligencer, Dec. 16, 1777.


growing professionalism of the American forces started to elicit recognition from British officers, who, in their reports to friends and relatives across the Atlantic, conceded that the Americans were worthy opponents. Captain Baldwin Leighton, for instance, wrote in July 1777 of the experience that the American generals were acquiring, which would in time "make their men good Soldiers." When the Continental army took the field for the 1778 campaign after extensive training over the preceding winter by Baron von Steuben, who had served under Frederick the Great, the impression that the British were now fighting a European-style enemy was considerably reinforced.

The course of military operations in North America was probably still more important. As Burke observed, "In War, Events do every thing." Public opinion, he mused, was "wholly governed by the last Flanders Mail or New York Pacquet." In 1775, when the war was not going very well for the British army, it was perhaps inevitable that at least some Britons should start to emphasize the differences between Britons and Americans, or at least between Britons and New Englanders. The unifying theme of interdenominational Protestantism became less obvious than the gulf between "fanatical" New England Puritans and more moderate British Protestantism. As Thomas Falconer wrote on learning of the heavy British casualties at Bunker Hill: "The Bostonians have all the barbarity wch false zeal can inspire." When British fortunes improved, however, there was something of a reversion to the view that the colonists were disobedient and undisciplined offspring, who needed merely to be coerced back into the family fold. The series of British triumphs in the New York campaign of 1776, and the pursuit of Washington's disintegrating army across New Jersey to the Delaware, pointed to the collapse of the American rebellion. To the dean of Durham, "the Good News from America" suggested that the war was almost over: "The Rebels," he wrote, "can't hold out long Without foreign Assistance." A Staffordshire clergyman noted with satisfaction at the end of the year that it looked as though the army would soon be "bringing back these ungratefully rebellious Children to their Duty."

Once again, however, changes in the war situation brought further reassessments of the Americans. Washington's bold and successful counter-attack at the very end of 1776 and the beginning of 1777—at

93 Congreve Papers, S.MS 48/7.
94 Burke to William Baker, Oct. 12, 1777, Correspondence of Burke, ed. Copeland et al., 3:389.
95 Round MSS, D/DRg 4/30, Essex Record Office, Chelmsford.
96 Ashridge MSS, AH 2275, Hertfordshire Record Office, Hertford; entry of Jan. 1, 1777, Hanbury Parish Register, D 1528/1/4, Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford.
the battles of Trenton and Princeton—seems to have jolted the British public into a realization that the war was far from over. With this realization came a reappraisal of the nature of the struggle. As early as January 1777 Sir George Savile, an opposition MP hostile to the conflict in America, was writing that “the cause itself wears away by degrees from a question of right and wrong between subjects, to a war between us and a foreign nation. . . . I see marks of this everywhere, and in all ranks.” By the following August, Edward Gibbon, the historian and a government-supporting MP, was criticizing the “wretched piece of work . . . we seem to be making of it in America” and was referring to the Americans as having “almost lost the appellation of Rebels.” The surrender of Burgoyne’s army at Saratoga in October 1777 was further proof that the Americans were formidable opponents, and there can be little doubt that this defeat contributed to a reappraisal of their status by British politicians and the wider British public. Saratoga convinced some Britons that America was lost, and with that conviction came a recognition that, de facto, the Americans had secured their independence. In the words of a Glasgow merchant: “the consequences of Genl. Burgoynes Surrender, we dread, will prove fatal to our [i.e., Britain’s] affairs in America.”

Yet the importance of British military setbacks from December 1776 to October 1777, and of Saratoga in particular, should not be overstated. We should note that when news arrived of Burgoyne’s surrender, several town corporations, far from regarding the Americans as having established their independence, pledged to raise regiments to help continue the war in America. Glasgow’s burgh council, for instance, unanimously resolved on December 26, 1777, to “give their aid and assistance to government at this critical time in order to enable them to quell the . . . rebellion.” Three days later the council agreed to raise a battalion in the city by “voluntary subscription.” Nor, it seems, were such initiatives simply a gesture by loyal elites. In January 1778 the people of Edinburgh, where the local council had also pledged to raise a regiment, were said to be “emptying their Pockets . . . in the support of the war”; a commitment manifested by “Every order of Men from the highest to the Lowest.” A song, published at this time, looked forward to the newly raised Scottish regiments chastising “the Yankees” and gaining revenge for Burgoyne’s defeat. In Birmingham, meanwhile, a subscription was


opened by the inhabitants "for the Support of his Majesty's Government" in the prosecution of the American war, the proceeds of which within a very short time exceeded £1,200. Saratoga, in short, while an undoubted blow to those who supported the war against the Americans, did not extinguish hopes of reclaiming the rebel colonies.99

Many more Britons seem to have been persuaded that the Americans had effectively become a separate nation by the confirmation in March 1778 of the existence of the Franco-American alliance. Fears of French intervention had been voiced before, especially during the autumn of 1776: "A war with France talked of," Mary Hardy, a Norfolk farmer's wife wrote anxiously in her diary at that time.100 When rumors of the signing of a formal alliance reached London in February 1778, Thomas Hutchinson wondered what effect it would have "upon the minds of the people." In March, when the Franco-American treaties became public knowledge, he declared that "America seems to be lost" and wrote in his diary that the public appeared to accept this as an established fact: "Never was [there] such an instantaneous conversion of a whole kingdom." A few months later, Hutchinson was himself referring to John Adams as "now Ambassador from the United States to the Court of France." The writer who in 1776 had denounced the "consummate effrontery" of the Declaration of Independence was now acknowledging the existence of the United States.101 The comments of John Baker, an elderly lawyer, on a Plan of Re-union between Great Britain and her Colonies, published in the same month that the Franco-American alliance was formally announced, are similarly instructive: "It comes too late," was Baker's laconic verdict.102

Once it was known that the French and Americans were allies, French involvement meant an enormous expansion of the war. The conflict spread to all areas of Anglo-French imperial contact and rivalry—the Caribbean, West Africa, and India—and the British Isles themselves were exposed to attack. In this situation, America inevitably slipped down the British government's agenda. Military resources were redeployed to the new theaters of operation, particularly to the West Indies

99 Drennan Letters, T 765/1/20, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast; [Anon.], Four Excellent New Songs (Edinburgh, [1778]), 3–6; Aris's Birmingham Gazette, Jan. 12, 1778.
100 Basil Cozens-Hardy, ed., Mary Hardy's Diary, Norfolk Record Society, 37 (Norwich, 1968), 22.
101 Peter Orlando Hutchinson, ed., The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq., 2 vols. (Boston, 1884–1886), 2:186, 193, 194, 220; [Hutchinson], Strictures upon the Declaration of the Congress, 28.
and to home defense. This redeployment, it was widely recognized, greatly reduced the chances of reclaiming the rebel colonies. These military realities finally persuaded the Rockinghamites that it was pointless to deny American independence. In April 1778 Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke, Rockingham’s principal spokesmen in the House of Commons, urged that the peace commissioners appointed to negotiate with the Americans be empowered to recognize that they no longer owed allegiance to the British crown. Even Britons less sympathetic to the Americans were forced to accept that the suppression of the rebellion was now going to be very difficult.

French intervention, furthermore, had the tendency to narrow definitions of Britishness by concentrating public attention on the home territories. A beleaguered sense of British-ness was engendered by the power and proximity of the French. The war was no longer simply against the Americans, but also against the formidable French army and a significant French navy. And the war was no longer a struggle in North America alone, but was now also a conflict on Britain’s very doorstep. An enemy landing seemed a distinct possibility. “Fire your Indignation at the Thoughts of an Invasion by the Monsieurs of France,” one newspaper urged its readers in July 1779. John Marsh, a musician, wrote that August of the great alarm caused by “the French Fleet having appear’d off Plymouth,” and Richard Neville, a Berkshire squire, apprehensively recorded in his diary his fears for his country: “God preserve Old England.” From 1778 British newspapers continued to carry accounts of military operations in North America, and the other distant theaters, but many column inches were now devoted to preparations to repel an enemy landing. In 1778 and 1779 particularly, there were many items on

104 Cobbett, ed., Parl. Hist., 19:1082–85, 1088. Burke remained ambivalent about whether the Americans were now part of a new nation. In June 1779 he insisted that they were “still Englishmen by blood,” regardless of “whether they find it in their Interest to embody under our Monarchy, or to regulate themselves in Republics of their own”; Burke to John Erskine, June 12, 1779, in Correspondence of Burke, ed. Copeland et al., 4:87.
105 As early as Jan. 1778, in anticipation of conflict with the French, Lord Amherst advised the cabinet that the necessary forces could not be spared for an offensive land war in America: cabinet minute, Jan. 17, 1778, Abergavenny MSS, 162a, Brit. Lib.
the camps established in southern and eastern England to train regular troops and militia to fight off an invading army. The threat of invasion was not new in itself; enemy landings were feared in both the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years’ War. But in these earlier conflicts the same powerful foe was menacing both the British Isles and British North America. The British Atlantic world was united in its Protestant resistance to French popery. This shared sense of danger promoted a sense of solidarity. In the American war, the situation was very different. The French threat was directed at Britain and Ireland, but not at North America. In these circumstances, the idea of the British as a transatlantic people unsurprisingly lost ground to a more geographically confined conception of the nation.

But, above all, it seems that it was the association of the Americans with the French that led to a reevaluation of the Americans—a reevaluation that turned them into a separate people. The French, as we have seen, were the defining counterpoint that gave both English-ness and British-ness meaning in the eighteenth century. There was, it must be acknowledged, a more positive side to images of France: French culture attracted many Britons, and not simply those aristocrats who were able to travel on the Continent, and there was some admiration, as well as fear, of French power. Even so, the negatives far outweighed the positives so far as many Britons were concerned. The French were, as the earl of Chesterfield wrote in the War of the Austrian Succession, “our great and natural enemy.” An army officer writing from the Low Countries during the same conflict noted that his men had “an implacable hatred against the french, who are the enemies of all mankind.” At the time of the American war, anti-French feeling was as strong as ever. In 1776 an English Dissenter, echoing Chesterfield, described the French as “our natural enemies, the enemies of civil and religious liberty.” A cartoon published in 1778, entitled “Politeness,” contrasts plain and manly “Jack English,” with his tankard of ale and haunch of beef, with an effete (and effeminate) Frenchman, with his wig, snuff and dandified clothes. In a newspaper verse, the traditional culinary contrast between England and France is adapted to emphasize the difference between


108 See, e.g., Postlethwayt’s Britain’s Commercial Interest, n. 56 above. In 1757, the French were doing rather well in the Seven Years’ War and the British rather badly. For another work of that year that compares Britain unfavorably with France, see [John Brown], An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times, 2 vols. (London, 1757).

Britain and France: “British heroes,” with their beer and plum-pudding, confront the French with their “Frogs, soup-meagre, and wine.” “The natural antipathy I believe we all have towards the French,” an Oxford undergraduate wrote in the summer of 1778, “has rous’d the Britain [sic] in my soul.”

True, some American sympathizers defended the French alliance as an unavoidable necessity, “evidently founded upon self-preservation.” Other Britons regarded French entry into the conflict as an opportunity to restore the unity of the British empire and focus animosity on the traditional enemy. A toast drunk at a dinner of a Protestant Irish volunteer corps, for instance, called for “Speedy peace with America, and war with France,” while a Dissenting congregation in Cambridgeshire asked the Lord to put “an end to the American-war” and appear “for us against the French.” And there were those who believed that the unnaturalness of the American relationship with the French—a republican and Protestant people allying with an absolutist Catholic regime—meant that it was doomed to collapse. But if the association of America with France was denied in some quarters, it was accepted readily, if regretfully, in a surprisingly large number of cases. In the pronouncements of ministerial politicians, America seemed to lose its rebellious character and become an enemy to be juxtaposed with France. “France and America,” Lord Stormont feared, “were indissolubly leagued for our destruction”; “France and America . . . were to be considered as one enemy” was the view of Lord Suffolk. Lord Lyttleton was thunderstruck that “America, the child of Great Britain,” had allied with France, throughout his lifetime “the determined foe of both Great Britain and America.” Indeed, Lyttleton continued, “America willingly became the dagger of France, and lent herself to be the instrument of the assassination of her parent!” In these circumstances, he concluded, surely no one should “hesitate a moment . . . [to] strengthen the hands of government against such an

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alliance?" 

Beyond parliament, similar views were expressed. "A Friend to Great Britain," writing in a London newspaper shortly after news had arrived of the Franco-American treaties, denounced the Americans for having entered "into a league with our ancient, inveterate, and perfidious foes." The Americans, he continued, had now put themselves beyond the pale: as irretrievable enemies, they would be exposed to the anger of the "British Lion," who would proceed to "trample under his feet the dastard Gallic Cock, and the tyrannical, ungrateful, venomous American Rattlesnake." A letter to another newspaper asked pointedly: "Are rebels, and traitors our brethren, and fellow-subjects? — Are they not now aliens, and enemies? And what hope have we they will be our friends again, who are joined with Frenchmen, and Papists?" 

As more European enemies entered the war, Britons became still more accustomed to list the Americans alongside them as their opponents. When the Spanish joined the French in June 1779, Fox, a consistent opponent of the American aspect of the conflict, lamented that "Spain, France, and America [are] leagued against us." In February 1780, the Reverend James Woodford noted in his diary that Britain was at war "with America, France and Spain"; he seemed to regard these three enemies as on the same footing — America had lost its distinctive status as a collection of rebel colonies and become a belligerent just like any other. During the course of 1780, it must be said, British military fortunes brightened appreciably, leading temporarily to a revival of the view that America might be reclaimed. News of the capture of Charleston, South Carolina, according to a prominent opponent of the war, created an expectation among the public "that America will soon be ours again." By the end of the year, however, it had become obvious that there would be no such turn of events. The stage was set for the final recognition that the Americans were part of a hostile coalition ranged against Britain, rather than a branch of the British nation.

Some confirmation of this came when Henry Laurens, a former president of Congress, was captured on the high seas on his way to negotiate with the Dutch. The King's Arms London debating society

113 Cobbett, ed., Parl. Hist., 20:28 (Stormont), 9 (Suffolk), 23 (Lytton). 
114 Morning Chronicle, and London Advertiser, Mar. 31, 1778; Morning Post, and Daily Advertiser, Mar. 20, 1778. 
116 Price to Francis Dana, Sept. 26, 1780, in Correspondence of Richard Price, ed. Peach and Thomas, 2:79. See also the enthusiastic response of John Gibbons, a prebendary of St. Paul's, in Galton Papers, 278/2, Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham.
considered whether he should be treated "as a rebel, or as a prisoner of war." The outcome of the disputation is unknown, but the very fact that such a debate took place is interesting.  

The opening of hostilities against the Dutch at the end of 1780 saw a return to the habit of listing the Americans as one of many enemies. Lord Stormont, echoing and enlarging on his earlier denunciation of the Franco-American alliance, spoke of "France, with Spain and America, . . . confederated for our destruction" and Dutch assistance to this triumvirate as justifying the declaration of war on the Netherlands. Lord Camden, a critic of the government, regretted a state of affairs where Britain had alienated a former ally and now had to contend with "France, Spain, America and Holland." Cartoons published in the aftermath of the outbreak of the Dutch war also depicted America as one of a series of enemies, all of whom are effectively viewed as on the same level. "The Ballance of Power," which appeared on January 17, 1781, refers to America, France, Spain and now the Dutch trying to tip the scales against Britain. Three days later, another print showed a British sailor defying the "Four Confederates."  

When British forces captured the Dutch West Indian island of St. Eustatius, an important entrepôt for American trade, a meeting of the Westminster Forum—another London debating society—considered whether this development was "more likely to continue the War with Holland and America, or produce a Peace?" Again, America was effectively put on the same level as Britain's European foes, and no longer treated as a different kind of opponent. The following year, when news reached home of Admiral Rodney's great victory over the French fleet at the battle of the Saints, the message in the public prints was very similar, though American equality with Britain's other enemies was now explicitly acknowledged by references to Britain's remarkable achievement in resisting the combined weight of "Four Powers." Or as John Mells, a Lincolnshire customs officer, noted in his daybook on May 18, 1782: "notwithstanding Great Britain has had to contend with the House of Bourbon America and Holland not one of these powers dare fairly meet her either on the Ocean or in the Field."  


119 BM 5827 and 5828.  

120 Entry 781 in Andrew, ed., London Debating Societies, 136.  

121 BM 6004; Misc. Don 681/1, Lincolnshire Archives Office, Lincoln. Emphasis added.
There were, then, many stages in the process of British estrangement from the Americans, and many very different reasons for that estrangement. In the aftermath of the Seven Years' War the expansion of the British empire led, perhaps subconsciously, to a loss of status for the Americans so far as many Britons were concerned. Instead of being associated with Britons in Britain, they came to be associated with the various other peoples of the newly acquired territories. British Americans, Native Americans, French Canadians, even Bengalis, were all now subjects of the British crown, to be ruled over by the British state. But insofar as we can identify a general and pronounced shift in British attitudes, it came during the American war. The Americans' own Declaration of Independence was not, it seems, important in bringing about a change on the British side. Renouncing their allegiance to the king did not turn the Americans into a separate nation. More important in this respect were the nature and course of the conflict. The scale of the rebellion and the apparent weakness of American loyalism were sufficient to convince some Britons that the Americans had to be regarded as an enemy, much like any other. Washington's reputation and the growing professionalism and success of the American armed forces, and particularly the Continental army, added to the tendency for the Americans to be treated and regarded as belligerents rather than rebels. But it was perhaps above all the broadening of the war from 1778 that persuaded most Britons to look at the Americans in a different light. The expansion of the conflict effectively completed the process of national redefinition on the British side. Rather than being viewed as wayward children to be chastised, the Americans became associated in the minds of many Britons with the French—the traditional and deeply hated foe—then with the Spanish, and finally with the Dutch. From being a part of the extended British nation, they became part of a formidable coalition arrayed against Britain. From fellow-Britons, they became foreigners.