

On November 30, a month out from Alexandria, Washington began the final, most arduous leg of his journey. Alternately traveling on foot and horseback in temperatures that seldom rose above freezing, the men climbed hills with old snow that barely remained white, slogged through thick, black bogs, and from time to time used hastily built log rafts to make their way through seemingly impenetrable swamps. Finally, nearly 100 miles north of the Forks of the Ohio, and just south of Lake Erie, their destination came into view: Fort Le Boeuf, a small rectangular French post that bristled with artillery and was garrisoned by nearly 100 French soldiers.

Changing from the buckskin and moccasins he had worn during his journey, Washington donned attire more suitable for a gentleman and royal messenger, and hurried to the fort amid swirling gusts of snow. The French received him hospitably, and soon the young Virginian was dining with his hosts, enjoying perhaps his first good meal in six weeks, replete with excellent French wine. Afterwards, Washington got down to business. Preeningly tough, he presented Dinwiddie's message. The French response was no less emphatic: France was not encroaching on British soil; the Ohio Country belonged to France by the right of discovery and exploration. Throughout, the French officers and Washington remained cordial, but all knew that what had been said meant that war was on the horizon. Forty-eight hours later, Washington—rested, clad

again in buckskin and furs, and carrying food and liquor provided by his generous hosts—departed under shifting grey clouds to return across the Appalachians in the dead of winter.

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Washington barely survived the trip home. First, he was fortunate to escape harm when a brave who had fallen in with him and Gist somewhere between the Allegheny and the Ohio—near what the English traders disquietingly called Murthering Town—tried to kill him. The Indian, who was walking about fifteen paces ahead of the two Englishmen, abruptly wheeled about brandishing a single-shot handgun and fired. His shot missed. Thereafter, Washington and Gist disarmed the Indian and sent him on his way unharmed, or so Washington later claimed. Later, Washington might have drowned, or died from hypothermia, when he fell from his raft into the swirling Allegheny River, whose temperature, he later said, was “extream severe.” He was rescued by Gist, who got him ashore, built a fire, and tended his frostbitten extremities. Thereafter, the journey was largely uneventful, and it was speedier than the out-bound trek. Making about ten miles a day under the paltry winter sun, Washington came down out of the mountains only three weeks after leaving Fort Le Boeuf. A few days later he reached Williamsburg.²

When Washington was received by Dinwiddie, he made his report: the French denied Virginia’s claims to the Ohio Country. The governor wasted no time asking the assembly to raise an army, which in turn acted rapidly to create the Virginia Regiment. Washington was rewarded with the post of second in command, but soon was named commander of Virginia’s army when his superior died in an accident. Recruiting proceeded through the damp, chilly spring, and as Franklin and the other commissioners started their journeys to Albany, Lieutenant Colonel Washington, now all of twenty-two years old and wearing a blue and red uniform of his own design (it was the exact reverse of the redcoat uniform worn by British regulars), marched his men toward the area in dispute. His orders were to proceed to the forks of the Ohio River, where he was to build a fort. If the French had already arrived, he was to drive them away.

Late in May 1754, as Washington’s ragged, ill-trained force of fewer than 150 men advanced through the tangled Pennsylvania forests to within forty miles of the forks of the Ohio, intelligence arrived that a party of French soldiers had been spotted. Washington moved quickly to intercept them. Indian guides led him, with about forty men, deeper into the dark wilderness. After a few hours they found their prey. There were thirty-five French soldiers. Having only a slight numerical advantage, Washington decided on a surprise attack. With stealth, he moved forward, until his men encircled the adversary. At the right moment,

Washington screamed the order to open fire. A volley of shots poured down on the unsuspecting French. Some were hit. The others fought back, but the firefight was brief. Caught off guard, and without adequate cover, the overpowered French surrendered. Washington’s Indian allies then went to work, and the young Virginian was unable, or unwilling, to stop them. In all likelihood Washington, who never before had experienced combat, was “unmanned,” as the historian Fred Anderson has observed, possibly by the shocking carnage that he had just unleashed, including the realization that he had just killed, or mortally wounded, another man. Momentarily disoriented, or perhaps in a rush of blood lust, Washington stood aside while the Indians massacred several of the French, together with their commander, Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville. Ensign Jumonville was tomahawked and scalped, after which Half King, the leader of Washington’s Indian allies, scooped out the Frenchman’s still warm brain and squeezed it in his hands.³ What Washington did not know before he ordered the attack was that Jumonville was on a peaceful mission, not unlike that which had taken him to Fort Le Boeuf six months earlier.

Long before Washington opened fire on the French in that thick American forest, imperial authorities in London had recognized the gathering war clouds. Not only was trouble brewing in the Ohio Country, but evidence existed that France was considering an attempt to retake Nova Scotia, which it had lost to Great Britain forty years before. In August 1753, the Board of Trade directed all colonial governors to use force if necessary to resist French encroachments on their frontiers. A month later, it instructed the governors of New York to call an intercolonial conference. London had several things on its mind. It wished to restore friendship with the Indians of the Six Nations Confederacy, an alliance of tribes that inhabited the vast area stretching from the Hudson Valley deep into the western regions of the Ohio Country. It wanted the colonies to find a way to build a string of forts across the vulnerable frontier, and to act cooperatively in supplying the forces that were raised to deal with the French.⁴ Lieutenant Governor James De Lancey of New York quickly invited eight colonies to send delegates to Albany—he chose that site because of its proximity to the Iroquois homeland in what now is upstate New York—to treat with the Indians and to seek ways in which the provinces might cooperate against the French. Virginia, which had already been promised aid by London, declined, as did New Jersey, which was far from New France and had no land claims in the West. However, the six other provinces—the New England colonies, as well as Maryland and Pennsylvania—joined New York in sending delegations of varying

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Franklin had come to Albany to prepare for war. King George's War, Great Britain's third war with France since 1689, had ended six years earlier without a clear victor, and most leaders in London, as well as the colonies, feared that hostilities would soon resume. Once before, when the first Anglo-French war of the series, King William's War, had ended inconclusively, the fragile peace that followed lasted only four years. Besides, a new source of tension was apparent. Peace had hardly come in 1748 before Versailles sent a modest military detachment to what the English called the Ohio Country, a region bounded by the Mississippi River, the Great Lakes, the Ohio River, and the Appalachian Mountains. France, like Great Britain, claimed this area. It regarded the trans-Appalachian West to the Mississippi River—together with Canada—as part of New France, its colonial domain in North America. When it dispatched its white clad soldiery to the Ohio Country, France had acted to woo the Indian inhabitants and select sites for the eventual construction of fortifications. British officials, both in America and London, were immediately concerned. With crystal clarity, they saw that if the French won control of the Ohio Country, the English would be hemmed in between the Atlantic and the Appalachians, caught between New France to the north and west, and Spanish Florida to the south. Opportunities for colonists who aspired to own land would vanish, fortunes sunk in western land speculation would be lost, and the dream of a mighty and expansive British empire would die.

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Hutchinson, like Shirley, favored an American union, but not for the reasons that moved the governor or Franklin. His objective, as had been the case with many in Massachusetts during the past half century, was the utter destruction of New France. In 1691, in the first of the inter-colonial wars with France, waged two decades prior to Hutchinson's birth, Massachusetts had sent an armada of thirty-four vessels and 2,200 men to take Quebec. Its leadership had reckoned that only the expulsion of the French, who armed the Native Americans all along Massachusetts's extensive frontier, could bring true peace and security to the province. The attempt failed. Not only was the attack on Quebec repulsed, but only about half the colony's soldiery survived the campaign. Thereafter, Massachusetts understood that it could eliminate the French only with help both from the other colonies and Great Britain. Hutchinson came to Albany to fashion a union of provinces that would help secure Massachusetts's ends. He unveiled a plan that urged Parliament to form two confederations, one of the eight northern colonies, and a separate union consisting of the southern provinces. The two were to be created "for their Mutual Defence & Security & for extending the British Settlements Northward & Westward." In the event of war, the Southern union would cope with the overextended French in the Ohio Country, while the Northern union would invade New France.¹⁷

Benjamin Franklin arrived in Albany with a paper he had drafted during his brief stay in Manhattan en route to the conference. He titled it "Short Hints towards a Scheme for a General Union of the British on the Continent." Unlike Hutchinson, he proposed one union that would consist of all thirteen mainland colonies, and he recommended that it be created by the colonists, rather than by Parliament. The government of the American confederation was to include a chief executive, who was to be "a Military man" appointed by the Crown, and an elected assembly in which the number of representatives allotted each colony was to be determined by the size of its population. The powers of this national government would be limited to matters of Indian diplomacy and national defense, and would include "every thing that shall be found necessary for the defence and support of the Colonies in General, and encreasing and extending their settlements." Franklin closed with the recommendation that the Albany Congress adopt the plan, after which it would "be sent home" for the consideration of Parliament.¹⁸

The various plans introduced at Albany were not the first instances when American colonists had contemplated acting in concert or had considered the establishment of a political confederation. However, only the Puritan colonies in seventeenth-century New England had succeeded in

actually forming a federation of sorts, and in reality it was never more than a defensive league against regional Indian tribes. Outside New England, each province dealt unilaterally with nearby Native Americans, but when Britain's struggles with France and Spain began, plans of union and calls for a greater centralization of authority mushroomed. At least eleven plans of union are known to have been concocted after 1689, pouring forth from essayists, merchants, a founder of a colony, a governor, colonial officeholders—especially those whose responsibilities included Indian concerns—and imperial officials, including a member of the Board of Trade. The goal of military coordination lurked behind every plan, if in fact defense was not the sole reason for every proposed super-government. Most contemplated a national union, one that could set quotas for men and revenues in wartime, raise armies, and dispatch militia units from one colony to another, an act that was prohibited by the laws of most provinces.¹⁹

None of these plans came into being. Each colony had a long, unbroken history as a separate entity. Each had its own charter, institutions, history, statutes, and identity. Each was independent of the others, generally liked it that way, and hoped to remain unfettered by ties to anyone, save the mother country. The provincials saw dangers in each proposed scheme. The smaller colonies always chafed at the prospect of being underrepresented in a national congress dominated by the largest colonies. Men with influence in the provincial government feared losing their clout in a large confederation. Provincial taxpayers were loath to pay additional duties to still another government, especially to a central government over which they might exercise little leverage with regard to who was taxed and how the tax dollars were spent. Among a people who had fled Europe to escape tyranny, civil and religious, it was unnerving to consider the prospect of surrendering local autonomy and leaping into a strange new union, in which distant provinces, and faraway London, would exercise formidable power. Insularity prevailed. Each colony cried out for its security and sought to protect and further its vital interests, but few conceived a common bond with all, or even many, other British provinces in North America. Historically, they had looked across the Atlantic to the parent state, not across the borders to their neighboring American provinces. Indeed, the colonies often had strikingly different interests. Some traded with the Indians to a far greater degree than others. Some had extensive claims to western lands; others had none. Massachusetts at times wished to fight to secure fishing rights off Newfoundland, or coal deposits in Nova Scotia, or timberlands in Maine whose products were essential in its ship construction yards. Those were not burning issues in the Carolinas or Georgia, which were preoccupied

for the best. Form a union, Franklin said, extend greater sway to London than ever before, and “make as good a night of it as we can.”²⁴ Some deliberation also took place over the colonists’ freedom of trade with other imperial powers. Even the utilization of the Mississippi River, far, far to the west, crept into the discussion. Congress made additional changes, particularly with regard to the proposed sections concerning taxation, representation, and land policies. Nevertheless, the final product was sufficiently similar to Franklin’s original proposal that he might fairly be thought the father of the Albany Plan of Union.²⁵

3 → This plan urged that Parliament sanction a union of eleven mainland colonies. Georgia, founded only twenty years before and still in a primitive state, and tiny Delaware, which many yet thought of as part of Pennsylvania, as in fact it had been until recently, were excluded. The government was to include a President General appointed by the Crown and a Grand Council, the national legislature, which was to consist of forty-eight members elected for three-year terms by whomever each province designated as qualified voters. Representation and taxation were initially to be based on population. Massachusetts and Virginia, for instance, were each to have seven representatives, and New Hampshire and Rhode Island would have two apiece; the others were to fall somewhere in between. In time, however, the number of representatives allotted to each colony was to be made proportional to the amount of taxes paid. The Council was to meet annually in Philadelphia, but could be summoned to emergency meetings by the executive. It could elect its speaker and could be dissolved, or prorogued, by the executive.

The Albany Plan proposed that the President General, with the advice and consent of the assembly, could declare war and make peace, negotiate treaties, regulate trade, and arrange land transactions. The central government was authorized to equip vessels of war and raise armies, but it could only conscript men with the consent of the colonial assemblies. It could build forts, administer territorial expansion, and regulate new western settlements. The assembly could levy taxes that “to them shall appear most equal and just,” but in so doing it was not only to consider the citizenry’s ability to pay but also to focus as much as possible on luxury items. All legislative enactments required the assent of the executive and could be invalidated within three years by the Privy Council in London.²⁶ The Albany Plan was adopted unanimously and sent to London and to each colony for approval.

The plan did not fare well on either side of the Atlantic. The prime minister and his cabinet, or ministry, having learned of the fire at Jumonville’s Glen, had committed two regiments of British regulars to North America just ten days before the Albany Plan reached London.

This force was to clear the head of the Ohio of all enemy personnel. London also had ordered the colonies to raise up to 3,000 men to augment the redcoats, directed the colonial governors to make available supplies, transportation, and quarters for the soldiery, and commanded that the provinces establish a common defense fund for covering a part of the cost of this initiative. Word of the Albany Plan did not cause the imperial officials to reconsider their earlier steps. Many powerful figures, such as the Speaker of the House of Commons, fretted that “an Independency upon this country [is] to be feared from such an union” of the colonies. Although more the product of ruffled paranoia than cold reason, there were those who suspected that an American revolt to separate from the empire had long been in gestation, especially in New England, home to the descendants of the Puritans, and that a union of the colonies would only facilitate such treachery. Even with a cataclysmic war apparently under way in America’s dark, tangled interior, London superciliously concluded—as Franklin put it—that an American “Union might make the Colonies in some degree [as] formidable to the Mother Country . . . as to the Enemy.”²⁷

The Albany Plan foundered in America as well, smashed by the age-old fears that had wrecked so many previously proposed schemes of union. The Massachusetts assembly obsessed that Parliament would use the American government for “gaining power over the Colonies.” Governor Shirley had a different take. The legislators, he said, “don’t like the plan . . . which all of ’em conceive to infringe upon the Colony-liberties & privileges.” Rhode Island worried that it might ultimately destroy the existing colonial charters. Connecticut declared that to grant revenue-raising powers to a central government was “a very extraordinary thing, and against the rights and privileges of Englishmen.” Likewise, Pennsylvania’s assembly, acting on a day when Franklin was not in attendance, rejected the proposed union. Powerful men in Virginia, fearful that a national congress dominated by populous northern colonies might scuttle their province’s title to western lands, blocked the House of Burgesses from even considering the proposed union. Although in a couple of instances one house of an assembly endorsed the proposal, not a single colony approved the Albany Plan of Union.²⁸

Although the push for an American union with central authority over colonial affairs had been a chimerical quest, Great Britain sought to win the French and Indian War—as the conflict that was officially declared two years after the Albany Congress often has been called—through centralized direction. Imperial officials were always in charge. General Edward Braddock, who led the regiments sent across the Atlantic soon after the meeting in Albany, was initially in overall command

and in charge of the common defense fund. Following Braddock's death in battle on the Monongahela in July 1755, Governor Shirley was named the commander-in-chief of Anglo-American operations. Military figures ultimately succeeded him, beginning with John Campbell, the fourth earl of Loudoun, who took charge late in 1756. Loudoun sought to bring order and efficiency into the colonists' war effort. To remedy a chaotic logistical situation, he hired crews and set them to work widening roads, improving portages, and constructing way stations, and he even standardized the size of bateaux and scows used in supplying the Anglo-American armies. Loudoun was outraged to find that merchants in many colonies were trading with the enemy and that corrupt, or inept, royal governors often did nothing to stop them. Nor did Loudoun shrink from using his powers to attempt to stamp out the illicit commerce. In fact, in short order Loudoun reached the identical conclusion that Franklin and Hutchinson, and others at Albany, had mooted following King George's War. The provincials, Loudoun came to believe, were so divided by their multitudinous selfish interests that they were incapable of waging an intercolonial war with any degree of efficiency. By 1757 he had marched step-by-step in the same direction that the Albany Congress had longed to go: toward greater centralized control of the war effort.²⁹

Loudoun's cranky dislike of the Americans hardened into contempt as the British and their colonists suffered a nearly unbroken chain of disasters in the first years of hostilities. Braddock's force was decimated in an encounter on the Monongahela River, near the Forks of the Ohio, in July 1755. The following year Colonel Washington's Virginia Regiment, which no longer received any assistance from its neighbors, lost one-third of its men in the ghastly frontier fighting. Indeed, by the end of 1756 Washington, flailed with agitation, acknowledged the loss of the Shenandoah Valley. That was the story throughout America. Georgia's lieutenant governor reported that the "frontier, instead of being covered by Forts, is entirely destitute of any, at least, that are not in ruins." According to a Philadelphia newspaper, "nothing but Murdering and Captivating . . . by Indians" prevailed on the Pennsylvania frontier. A royal official in Rhode Island, with lancing invective, attributed the colonists' dire predicament to their excessive individualism. In America, he said, "all seek their own, every Man his private Gain, pursuing a distinct and separate Interest from that of his Majesty and the public." No one understood this better than young Colonel Washington. Lamenting the lack of cooperation, he predicted that "without a much greater number of Men than we have a visible prospect of getting," conditions inevitably would "assume a more melancholy appearance."³⁰

But steadily larger numbers of men arrived from Great Britain in 1758 and thereafter. They crossed the Atlantic, sent by a new prime minister, William Pitt, who understood that conditions had to be changed. Pitt secured new allies in Europe, whose armies took on the fight against the French on the continent. This enabled him to send 20,000 British regulars across the Atlantic, more than ten times the number that Braddock had brought, to fight in the American theater. He asked the colonies to raise nearly an equal number of men, and established manpower quotas for each colony. He also promised to reimburse each province at war's end for supplying and paying its soldiers. In 1758 Massachusetts raised an army of 7,200 men, Connecticut put 5,000 under arms, and tiny Rhode Island and New Hampshire each fielded armies of 300 men. Altogether, the Northern colonies alone raised 16,300 men that year, a total that nearly exceeded the number raised by these colonies in the two previous years combined. Overall strategy was planned in London, and troop allocation decisions were generally made in Whitehall, the seat of the ministry, as well.³¹

Pitt never set out to unify the colonies, and the provinces did not fight in 1758 or thereafter, in a unified manner. However, joint Anglo-American operations, a rare occurrence in the earlier wars, became commonplace. In the crucial struggles between 1758 and 1760, several Northern provinces contributed men who served alongside British regulars at the front in New York and New France, while many Southern provinces sent troops to campaign with His Majesty's regiments in the battle for the Ohio Country. In the climactic campaigns for New France, up to half the soldiery consisted of colonials, and even more when it is remembered that thousands of militiamen were simultaneously summoned to duty to guard the frontier nearer the home front. Pitt's central leadership resulted in a greater coordination and cohesion of the colonial war effort, not least in acting on his conviction that victory hinged on "carrying War into the Heart of the Enemy's Possessions." Principally, this meant that Quebec must be the primary objective in securing victory. It was an axiom that generations of New England's leaders had carried to London, which Hutchinson had conveyed at Albany, and which one ministry after another had largely ignored.³² But when Quebec fell in 1759, New France was doomed.

News of the capture of Quebec triggered a jubilee in the northern provinces. Philadelphians put candles in their windows, and New Yorkers built a great bonfire. Bostonians outdid both. After three-quarters of a century of failed attempts to take the capital of New France, Boston's militia paraded and fired artillery, churches throughout the city rang