CHAPTER 1

Sea Power and the Modern State System

James C. Bradford

Sea Power played a major, often decisive, role in the wars that led to the rise and fall of ancient empires. Once rivers and seas became avenues rather than barriers to communication and commerce, conflict followed in the form of rivalry between traders, pirates who preyed on shipping, and governments that formed navies to protect their own commerce and seize that of others. The latter gave rise to the first warships, most of which were galleys (i.e. long vessels, propelled by oarsmen).

Sea Power in the Ancient World

Bronze-Age Minoa (c. 2000–1420 BCE) was the first Western thalassocracy (i.e. civilization dependent on the sea) and the first European sea power. Located on the island of Crete at the nexus of trade routes between the Aegean, Adriatic, and eastern Mediterranean Seas, Minoan civilization relied largely on coastal fortifications for defense until its conquest by Mycenaeans from mainland Greece (c. 1470–1420 BCE), who operated the western world's first navy.

Sea power saved the Greek city-states from Persian domination when an Athenian-led flotilla of galleys defeated the Persian navy at the Battle of Salamis (480 BCE) and destroyed the remainder of their galleys at Mycale (479 BCE). Later during the same century, Athens' fleet provided the city and its allies with their main defensive bulwark during the Peloponnesian Wars with rival Sparta. Those wars decimated Greece and led to the region's decline at the same time that Rome was rising to power in the central Mediterranean. Though best known for its infantry legions, it was the Roman navy that brought Rome victory over its rival Carthage in the Punic Wars (264–146 BCE) by allowing Rome to isolate Carthage from its colonies, cut Hannibal's army off from support from home when it invaded the Italian Peninsula, and, finally, to invade and defeat Carthage itself. Roman control of the Mediterranean facilitated commerce, including the grain trade vital to support of a city the size of Rome, and the movement of army legions to trouble spots in the empire.

Transition to the feudal system of medieval Europe brought with it myriad small states – none, except Venice, large or wealthy enough to support a significant navy – and a decline in overseas commerce. When Vikings reached North America (c.1100) and established L'Anse aux Meadows on Newfoundland, there was no political entity capable of sustaining the settlement and there were no ships with the capacity to conduct transoceanic commerce. Four centuries later, when Columbus visited the West Indies, this had changed. Poised on the brink of the modern era, Europe was developing the technology needed for overseas trade and the political and economic institutions to maintain overseas empires.

The Modern World and the Great Power System

The transition from the medieval to the modern world was marked by technological advances in metallurgy, chemistry, and navigation, and by the

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replacement of oar-powered galleys by sailing ships of a much greater size that, by tacking, could sail against the wind. Equally important was the rise of nation states – that is, political units (states) composed of a common people (nations). These new unified entities could and often did support trade, establish overseas colonies, and construct navies.

The first nation-states developed on the Iberian Peninsula; Portugal dates its emergence as a nation-state from the reign of John I (1385–1433), who initiated European exploration of the Atlantic coast of Africa, and Spain became a nation-state following either the 1475 marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile or newly unified Spain's expulsion of the Moors from the whole of the peninsula except Gibraltar in 1492. That year coincided with Christopher Columbus' first voyage to the Americas. Over the next century, Portugal and Spain established the first great oceanic empires before England and France formed nation-states: England after the Wars of the Roses (1455–1487) and France after the War of the Three Henrys (1587–1589). These civil wars had kept England and France from developing the characteristics of a strong nation-state – that is, one with a central government (in that era a monarch) that had the allegiance of the political classes, a bureaucracy that administered an efficient tax system, and a standing army (though in England's case its Royal Navy was more important than its army).

The seventeenth century proved a transitional era during which emerged the Great Power System, which would continue for three hundred years. By 1600, Iberian power was eroding. Seven northern Netherlands provinces declared their independence from Spanish Hapsburg rule, formed the Dutch Republic, fought the Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648), and challenged the Iberians by establishing settlements on the Cape of Good Hope, the north coast of South America, Java, and elsewhere. England and France also began forming overseas empires while Prussia, Russia, and Austria rose to prominence in central and eastern Europe.

Within this transitional era, a seemingly minor incident occurred in February 1603 which had an oversized impact on maritime history. Working with local allies, Dutch Admiral Jakob van Heemzkerk attacked and seized the Portuguese carrack *Sta. Catarina* near the mouth of the Johor River near the Singapore Strait. The cargo of silk, gold thread, spices, and a bounty of Chinese-manufactured wares was auctioned for a financial yield of over 3 million guilders, roughly equal to half the Dutch East India's Company's capital base and more than double that of the emerging rival English East India Company. The attention drawn by the astonishing wealth raised the stakes involved in, and therefore the resources devoted to, the developing European contests to dominate trade in Asia, thereby setting the stage for expanded warfare and the age of imperialism. In association with the auction, a young Dutch lawyer, Hugo Grotius, was engaged to justify the seizure as a prize of a just war. A portion of the lengthy treatise he developed was published a *Mare Liberum* (The Free Sea). Contrasting with the concept of *Mare Clausum* (closed sea), the freedom of the seas concept provided justification for the contesting of trade monopolies and laid the foundations for the dominant principal of maritime law that continues to govern states behavior in the present day.

The Thirty Years' War swept Europe between 1618 and 1648. While virtually every nation was involved, the main fighting occurred in central Europe, where it decimated populations and devastated large sections of land. Following its settlement in the Treaty of Westphalia there emerged an enduring Great Power System in which five nation-states – Russia, Austria, Prussia (Germany after 1870), France, and England (Great Britain after 1707) – played dominant roles. The goal was to maintain a "balance of power" that would prevent total wars, such as the Thirty Years' War, in the future.

Though never formally enunciated in a single document, five core tenets underlay the Great Power System: (i) five is the correct number of powers to maintain a healthy balance; (ii) no great power should ever be destroyed or reduced to a position that prevented it from playing an independent role in the system; (iii) no single nation should ever be allowed to grow powerful enough to threaten the continued existence of any other great power; (iv) no nation has permanent friends, just permanent interests, so alliances should shift to preserve the balance; and (v) wars are acceptable tools for upholding the system. Within the system, a great (first-rate) power was one that possessed

sufficient political, economic, and/or military strength that every other nation had to consider the great power's interest and possible reaction to any diplomatic or military action it might take. A great power possessed total sovereignty in its internal affairs and would consider any interference in its domestic business a *casus belli*.

Lesser nations played roles in the system based on their relative power. Second-rate, or regional, powers could pursue independent foreign policies and control their internal affairs. Great powers had to consider the interests of second-rate powers when operating in the sphere of influence of such a power. Third-rate powers controlled their foreign policy and, in a major conflict, could choose, if not to remain neutral, at least which side to join as an ally. A fourth-rate power did not have such a choice and was basically a client or satellite of a more powerful state, usually a neighbor. Fifth-rate, even weaker, powers rarely controlled even their internal affairs.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, Switzerland, and Sweden maintained regional-power status. The Netherlands and several lesser German states were third-rate powers, while Portugal and Denmark became third-rate powers by the eighteenth century. The United States began as a third-rate power that benefited from the system during its War of Independence and grew to be a regional power by the late nineteenth century.

During the eighteenth century, Britain participated in a series of wars with various allies to counter France, which repeatedly upset the balance of power. With the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, France was finally contained, but not reduced from great power status. Instead, the other great powers forced France to accept a king who promised not to again challenge the balance of the Great Power System. The first significant blow to the system came at the end of World War I when Austria-Hungary was destroyed as a great power. Germany was temporarily reduced in power but able to begin rebuilding by the 1930s. By 1900, Italy sought great power status, as did Japan a quarter-century later. By World War I the United States had achieved virtual great power status but chose not to participate actively in world affairs until World War II, the conflict that finally destroyed the system.

Competition for Empire

During the 300 years that the system functioned, the three eastern powers competed for advantage on the Eurasian continent while Britain and France vied for economic, political, and military power not only in Europe but also in their empires in America, Asia, and Africa.

Their competition was guided by mercantilism, an economic theory that held sway in Europe from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Mercantilists believed there was a finite amount of wealth in the world, that national wealth was measured in specie (gold and silver) reserves, and that it was the role of government to promote policies, particularly a positive balance of trade, that would build the nation's wealth and therefore its power at the expense of rival nations. Those policies included: (i) protective tariffs to stimulate internal production and limit imports that would lead to the outflow of specie; (ii) establishment of colonies to produce commodities such as sugar and tobacco, not producible at home, so they would not have to be purchased from foreigners; (iii) prohibiting colonies from trading with other nations so that they would purchase manufactures from the mother country, which could also profit by reexporting colonial products to other parts of Europe; and (iv) forbidding trade in foreign ships. The goal of mercantilist policy was to strengthen a nation's economy and, thereby, increase its military power.

While mercantilism is most closely identified with Jean Baptiste Colbert, French minister of finance (1662–1683), it was also the philosophical foundation for England's Navigation Acts. The first such act, passed in 1651, banned the importing of goods from outside Europe into England and its colonies in foreign ships and limited the import of goods from Europe to English ships or those of the nation that produced the goods. The Navigation Act of 1660 added a requirement that, in addition to being English-built and owned, "English ships" had to be commanded by an Englishman and have a crew that was three-quarters English. The act also included a list of "enumerated articles," including tobacco, cotton, sugar, dyewoods, and naval stores, that could only be sold by England's colonies to England, from which many were reexported to Europe.

The Navigation Act of 1663 stipulated that all European goods had to pass through England before going anywhere in the empire.

Anglo-Dutch Wars

Britain's 1651 restriction on foreign ships was aimed directly at the Dutch, who had replaced the Portuguese as the dominant traders in Asian, Baltic, and north European waters and was a major cause of the first of three Anglo-Dutch Wars. All were largely economic conflicts.

At the start of the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654), the Dutch navy had 76 warships in commission and 150 under construction or conversion from merchantmen. England could not deploy more than 123 warships so adopted the strategy commonly employed by the weaker naval power, that of *guerre de course* (i.e. commerce raiding) to force the Dutch to the negotiating table. The more powerful Dutch sought to engage and destroy the English navy – that is, they adopted a *guerre d'escadre* (i.e. combat between fleets) strategy of fleet engagements and blockades, usually employed by the stronger naval power. Despite the English capture of 1200–1500 Dutch merchantmen, and naval victories at Portland, the Gabbard, and Scheveningen in 1653, there was no clear victor in the war, so, with both sides nearly exhausted, a peace was signed in 1654 that settled few outstanding issues.

In 1660, Charles II, restored as king of England after nearly a decade of parliamentary rule, sought to strengthen his position by expanding English trade and settlement in America. In addition to supporting the Navigation Act of 1660, Charles granted proprietorships to supporters who would establish colonies in America that would produce taxable commodities such as sugar, rice, and indigo. With an eye to expelling Dutch shippers from the Chesapeake tobacco trade and gaining control of the lucrative fur trade, Charles ordered the capture of New Netherland, and gave the Dutch colony to his brother, James, Duke of York and Lord High Admiral of the Royal Navy. In 1664 James sent four frigates to capture the colony and renamed it New York. When England seized several Dutch trading posts in West Africa, the Dutch dispatched a fleet that took back the posts and evicted the English from their own posts in the region. The result was the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–1667), a conflict between evenly matched opponents. The Royal Navy defeated that of the Netherlands at the Battle of Lowestoft (1665) but lost the Four Days' Battle (1666) and was humiliated when a Dutch raid up the River Thames destroyed several English warships. By 1667, both belligerents wanted peace, so they signed the Treaty of Breda. By its terms England retained New York, the Dutch kept English settlements they had captured in Suriname, and minor changes were made to the Navigations Acts to favor Dutch traders.

The Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–1674), part of a larger Franco-Dutch War (1672–1678), was the product of the secret Treaty of Dover, in which Charles II conspired with Louis XIV to annex parts of the Netherlands. When the Royal Navy was defeated at the Battle of Texel (1673) and forced to abandon its blockade of Dutch ports, Parliament compelled Charles to end the war. French pressure on Dutch land borders forced the Netherlands to invest less in its navy and more in its army. The mid-sixteenth century proved to be the height of Dutch imperial expansion and oceanic trade. The Netherlands simply had too small a population and borders that were too difficult to defend for it to continue as great power.

Development of Modern Navies

Modern navies with their purpose-built warships and permanent administrative bureaucracies first developed during the late seventeenth century. Prior to this era, navies were ad hoc in nature as governments cobbled together fleets largely composed of converted merchantmen.

During the Anglo-Dutch Wars, commanders on both sides sought to bring order to naval engagements. Instead of their warships individually attacking any target that presented itself, commanders began organizing their ships in formations designed to place them in mutually supportive positions as they attacked the enemy. The line-ahead formation, in which warships formed a single column and remained together as they maneuvered and engaged the enemy, soon became the preferred tactic (see Figure 1.1). Victory usually went to the fleet that could bring the most firepower to bear on its opponent. Converted merchantmen of various sizes and sailing characteristics, and carrying varying numbers of cannon that fired differing



Figure 1.1 Battle of the Virginia Capes, 1781. British and French ships-of-the-line in parallel line-ahead columns exchange broadsides. French victory in the battle led to the British loss at Yorktown and to the Treaty of Paris, which recognized the independence of the United States. *Source:* US Navy Art Collection, Washington, DC. US Naval History and Heritage Command Photograph.

sized shot for variable distances, simply could not effectively execute line-ahead tactics. Successful execution of such tactics required purpose-built warships of common design, armed with standardized cannon, and sailed by trained crewmen led by experienced officers. To design, construct, and maintain such warships required a permanent shore staff. The development of modern navies with these characteristics was spurred by the Anglo-French wars that began in 1688.

War of the Grand Alliance (1688–1697)

France emerged from the Franco-Dutch War as the most powerful nation in Europe, yet Louis XIV sought to extend French territory further to the north and east. His aggression precipitated the War of the Grand Alliance, in which the Anglo-Dutch leader, William of Orange, formed the Grand Alliance, which included England, to contain France. Military operations centered in the Rhineland but spread to Asia and the Caribbean, where the English and Dutch navies gave them an advantage. In North America, where the conflict was called King William's War, France and its Algonquin Indian allies dominated in the interior, but in 1690 New Englanders captured Port Royal in Acadia and launched an unsuccessful attack on Quebec via the St. Lawrence River. In 1697, most of the belligerents neared financial exhaustion so signed the Treaty of Ryswick, which, except for French retention of Lorraine, was a *status quo ante bellum* treaty – that is, one that brought peace by returning to prewar conditions, including borders.

The French and Allied navies were roughly equal in numbers when the war began in 1688, but, unable to match Allied construction – during the last four years of the war, France completed 19 major warships, the Dutch 22, and England 58 – France adopted a *guerre de course* strategy and relied largely on privateers to attack English and Dutch merchant ships.

Privateering

Privateering provided a means for a government to enlist private enterprise in maritime warfare. The goal was to seize enemy merchantmen and their cargoes and thereby to damage the enemy's

economy and drive up insurance rates until merchants pressured their government to make peace. A legal system had developed by the mid-seventeenth century under which a government could issue a letter of marque (i.e. a license) to investors who would obtain, arm, and fit out a ship to attack enemy vessels during wartime. Regulations required that the capture of a vessel be reviewed by a prize court, and, if the captured ship was proved to be enemy-owned or carrying enemy-owned cargo, that the ship and its cargo be sold at auction. The government that issued the letter of marque would receive a portion of the proceeds from the sale and the rest would be divided between the investors, officers, and crew of the privateer that made the capture. Weaker naval powers, including, when it gained independence in the late eighteenth century, the young United States, often used privateering to bring economic pressure on their opponents and to force those opponents to deploy naval assets to protect their merchant shipping. A vessel engaged in privateering was itself referred to as a "privateer," defined by an eighteenth-century maritime dictionary as a privately owned ship sent in wartime "to cruise against and among the enemy, taking, sinking or burning their shipping" in exchange for shares of any captured prizes.[1]

War of the Spanish Succession, 1701–1714

When Charles II of Spain died childless in 1700, Leopold I of the Austrian Hapsburgs and Louis XIV of France lodged competing claims to the Spanish throne. To prevent upsetting the balance of power through a union between France (the strongest military power in Europe) and Spain (with its huge empire), a coalition led by Austria, England, and Prussia declared war on France (called Queen Anne's War in North America). The bulk of the fighting again took place in Europe, though it spread to the English, French, and Spanish empires, where England's Royal Navy and troops from New England again captured Port Royal and launched assaults on Quebec, which, like the one in 1690, failed.

Allied victory at Blenheim led to the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which banned union of the French and Spanish thrones, gave Gibraltar to Britain (formed by the union of England and Scotland in 1707), and attempted to extend the balance of power from Europe to North America by transferring Acadia (renamed Nova Scotia), Newfoundland, and Hudson's Bay to Britain. The result was three and a half decades of peace among the great powers of Europe.

By war's end, the Royal Navy's transition to a modern, professional force with a mature administration, career officer corps, and purpose-built warships was complete.

Sailing Warships

By the eighteenth century, purpose-built warships had become the norm in all major navies, though a few minor navies, such as the Continental Navy of Britain's rebelling North American colonies, continued to employ converted merchantmen. Warships were divided into three broad groupings identified by their function and number of guns carried.

Ships-of-the-line took their name from their ability to stand in the line of battle formation employed to engage enemy squadrons and fleets. The largest, first-rate warships had three continuous decks and carried 90 or more guns. Few in number, these usually served as flagships. By the mid-eighteenth century the standard ship-of-the-line was a third-rate that had 74 guns mounted on two continuous decks plus a forecastle and quarterdeck. Fourth-rate warships were usually classified as ships-of-the-line because they had two continuous gun decks, but they were often used like frigates because of their limited firepower (see Figure 1.2).

Frigates, with their single continuous gun deck, came next in size. Even the largest never stood in the battle line but supported it by scouting, carrying dispatches, and conveying signals during engagements. Frigates also operated independently of the fleet, convoying merchantmen, patrolling empires, and countering piracy.

[1]William Falconer, *A New Universal Dictionary of the Marine* 1830 [1769], 353.

Class	*Rate*	*Guns*[a] *(size built*[b]*)*	*Through gun decks*	*Number of crewmen*	*Number in commission*
Ships-of-the-line	First rate	100–120 (100, 110)[c]	3	850–950	11
	Second rate	90–99 (90, 98)[d]	3	700–750	21
	Third rate	60–89 (64, 74, 80)[e]	2	600–700	148
	Fourth rate	50–60 (50)[f]	2	350–450	20
Frigates	Fifth rate	30–50 (36, 38, 40, 44)	1	200–350	162
	Sixth rate	20–30	1	150–200	51
Sloops and brigs	Not rated	10–20 (16, 18)	1	100–120	134
Bomb ketches	Not rated	8	1	>120	127

[a] "Guns" designates the range of the number of guns a warship was designed to carry; actual armaments varied.
[b] "Size built" identifies the size (as designated in terms of guns designed to carry) of warship built for the Royal Navy.
[c] The Royal Navy's last 100-gun ship, *Queen Charlotte,* was launched in 1800; its first 110-gun ship, *Ville de Paris,* was completed in 1795.
[d] The last 90-gun ships were launched in 1767; the first 98-gun ship was launched in 1772.
[e] Very few 64s were constructed after 1780, because 74s could better carry 32-pound guns.
[f] The last fourth-rate ship-of-the-line was launched in 1759.

Figure 1.2 Royal Navy warship classes in 1800.

Unrated warships, including sloops, brigs, and pinnaces, carried fewer than 20 guns. These shallower-draft, faster sailing vessels filled a variety of functions including carrying dispatches and patrolling off enemy harbors to alert the ships-of-the-line on blockade duty when enemy ships put to sea. Bomb ketches were armed with mortars that fired explosive "bombs" in high trajectories used to attack coastal fortifications.

Wars of the Mid-Eighteenth Century

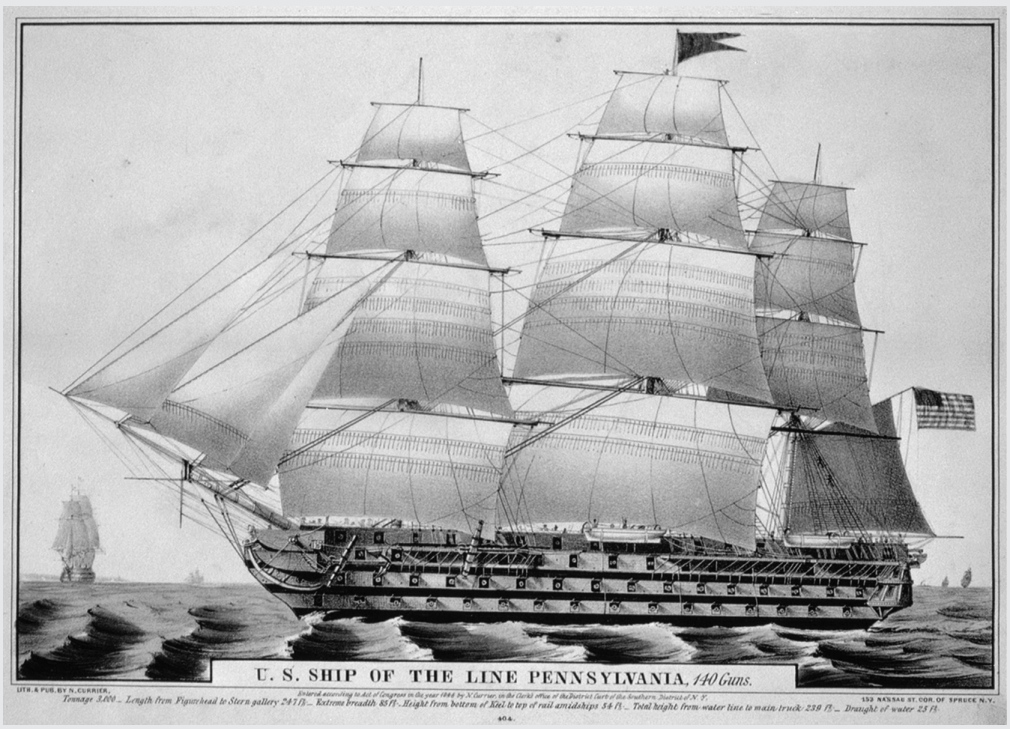
War returned to the Atlantic world in 1739 when conflicts over English trading in Spanish America led to the War of Jenkins' Ear, so named for an incident in which the captain of a Spanish revenue cutter ordered the cutting off of the left ear of Robert Jenkins, an English merchant captain whom he accused of smuggling. Added to other cases of "Spanish Depredations upon the British Subjects," the incident led Britain's Parliament to declare war on Spain in 1739.[2] Within a year the Royal Navy captured Porto Bello in Panama but failed in attempts to take Cartagena on the Caribbean coast of South America, as did an attempt by forces from Georgia to capture St. Augustine in Spanish Florida.

In 1740, this Anglo–Spanish war merged with the War of Austrian Succession, a conflict pitting France and Prussia – which contested the right of Maria Theresa of Austria to succeed her father, Charles VI, as ruler of the Hapsburg family lands – against Austria, Britain, and Russia. Each side was joined by lesser powers in a series of inconclusive wars that lasted until 1748. Operations were equally indecisive in King George's War, the North American phase of the war, except for the capture of Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island by Massachusetts militia with the support of the Royal Navy in 1745. That fortress, the "Gibraltar of America," was returned to France by *status quo*

[2] *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons,* vol. 10: *1737–1739* (1742), 159–182.

Ships-of-the-Line

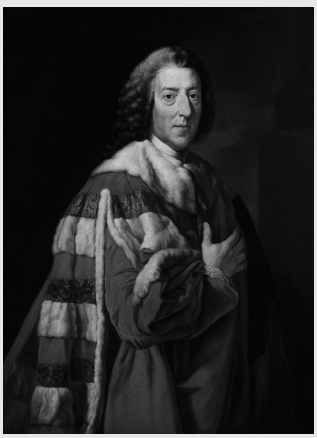
At the Battle of the Gabbard in 1653, the British abandoned single-ship actions and boarding tactics, formed their ships in a single column, and engaged the Dutch broadside-to-broadside. The new tactics required stout warships able to "stand in the line," absorb fire from the enemy, and return effective fire. In the beginning, typical ships-of-the-line carried 30 guns, a number that had risen to 50 by 1700, 64 by 1750, 74 by 1800, and 80 by 1840. Ships-of-the-line were usually 160–200 ft long and had two or three gun decks. The lowest gun deck carried the largest cannon, usually 42-pounders (42 pounds being the weight of the cannonballs it fired) or 32-pounders. The middle deck mounted 24-pounders and the upper deck 12-pounders. Long-range nine-pounders were often mounted on the forecastle and quarterdeck. The fire power of a warship was expressed in "weight of broadside," meaning the total weight of shot that could be fired in a single volley by all the guns on one side of a warship. A third-rate 74, the standard ship-of-the-line in Britain's Royal Navy during the late eighteenth century, could deliver a broadside weight of approximately 1750 pounds. With 140 guns, the *Pennsylvania* was the largest US Navy sailing ship. Ships-of-the-line were so expensive that only a few nations could afford to construct, maintain, and man a significant number. Ships-of-the-line soon became symbols of national prestige, as did their descendants, during the early twentieth century.



USS *Pennsylvania*. The largest sailing ship ever built by the US Navy, the 140-gun ship-of-the-line was authorized in 1816, laid down in 1821, and commissioned in 1837. Lithograph by Currier & Ives, 1848. *Source:* Currier & Ives: A catalogue raisonné/compiled by Gale Research. Detroit, MI: Gale Research, c. 1983, no. 6850. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

William Pitt

William Pitt (1708–1778) was one of Britain's great wartime prime ministers. He believed that Britain's future lay in its overseas empire rather than as a continental power. As the dominant member of the British government between 1756 and 1761, he made North America and India the focus of British operations during the Seven Years' War and adopted a "peripheral strategy" in which Britain would not commit a major army to Europe but would instead support a continental ally by blockading their common enemy and conducting diversionary attacks on the coasts of enemy-held territory that would force that enemy to dissipate its resources by stationing troops in port cities and responding to British conjunct operations. Subsequent British leaders followed these policies for over two centuries. Pitt resigned from the government when it refused to declare war on Spain in 1761, and criticized the 1763 peace treaty with France as too lenient. Pitt remained a member of the House of Commons, where he opposed the Stamp Act. He argued that, while Parliament had the power to enact legislation, including external taxes for Britain's colonies, it did not have the power to levy internal taxes, such as the Stamp Act. In 1766, Pitt moved to the House of Lords as Earl of Chatham. Consistently focusing on France as Britain's archenemy, he sought first compromise then reconciliation with the Americans before his death in 1778.



William Pitt, after a portrait by Richard Brompton, 1771. *Source:* © National Portrait Gallery, London.

ante bellum provisions of the 1748 Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.

Nothing having been settled between the British and French empires, colonists from both continued to jockey for position, and the next war between the antagonists was the first to begin in America and spread to Europe. The immediate point of contention was control of the forks of the Ohio River (site of modern-day Pittsburgh), which brought with it domination of the Ohio River Valley. In 1754, Virginians began establishing a trading post at the site but were forced by the French to abandon the area. Receiving reports that the French were erecting a fort there, Virginia's governor, Lord Dunmore, sent Colonel George Washington and a party of militiamen to scout the area. When they were ambushed by French troops and their Indian allies, Dunmore sought troops from England, which dispatched General Edward Braddock to evict the French. Braddock's expedition was soundly defeated in 1755.

In 1756, the French and Indian War in America merged with the Seven Years' War in Europe to form the Great War for Empire (1756–1763), a name that reflects operations after William Pitt formed a coalition with the Duke of Newcastle and took strategic control of British conduct of the war in August 1757. Prior to that time the war had gone badly for Britain both in Europe and its empire. In Europe, Britain and its ally Prussia faced a coalition of Austria, France, Russia, Spain, and Sweden – a major shift in alliances since the previous war. The coalition overran George II's Hanover and Minorca was lost to France. Meanwhile, in America, French forces pressed colonial outposts in an arc from Nova Scotia to western Pennsylvania.

Upon taking office, Pitt fundamentally altered British national strategy – henceforth, he announced, Britain would abandon territorial ambitions on the continent of Europe and seek its future in its empire. In pursuit of this policy, Pitt adopted a "peripheral strategy" for conducting the war in Europe, one in which Britain would subsidize its allies, in this case Prussia, but not commit a major army to the continent. Instead it would use the Royal Navy to blockade enemy ports, cutting off trade and support from the outside, and launch a series of raids and conjunct operations to tie down enemy forces away from the main theater of operations. Forces would also be dispatched to the empire to protect and expand Britain's colonial possessions. These principles characterized British military strategy and foreign policy for the next two centuries. The military strategy underlay the Duke of Wellington's Iberian Campaign during the Napoleonic Wars, the Gallipoli Campaign of World War I, and British preference for the North Africa–Italy Campaigns versus a cross-channel line of attack during World War II. The 1973 abandonment of preferential trading agreements with members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, successor to the pre-World War II British Empire, and entry into the European Economic Community signified a shift in national or grand strategy.

During the Seven Years' War the new strategy led to British raids on French homeland ports Rochefort and the Isle d'Aix in 1757 and St. Malo and Cherbourg in 1758. Royal Navy victories at the Battles of Lagos and Quiberon Bay (south of Brittany) in 1759 ended French plans to invade Britain that year and prevented France from sending significant support to its empire where British and colonial forces had captured French Forts Frontenac on Lake Ontario, Duquesne at the forks of the Ohio River, and Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island in 1758. This set the stage for the British occupation of French forts on Lake Champlain and the capture of Quebec on the St. Lawrence River in 1759, followed by Montreal in 1760. British forces were equally successful in the West Indies, where they captured the French islands of Guadeloupe (1759) and Martinique (1762) and Spanish Havana (1762). On the other side of the world, British forces seized Senegal in Africa (1758) and Karikal (1760) and Pondicherry (1761) in India from the French, and Manila in the Philippines (1762) from Spain.

In February 1763, the *status quo ante bellum* Treaty of Hubertusburg brought peace to Europe and the Treaty of Paris ended the war outside Europe. In the latter, France transferred ownership of Canada (except the tiny islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon in the Gulf of St. Lawrence), most of Louisiana east of the Mississippi River, and the islands of Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago to Britain and the bulk of Louisiana to Spain. Britain returned Guadeloupe and Martinique to France. In the Eastern Hemisphere, Britain abandoned Manila to Spain and France ceded Senegal to Britain in exchange for the return of only five trading posts in southern India, a settlement that left Britain dominant in India.

The war marked a triumph for Pitt's peripheral strategy and for Britain as an empire, but in the euphoria of victory few understood that the achievements of the past five years contained the seeds of problems that would plague the British Empire for two decades. Britain emerged from the war with a huge national debt, vast new lands to govern, and demands by West Indian planters for assistance in recovering from French depredations suffered during the war. The policies developed by the administrations of George Grenville (including the Sugar and Stamp Acts), Charles Townshend (duties on paint, lead, glass, and tea), and Lord North (the Tea and Coercive/Intolerable Acts) to deal with these problems alienated 13 of Britain's North American colonies and in only a dozen years drove them to rebellion. The removal of France from Canada freed the Americans from any dependence on Britain for defense. During that same time, the use of the Royal Navy to enforce revenue laws changed its image in America from that of a guardian into one of an oppressor. Internationally, an unintended outcome of the Treaty of Paris was the upsetting of the balance of power so that, when its colonies rebelled, France assisted those colonies in their war for independence with the goal of reducing British power to reset the balance of power. France was joined in the War for American Independence by Spain and the Netherlands, Britain faced opposition from the Armed Neutrality formed by Russia, and, for the only time between 1689 and 1980, Britain was without a continental ally. Thus the stage was set for American rebellion and the emergence of the new United States.

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