

Confederal Union and Empire: Placing the Albany Plan (1754) in Imperial Context

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Abstract Why did British politicians on both sides of the Atlantic propose a confederal rather than incorporating union in 1754? This question has been difficult to answer because most scholars have focused on the Albany Plan of Union outside of its imperial context, seeing in the plan either evidence of nascent American nationalism, a point of divergence between American and British conceptions of empire, or a missed moment to establish parliamentary supremacy over America. I show instead that the British and American plans for confederal union in 1754 formed part of an intensely partisan and pan-imperial debate about the nature of the British imperial constitution. The failure to adopt a confederal imperial constitution in 1754 had more to do with the contingency of the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War than with diverging British and American visions of empire or nascent American nationalism.

In 1754 British imperial politicians on both sides of the Atlantic drew up remarkably sophisticated plans for confederal union. After much discussion and debate within the Board of Trade and among ministerial circles, George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax, circulated his “Draft of a Plan or Project for a General Concert.”¹ Less than a month earlier, Benjamin Franklin had played a key role in drafting the different, but remarkably similar, Albany Plan of Union. When Franklin reflected on the plan over the course of his long and eventful life, he often compared the place of the American colonies within the empire to that of Scotland. Without a union, he remarked, the colonies were “so many separate states, only subject to the same king, as England and Scotland were before the Union.” He was “fully persuaded” that union was “best for the whole” and “that though particular parts might find particular disadvantages in it, they would find greater advantages in the security arising to every part from the increased strength of the whole.”² But Franklin was insistent that the union he imagined could not

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¹ George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax, “The draft of a plan or project for a general concert to be entered into by His Majesty’s several colonies upon the Continent of North America, [August 1754],” unpublished manuscript, Add. MS 32736, fols. 247–52, British Library, London. (This repository is hereafter abbreviated as BL.)

² Benjamin Franklin (London) to William Franklin, 13 March 1768, The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, <https://franklinpapers.org> (hereafter FP). Franklin returned to this theme repeatedly; see Benjamin Franklin, marginalia in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Present Disputes* (1769), [1770], FP;

be one in which England dominated. “It has long appeared to me,” he later reflected, “that the only true British politics were those which aimed at the good of the whole British Empire, not those which sought the advantage of any one part in the disadvantage of the others.”³ Why did British politicians on both sides of the Atlantic propose in 1754 a confederal union with dispersed sovereignty rather than an incorporating union, in which sovereignty would be centralized under a single imperial Parliament? Why did they share the view with many in England and Scotland in the early eighteenth century that the configuration of several states under a single sovereign was politically insufficient, while rejecting the early eighteenth-century commitment to incorporating union, as in the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707?

Unfortunately, the rich and well-researched scholarship on the union moment of 1754 does not provide satisfactory answers to these questions, almost universally ignoring the earlier robust and partisan debates about confederation.⁴ This is, in part, because many have been distracted by the eventuality of American Independence. One group of scholars emphasizes only the Albany Plan of Union, seeing in it the origins of American national and independent sentiment. A second group, the so-called Imperial School historians, instead emphasizes the 1754 moment as a missed opportunity to create a lasting British empire based on parliamentary supremacy. A third and more recent group highlight the moment as a time of divergence between an American confederal vision of empire and a British hierarchical one.

The first group of scholars, the nationalists, has insisted that the imperial discussions of 1754 mark the dawning of American yearning for national independence in the face of an increasing British commitment to hierarchical empire. George Bancroft, who based his scholarship on deep archival research, as did his near-contemporaries Thomas Babington Macaulay and Leopold Van Ranke, highlighted the exclusively American origins of the confederal ideas “breathed into . . . enduring life”⁵ by Benjamin Franklin at the Albany Congress of 1754. That congress accepted and adapted Franklin’s plan to create “a constitution for a perpetual confederacy of the continent.”⁶ The result was the beginning of the conflict that would lead to the American Revolution. “While the people of America were thus becoming familiar with the thought of joining from their own free choice in one confederacy,” Bancroft writes of the early 1750s, “the government of England took a decisive step towards that concentration of power over its remote dominions, which for thirty years had been the avowed object of attainment on the part of the Board of

Benjamin Franklin, marginalia in [Allan Ramsey], *Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Government* (1769), FP; Benjamin Franklin, “Tract Relative to the Affair of Hutchinson’s Letters, [1774],” unpublished manuscript, FP; Franklin (London) to Samuel Cooper, 8 June 1770, FP.

³ Benjamin Franklin, “Tract Relative to the Affair of Hutchinson’s Letters, [1774],” FP.

⁴ The honorable exception is Alison L. Lacroix, *The Ideological Origins of American Federalism* (Cambridge, 2010), 18–20, 24–29.

⁵ George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*, vol. 4, 15 ed. (Boston, 1853), 92, 121–22, 125–26, at 125. Significantly, Bancroft believed that Halifax, Cumberland, Townshend, and William Shirley shared the same vision for hierarchical empire. This view was echoed in Robert C. Newbold, *The Albany Congress and Plan of Union of 1754* (New York, 1955), 173, 183.

⁶ Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 4:122.

Trade.”⁷ The Albany plan was therefore, unsurprisingly, summarily rejected by the British government because “reflecting men in England dreaded American union as the keystone to independence.”⁸

The Imperial School argues that, far from being the moment of British and American divergence, the 1754 episode represented a missed opportunity to create a lasting and mutually satisfactory British empire. The plan proposed at Albany, in Lawrence Henry Gipson’s view, was a fusion of Benjamin Franklin’s ideas with those of the future loyalist Thomas Hutchinson. That plan, had it been “carried into execution,” Gipson opines, “would have doubtless served as an effective agency for grappling successfully with many of the most serious problems that soon faced the colonies in their relations both with the French and the Indians in the course of the Seven Years’ War and with the mother country at its termination.”⁹ 1754, unlike 1775, in Gipson’s view, marked a moment in which “the consensus of opinion of the most representative, and, all in all, the most capable and politically experienced body of colonials from a majority of the thirteen colonies” accepted that “parliament possessed the authority to alter the basic constitutional arrangements within the Empire.”¹⁰ The plan failed, then, not because of British opposition but rather because of “the intense particularism of most British colonials.”¹¹ Narrow-minded localist popular sentiment in 1754 prevented the implementation of union based on parliamentary sovereignty that was accepted by the well-informed political elite on both sides of the Atlantic. Andrew Beaumont’s recent careful study of the Board of Trade under the Earl of Halifax’s leadership provides support for Gipson’s view. Beaumont highlights the similarities between “the Albany plan and its London counterpart,”¹² arguing that both had their origins in the thinking of the earl of Halifax. “It is clear,” Beaumont writes, that the elements of the supposedly spontaneous idea of union devised at Albany were drawn up in advance in London.”¹³ That plan, Halifax’s plan, was “to establish an entirely new pan-colonial administrative infrastructure, based upon centralized governance under the leadership of a supra-colonial viceroy.”¹⁴

The third group of scholars maintains that the 1754 moment indeed marked a divergence between American colonials and British imperialists. But, they insist, that division did not pit Americans determined on achieving independence against Britons committed to empire; rather, it reflected competing visions of empire on either side of the Atlantic. Timothy Shannon provides the most complete elaboration of this position, insisting that the Albany Congress “belongs within a larger narrative about eighteenth-century Britain’s imperial expansion and its ramifications for the inhabitants of North America.” The Albany plan, he suggests, needs to be

⁷ Bancroft, 4:92.

⁸ Bancroft, 4:126.

⁹ Lawrence Henry Gipson, *Zones of International Friction: The Great Lakes Frontier, Canada, the West Indies, India, 1748–1754*, vol. 5 of *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, (New York, 1936–1970), 138, 123–24, 131–33, 144, 166.

¹⁰ Gipson, *Zones of International Friction*, 132.

¹¹ Gipson, 144.

¹² Andrew D. M. Beaumont, *Colonial America and the Earl of Halifax, 1748–1761* (Oxford, 2015), 139–49, at 140.

¹³ Beaumont, *Colonial America and the Earl of Halifax*, 148–49.

¹⁴ Beaumont, 147.

removed from the “context of state-making and placed “anew within the context of British empire building.”¹⁵ The significance of the 1754 moment was that it “marked a divergence in metropolitan and provincial attitudes about the nature of empire,” Shannon remarks. “In promoting the cause of colonial union, [Benjamin] Franklin claimed membership for his fellow colonists in a British national people that potentially knew no territorial borders; he assigned an equality of subjecthood to all Britons, regardless of which side of the Atlantic they inhabited, but also excluded from this national empire the non-British racial and cultural groups of North America.” British colonial administrators, by contrast, “defined empire in terms of conquered territories and foreign peoples fundamentally different from and inferior to the British.” Unsurprisingly, then, “the ministry rejected the Albany Plan” because they were determined “to centralize imperial administration, strengthen the royal prerogative in America, and reduce all of Britannia’s Americans—colonists and Indians alike—to a uniform dependence.”¹⁶ Scholar after scholar has echoed this view, asserting that the American plan for confederation, whatever its reception in the colonial assemblies, had no hope of success. In Gordon Wood’s view, “[M]any British officials continued to worry, as they had for decades, that the colonies were becoming too rich and strong to be governed any longer from London. Bringing the colonies together in any way seemed to make such a possibility more likely.”¹⁷ Many recent scholars conclude, then, that in 1754 there was no incipient American independence movement but that provincials and metropolitans increasingly differed on the proper nature of a British empire.

Against these views, I suggest taking seriously the insistence of contemporaries that imperial reform was a real possibility in the 1750s. The choice was not between centralized incorporation of the American colonies or independence. In fact, there was a deeply trans-imperial partisan divide over the possibility of confederal empire. Critics of the American nationalist narrative are correct to insist that at stake in the 1750s was not a choice between proto-independence and empire, but they are wrong to assert that there was a British ministerial consensus for hierarchical empire. There were transatlantic proponents of both hierarchical incorporation and confederal empire. Politicians and administrators on both sides of the Atlantic appreciated that French encroachments across the globe had created an urgent imperial crisis. This crisis meant that the Whig Old Guard method of governing the empire by commercial regulation would no longer do. Some thought the only solution was to mimic what they understood to be the roots of French success and create a more hierarchical and centralized empire with a single controlling legislature. Others argued that Britain should pursue the option eschewed in 1707 in the

¹⁵ Timothy J. Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca, 2000), 10–11; see also 88, 207. Shannon insists that “a single thread” ran through all British proposals for imperial reform, settling “definitively the nature of colonial dependence and imperial authority in its empire.” Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire*, 55. Alison Olson advanced a similar claim four decades earlier: Alison Olson, “The British Government and Colonial Union, 1754,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1960): 22–34, at 23.

¹⁶ Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire*, 13.

¹⁷ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004), 76–77. See also Fred Anderson, *The Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America* (New York, 2000), 85; Daniel Baugh, *The Global Seven Years War, 1754–1763* (London, 2011), 79; Lacroix, *Origins of American Federalism*, 24.

Anglo-Scottish Union and plump for a confederal empire. While scholars have been right to highlight differences among the various proposals for confederation on offer, the advocates of confederation in 1754 shared far more with each other than they did with the authoritarian Whigs in both London and the American colonies. Empire-building, as mid-Hanoverian Britons knew, generated profound partisan divisions. Those divisions were so deep and so bitter precisely because empire building and state formation were two names for a single process.¹⁸

IMPERIAL CRISIS AND CONFEDERAL SOLUTION

Britons in the 1750s faced an imperial crisis. Many believed in the late 1740s and early 1750s that France was on the brink of achieving global hegemony. Britons reacted, as they had done in the first decade of the century, with new and creative institutional responses. While the British government followed the advice of Robert Harley in 1707 and created an incorporating union between England and Scotland, Britons in the 1740s and 1750s explored confederal alternatives.

Transatlantic commentators asserted with increasing urgency that the French were poised on the brink of achieving global hegemony. Increasingly dense networks of journalists, merchants, and imperial administrators reported on and commented about the threat. By early 1754, North Americans were aware of the global danger posed by the French. “France has hitherto, by the means of Great Britain chiefly, been prevented from enslaving the world and mankind,” asserted Archibald Kennedy, the New York collector of customs, friend of Benjamin Franklin, and father of a Scottish peer. Their “late encroachments upon His Majesty’s rights and territories, in the East and West Indies, in Africa, and in Hudson’s Bay” were “so well known” in North America by 1754 that they were hardly worth a “mention.” The conquest of North America was just part of “the grand monarch’s universal system.”¹⁹ Robert Dinwiddie, the lieutenant governor of Virginia, had long worried about French encroachments in the Caribbean and elsewhere. By early 1754, he was convinced that the French were successfully severing vital British alliances with the Six Nations and other Indigenous peoples and were surrounding the British plantations. “If the French are allowed a peaceable settlement on the Ohio,” he warned, “I think the consequence will be attended with the ruin of our trade with the Indians and also in time will be the destruction to all our settlements on the continent.”²⁰ William Shirley, having just returned to North America after serving as one of the commissaries in the fruitless Anglo-French negotiations in Paris, agreed both in the central importance of Indian alliance and the gravity of the French threat. “The French,” Shirley told the Council and House of Representatives of Massachusetts

¹⁸ I take inspiration from Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 2010), 8–11; Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 2008), 12.

¹⁹ Archibald Kennedy, *Serious considerations on the state of the affairs of the northern colonies* (New York, 1754), 3, 5.

²⁰ Robert Dinwiddie (London) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, August 1743, in *Robert Dinwiddie Correspondence*, ed. Louis Knott Koontz (Berkeley, 1951), 59–60; Dinwiddie (London) to Board of Trade, August 1751, in Koontz, *Dinwiddie Correspondence*, 104; Dinwiddie (Williamsburg) to James Hamilton, 22 May 1753, in Koontz, *Dinwiddie Correspondence*, 270.

Bay in a widely publicized speech, “seem to have advanced further towards making themselves masters of this continent within these last five or six years, than they have done ever since their first beginning of their settlements upon it.”²¹ The ultimate French aim, concluded the commissioners at the Albany Congress itself, was to gain “an Universal Monarchy” by conquering North America and engrossing its “whole trade.”²²

Metropolitan Britons were no less agitated by French encroachments and rapid French commercial development. “The French have long been aspiring to universal monarchy,” John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, matter-of-factly asserted in the House of Lords.²³ The basis of French power, “Britannicus” claimed in the *London Evening Post*, was their flourishing empire. “The time when the French with great foresight and policy obtained their large possession in America is the epoch from which may be traced, by the most regular advances their degrees of growth,” this essayist maintained, “to their arrival at their present height of power and wealth; a state which is now so formidable and threatening to almost all the principal powers of Europe!”²⁴ Malachy Postlethwayt, an oft-republished and widely quoted political economist and Patriot Party member, insisted, “Numbers of men of the best sense in the kingdom, nay in Europe” now were certain that France sought “universal empire.”²⁵ “The French are encroaching extremely upon us in all the distant parts of the world,” agreed Horace Walpole, the son of Robert Walpole.²⁶

Commentators on both sides of the Atlantic increasingly demanded structural reorganization of the British Empire in the face of the increasingly ominous threat posed by France. But unlike in 1707 when English politicians quickly coalesced behind the notion of an incorporating union in which sovereignty was located in a single imperial Parliament, confederal notions that imagined sovereignty being dispersed across a number of locations and institutions were discussed far more widely in public discourse and among political actors.

By mid-century, the incorporating Anglo-Scottish union of 1707 was increasingly seen as only one possible response to the recurring French threat. Mid-Hanoverian Britons were reminded again and again in pamphlets, learned treatises, newspapers, and magazines of the possibilities and advantages of a confederal rather than incorporating union.²⁷ In the run-up to the union of 1707, mid-Hanoverian readers would have known well from reading a recent edition of Gilbert Burnet’s *History*

²¹ “William Shirley’s Speech to the Council and House of Representatives of Massachusetts Bay, 2 April 1754,” in *Correspondence of William Shirley, Governor of Massachusetts and Military Commander in America, 1731–1760*, ed. Charles Henry Lincoln, 2 vols. (New York, 1912), 2:46; *Boston Gazette*, 30 April 1754. In his speech, Shirley highlighted the threat to Nova Scotia.

²² Albany Congress, Representation of the Present State of the Colonies, 9 July 1754, FP.

²³ John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, 27 April 1744, in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (London, 1806–1820), 13:793.

²⁴ “Copy of a Letter from a Gentleman in the Country to a Merchant in London,” *London Evening Post*, 14 September 1754.

²⁵ Malachy Postlethwayt, *The universal dictionary of trade and commerce* [. . .], 2 vols. (London, 1751–1755), 1:444.

²⁶ Horace Walpole (Strawberry Hill) to Horace Mann, 5 July 1754, in *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 48 vols. (New Haven, 1937–38), 20:440.

²⁷ For debates about confederal versus incorporating union prior to 1707, see John Robertson, “Empire and Union: Two Concepts of the Early Modern European Political Order,” in *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge, 1995), 3–36 at 5–6, 22–31.

of *His Own Time* that “the Scots had got among them the notion of a federal union, like that of the United Provinces, or of the cantons of Switzerland.” Many Scots imagined a union in which sovereignty would be dispersed rather than concentrated. But, as it turned out, the English negotiators had already “resolved to lose no time in the examining or discussing of that project.” Instead, the Anglo-Scottish negotiations took place on the narrow ground of the terms of an incorporating union.²⁸

Mid-Hanoverian readers also understood that Jacobites in particular had immediately turned against the incorporating union. “Three parts of four of the nation were against it,” the Jacobite Colin Lindsay, 3rd Earl of Balcarres, recalled of the union in a tract reprinted in 1754. By the union’s terms, Balcarres lamented, “the Parliament of Scotland is gone and extinguished and the representation of Scotland in the Parliament of Britain is, in the House of Commons, but one single more than the County of Cornwall sends alone.” In the Lords, the Scots were allowed only sixteen peers, whose right to sit there was no longer hereditary. The Scots, Balcarres complained, were “mistaken” to believe that the union would promote such an “increase of trade” that they “would soon become rich.”²⁹ James VIII declared in 1743 that Scotland was “reduced to the condition of a province, under the specious pretense of an Union with a more powerful neighbor.” The result was not an economic boom but “poverty and decay of trade” and “unprecedented taxes.”³⁰ By the union, agreed the Jacobite-influenced philosophe Voltaire, Scotland became “a province of England.”³¹

By the 1750s, however, a far broader range of Britons expressed skepticism about the benefits of incorporation and waxed enthusiastic about confederal union. In Scotland, we now know, Patriot Whigs were increasingly skeptical about the virtues of the incorporating union of 1707.³² Daniel Defoe, who had been one of the most prominent defenders of incorporating union in 1705–1707, came to believe that its economic benefits to Scotland were limited. In his widely read *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Defoe, who had played a central role in promoting the incorporating union of 1707, argued that Scotland would be far more prosperous “if those engagements were fulfilled which were promised to [the Scots] before the union.” Although Glasgow, it was true, benefited tremendously from access to the American tobacco trade, the incorporating union of 1707 provided much more benefit to the Glaswegians “than to any other part of the kingdom.” “The Union,” Defoe concluded, “has opened the door to all the English manufactures and suppressed many of the Scots; has prohibited their wool from going abroad, and yet scarcely

²⁸ Gilbert Burnet, *Bishop Burnet’s history of his own time*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh, 1753), 299–300; MacInnes, *Union and Empire*, 277–83.

²⁹ Colin Lindsay, Earl of Balcarres, *An account of the affairs of Scotland, relating to the Revolution of 1688* [. . .], 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1754), 114–16; Burnet, *History of his own time*, 319. Burnet commented on Jacobite rhetoric.

³⁰ Andrew Henderson, *The history of the rebellion*, 1745 and 1746 [. . .], 5th ed. (London, 1753), 53–54; “Declaration of James VIII, 23 December 1743,” in *A collection of declarations, proclamations, and other valuable papers* (Edinburgh, 1749), 2–6.

³¹ Voltaire, *The age of Lewis XIV*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (London, 1753), 1:303–4.

³² Amy Watson, “Patriotism and Partisanship in Post-Union Scotland, 1724–1737,” *Scottish Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (2018): 57–84.

takes it off at home.”³³ Defoe’s turn against incorporating union was dramatic. For many, even many Whigs, the economic benefits from the incorporating union of 1707 had proved equivocal at best.

In fact, Britons across the empire continued to discuss the potential benefits of confederal unions. In the aftermath of the War of the Spanish Succession, the well regarded and widely cited Frenchman Charles-Irenee Castel, Abbé de Saint-Pierre, waxed enthusiastic about the possibilities of confederation. He called for a European “union and perpetual Congress” modeled on the Dutch Republic or Swiss Confederation.³⁴ Joseph Addison, the Whig secretary of state and influential journalist, “considered with a great deal of pleasure” the remarkable success of the Swiss confederation: “It is very wonderful to see such a knot of governments, which are so divided among themselves in matters of religion, maintain so uninterrupted an union and correspondence, that no one of them is invading the rights of another, but remain content within the bounds of its first establishment.”³⁵ Others, including the sons of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, pointed to the success of the Amphycyonic League and the Boeotian Confederacy, which reminded one mid-Hanoverian classicist of the Dutch “states-general.”³⁶ Cadwallader Colden, New York polymath and politician and a graduate of the Royal School and Edinburgh University, pointed to another contemporary successful confederation, that of the Iroquois. “The Five Nations (as their name denotes) consist of so many tribes or nations, joined together by a league or confederacy like the United Provinces [of the Netherlands], and without any superiority of the one over the other,” Colden observed. That confederation was so successful, he maintained, that it had “continued so long, that the Christians know nothing of the original of it.”³⁷ Benjamin Franklin, who was well informed about the effects of the incorporating union of 1707, similarly praised the strength of the Iroquois confederation which “has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble.”³⁸

³³ On Defoe’s passionate defense of incorporating union, 1705–1707, see Alan I. MacInnes, *Union and Empire: The Making of the United Kingdom in 1707* (Cambridge, 2009), 235–38; Daniel Defoe, *A tour through the whole island of Great Britain* [. . .], 4 vols., 5th ed. (London, 1753), 4:43, 124–25, 164.

³⁴ As quoted in Steven Pincus, *The Heart of the Declaration: The Founders’ Case for an Activist Government* (New Haven, 2016), 141.

³⁵ Joseph Addison, *Remarks on the several parts of Italy* [. . .] (London, 1753), 283–84.

³⁶ William Smith, trans, *The History of the Peloponnesian War; translated from the Greek of Thucydides*, 2 vols. (London, 1753), 1:124–25; [Philip Yorke et al.], *Athenian Letters, or, the epistolary correspondence of an agent of the King of Persia* [. . .], 4 vols. (London, 1741–1743), 3:92.

³⁷ Cadwallader Colden, *The history of the Five Nations of Canada* [. . .], 2 vols., 3rd ed. (London, 1755). 1:1. This tract was serialized in the British press; see *Leeds Intelligencer*, 27 August 1754. It was also widely praised; for example, see [Ellis Huske], *The Present State of North America, &c. part 1* (London, 1755), 26.

³⁸ Benjamin Franklin (Philadelphia) to James Parker, 20 March 1751, FP. Franklin’s comment has provoked a robust debate about the possible Iroquois origins of the American federation. See Bruce E. Johansen, *Forgotten Founders: How the American Indian Helped Shape Democracy* (Ipswich, 1982), xii. On the controversy generated by Johansen’s thesis, see, “The ‘Iroquois Influence’ Thesis—Con and Pro,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (1996): 587–636; Erik M. Jensen, “The Harvard Law Review and the Iroquois Influence Thesis,” *British Journal of American Legal Studies* 6, no. 225 (2017): 228–40; Elisabeth Tooker, “The United States Constitution and the Iroquois League,” *Ethnohistory* 35, no. 4 (1988): 305–36; Shannon, *Indians and Colonists*, 8. The Iroquois Confederation was one of many positive examples of confederation cited and discussed by Britons in the mid-eighteenth century.

On both sides of the Atlantic, many Britons responded to the increasingly menacing French threat with calls for confederal union with dispersed sovereignty. Benjamin Franklin's "Join or Die" print in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on 9 May 1754 was only the most famous instantiation of a broad pan-imperial sentiment.³⁹ In 1753 the Glaswegian-born Robert Dinwiddie thought it "absolutely necessary for all the colonies to join together in raising a proper force to prevent the French settling on the lands of the Ohio."⁴⁰ That summer the American-born deputy governor of Pennsylvania, James Hamilton, called for "the ministry at home" to "fall on some expedient to compel" "all the colonies to act in a conjunct body in Indian affairs."⁴¹ On this point, if on little else, James Glen, the governor of South Carolina, agreed with Robert Dinwiddie. "The English colonies on the continent," Glen opined, were "as a rope of sand, loose and inconnected." He called for "an union or association" modeled on "the seven united provinces" of the Netherlands.⁴² William Shirley explained to the Council and House of Representatives of Massachusetts that only "one general league of friendship, comprising all His Majesty's colonies" could convince the Six Nations to renew the covenant chain. "Such an Union of Councils, besides the happy effect it will probably have upon the Indians of the Six Nations," Shirley continued, "may lay a foundation for a general one among all His Majesty's colonies, for the mutual support and defense against the present dangerous enterprises of the French on every side of them."⁴³ The veteran Whig politician Horatio Walpole argued for "a plan of union" that "might be formed between the Royal, Proprietary, and Charter governments under the protection and with the approbation of the Crown of Great Britain for their mutual security and protection." Walpole added that "such a plan, even if these dangerous encroachments of the French should be disappointed without hostilities, should be taken soon under consideration."⁴⁴

Ironically, the argument for a confederal union to combat the French may have received an intellectual fillip from the Frenchman Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu. Montesquieu, whose *Spirit of the Laws* went through several editions in Britain in the 1750s, argued that a "confederate republic" could simultaneously provide "for the security of the whole united body" while still

³⁹ On the print and its local interpretations in North America, see Shannon, *Indians and Colonists*, 83–87.

⁴⁰ Robert Dinwiddie (Williamsburg) to James Hamilton, 22 May 1753, in Koontz, *Dinwiddie Correspondence*, 271–72; Dinwiddie (Williamsburg) to James Hamilton, 24 November 1753, in Koontz, *Dinwiddie Correspondence*, 407.

⁴¹ James Hamilton (Philadelphia) to Robert Dinwiddie, 2 August 1753, in Koontz, *Dinwiddie Correspondence*, 321.

⁴² James Glen (South Carolina) to Robert Dinwiddie, 14 March 1754, in Koontz, *Dinwiddie Correspondence*, 481. The Dutch confederation in which "every province is a distinct sovereignty, only united for the common interest," was a frequent touchstone for British Americans in this period; see Ezra Stiles (Newport) to James Hillhouse, 15 November 1755, MS Vault Stiles, correspondence box 2, folder 188, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

⁴³ "William Shirley's Speech to the Council and House of Representatives of Massachusetts Bay, 2 April 1754," in Lincoln, *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 2:42–44.

⁴⁴ Horatio Walpole (Wolterton) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 22 June 1754, Add. MS 32735, fols. 540–41, BL.

preserving liberty and “avoiding internal corruption.” He pointed to the successful examples of Greek confederations, the Dutch United Provinces, and the Swiss cantons.⁴⁵

Just as French aggression in the first decade of the eighteenth century prompted Britons to rethink constitutional arrangements, so French encroachments in the wake of the War of the Austrian Succession prompted constitutional reflection. Far from uniting behind coercive measures and unified parliamentary sovereignty over the empire, a wide variety of Britons imagined a very different kind of empire. By the mid-eighteenth century, unlike at its outset, many were willing to take seriously the possibility of confederation. Indeed, Britons discussed an amazingly wide range of confederations past and present that could serve as models. Those who were most willing to contemplate a confederal empire with dispersed sovereignty, as opposed to a unified empire tightly controlled from Westminster, tended to identify with the transatlantic Patriot Party. Whig Patriots on both sides of the Atlantic contemplated confederation with dispersed sovereignty not as a prelude to independence but as a possible long-term and lasting solution for the empire. Confederation, they hoped, would balance localist priorities with the urgency of colonial defense and the long-term aims of imperial prosperity.

TRANSATLANTIC PARTISANSHIP

Not everyone in mid-Hanoverian Britain thought confederation was a good idea. Indeed, politics in the period were particularly partisan. At the heart of these divisions were debates about how to govern the empire. A particularly intense division emerged precisely over the proper constitutional arrangements necessary to respond to the growing French threat.

Henry Pelham, Britain’s chief minister from 1743 to 1754, sought to govern Britain by avoiding partisan divisions in Parliament and popular debate out of doors. But this does not mean that there was ideological consensus in Britain, a tendency toward moderate politics, or a single unified imperial policy: far from it. Henry Pelham and his brother Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, were anxious to avoid public contention because they knew well that discontent and ideological division were omnipresent in Britain at this time.

Indeed, many commentators held the view that partisan divisions had become intrinsic to British politics, at least since the Revolution of 1688, if not before. “Were the British government proposed as a subject of speculation to a studious man,” wrote David Hume, “he would immediately perceive in it a source of division and party, which it would be almost impossible for it, under any administration, to avoid.”⁴⁶ “As to the unanimity of the people,” Thomas Hay, Viscount Dupplin, a supporter of the Pelhams and member of the Board of Trade, informed the House

⁴⁵ Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The spirit of Laws*, 2 vols. (London, 1750), 1:183–84. For the importance of Montesquieu’s thinking on confederations in America, see David Golove, “The New Confederationism,” *Stanford Law Review* 55, no. 5 (2003): 1697–748, at 1705–6. While Vaillant mostly specialized in printing drama, Nourse in England and Faulkner in Ireland were known for printing Patriot tracts.

⁴⁶ David Hume, *Essays and treatises on several subjects* [. . .], 4 vols., 4th ed. (London, 1753), 1:90.

of Lords, “I believe it can never be expected, whilst we preserve our liberties: in free countries there will always be parties and divisions.”⁴⁷

Whatever the cause, by late 1753 no one could doubt that “the influence of party is strong.” “There is a sort of magic in party,” noted an essayist in the leading London-based opposition newspaper, the *Evening Post*, implying that the majority of the nation had been bewitched by partisanship.⁴⁸ “Our good nature was necessarily soured by the spirit of party,” agreed another journalist.⁴⁹ “The spirit of party prevails so universally,” wrote a contributor to an essay paper about village life in the 1750s, “that the very children are instructed to lisp out the names of the favorite chiefs of each faction . . . Every petty village abounds with the most profound statesmen . . . [that] it is common to see our rustic politicians assembling after sermon, and settling the good of their country across a tomb-stone.”⁵⁰ “In our degenerate time / When most deem poetry the knack of rhyme,” one wag mused, the greatest crime was that “party interests govern works of wit.”⁵¹

Partisanship was a fact of life across the empire. In Ireland, struggles between Lord Lieutenant Lionel Sackville, 1st Duke of Dorset, and Henry Boyle, speaker of the Irish House of Commons, was widely seen as a battle between Patriots and their establishment Whig opponents. “The present political contest in Ireland has almost set that whole kingdom in a flame,” noted one observer.⁵² Another claimed that “no less than 300 Patriot Clubs” celebrated Henry Boyle’s victory in Parliament.⁵³ Partisan conflict ran high between “the monied and the landed interest” in Jamaica as well,” wrote another; “The animosities have dissolved friendships, divided families, and turned every man’s voice, if not his hand against his neighbor.”⁵⁴ The planters, apparently, had turned against the administration, with the “merchants in general” being the “hearty friends” of Governor Charles Knowles.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Thomas Hay, Viscount Dupplin, 7 May 1753, in Cobett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 14:1378.

⁴⁸ *London Evening Post*, 30 October 1753.

⁴⁹ *World* (London), 19 December 1754.

⁵⁰ *London Magazine*, May 1754.

⁵¹ *London Daily Advertiser*, 6 March 1753.

⁵² George Stone Archbishop of Armagh (Dublin) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 10 October 1753, Add. MS 32733, fol. 42r, BL; see also Lionel; Sackville, 1st Duke of Dorset (Dublin Castle) to Pelham-Holles, 14 January 1754, Add. MS 32734, fols. 39–42, BL; George Sackville (Dublin Castle) to Robert Maxwell, 11 February 1754, Add. MS 32734, fol. 131, BL; *London Magazine*, March 1754, 99; *London Magazine*, April 1754, 147; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 16 February 1754. For discussion of how the money bill dispute of 1753 was transformed into a widespread pamphlet war, see Ian McBride, *Eighteenth Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin, 2009), 299–300.

⁵³ *Public Advertiser* (London), 31 December 1754. On the money bill and Patriot politics, see James Kelly, “The Politics of Protestant Ascendancy, 1730–1790,” in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. 3, 1730–1880, ed. James Kelly (Cambridge, 2018), 55–57; James Kelly, “Patriot Politics, 1750–91,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, ed. Alvin Jackson (Oxford, 2014), 482–84. See also Bob Harris, “The Patriot Clubs of the 1750s,” in *Clubs and Societies in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Kelly and Martyn Powell (Dublin, 2010), 224–43.

⁵⁴ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, August 1754, 350–51.

⁵⁵ Charles Knowles (Jamaica) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 29 January 1754, Add. MS 32734, fols. 85–87, BL; see also Knowles (Jamaica) to Robert d’Arcy, 4th Earl of Holderness, 6 February 1754, CO 137/60, fol. 69, National Archives, London (this repository hereafter abbreviated as TNA); Humble Representation of the Governor and Council of Jamaica, 11 November 1754, CO 137/60, fol. 121v, TNA; “Extract of a Letter from a merchant in Kingston, Jamaica,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 26 March 1754.

In North America, too, partisan divisions dominated the political landscape in colony after colony. Party feuds reemerged in New York in 1753 after the resignation of the unpopular Governor George Clinton. While the issues debated ranged in the province from collective colonial defense to the nature of the new college to be founded in New York City, they consistently poised the followers of James DeLancey against the grouping around Lewis Morris and Peter Livingston.⁵⁶ The Quaker party remained dominant in Pennsylvania throughout the late 1740s and 1750s. But those who wanted a more aggressive response to French commercial and military aggression sparked a vitriolic essay debate that had all the characteristics of “party zeal.”⁵⁷ Massachusetts was divided into complex and bitter partisan divisions. This intense partisanship led one Boston newspaper to reprint Sir Thomas Burnet’s opinion that it “may be affirmed with freedom, and I am sure it may be maintained with truth, that the weak part in the constitution of our government is a tendency to tumult, sedition and rebellion.”⁵⁸

The notion that early and mid-Hanoverian imperial politics were deeply partisan admittedly stands at odds with a long tradition of interpretation. That tradition owes a great deal to the powerfully influential works of Sir Lewis Namier. Namier’s central arguments, advanced initially in his 1929 two-volume study *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* and then developed further in subsequent works radically transformed understandings of eighteenth-century Britain and its empire. Two of his most important claims were that Whig/Tory partisan divisions meant little in eighteenth-century politics and that political principle rarely explained political action. In Namier’s view, part of the explanation was that British elites largely agreed on fundamental principles. Eighteenth-century political struggles—and there were many—were over patronage, place, and status, not principles.⁵⁹ Namier’s influence on the field has been profound. While many recent scholars have rejected his account of eighteenth-century society and culture, they have nevertheless embraced his account of politics as based on a broad-based ideological consensus.⁶⁰ A range of

⁵⁶ *Independent Reflector* (New York), 19 January, 22 February 1753; *New York Mercury*, 2 December and 30 December 1754; Marc Egnal, *A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, 1988), 64–65; Alan Tully, *Forming American Politics: Ideals, Interests, and Institutions in Colonial New York and Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1994), 133–43.

⁵⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 26 September 1754; see also Egnal, *Mighty Empire*, 77; Tully, *Forming American Politics*, 149–51.

⁵⁸ *Boston Evening Post*, 15 July 1754. I find Egnal’s account of divisions over imperial policy more persuasive than Peterson’s division between those who had New England sensibilities and a small group around Governor Shirley with imperial sensibility, not least because the prominent Otis and the Hancock New England families and the popular preacher Jonathan Mayhew most actively supported the imperial struggle with France; see Egnal, *Mighty Empire*, 38–42. On Mayhew, see Jonathan Mayhew, *A Sermon preach’d in the audience of His Excellency William Shirley* [. . .] (Boston, 1754). Several years earlier, Mayhew had made it clear that he understood politics in an imperial rather than Bostonian context by preaching a laudatory sermon on the death of the Patriot Prince Frederick Henry; see Jonathan Mayhew, *A Sermon preach’d at Boston in New-England, May 26, 1751* [. . .] (Boston, 1751).

⁵⁹ Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd ed. (London, 1957); D. W. Hayton, *Conservative Revolutionary: The Lives of Lewis Namier* (Manchester, 2019), 170–74; James M. Vaughn, *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The East India Company and the Crisis and Transformation of Britain’s Imperial State* (New Haven, 2019), 166–67.

⁶⁰ Among the most influential have been Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), esp. 710–11; and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992); Linda Colley, *Lewis Namier* (London, 1989).

prominent early American historians explicitly developed their accounts based on Namier's account of Hanoverian politics.⁶¹ A later generation has, following some British scholars, insisted that ideology mattered, while embracing Namier's notion that political ideas were largely held in common by the British political elite, with a decided absence of partisan politics.⁶² Seminal works in other areas of British imperial history have also embraced a Namierite account of British politics.⁶³ Namier's insistence on the absence of partisan ideological debates among the political elite, then, has a long history and is still embraced by many scholars of British imperial history and the history of Britain's former colonies. Yet British historiography has seen a withering and sustained assault on Namierian accounts. The earliest critiques focused on the period after 1760, which Namier had explicitly discussed.⁶⁴ Since those initial forays, a torrent of scholarship has demonstrated the importance of partisan politics at both elite and popular levels from the end of the War of the Spanish Succession until the French Revolution. In the view of most scholars now working on eighteenth-century British political culture, the Rage of Party period never came to an end.⁶⁵ Contemporaries, it turns out, were right to see the 1740s and 1750s as an age of bitter partisan ideological conflict. At the heart of that conflict was a debate over how best to reform the imperial constitution.

⁶¹ Jack P. Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689–1776* (Chapel Hill, 1963), 3; Jack P. Greene, ed., introduction to *The Reinterpretation of the American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York, 1968), 47–48; Edmund S. Morgan, “The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1957): 3–15, at 4; Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1967), 59–105; James Henretta, *Salutary Neglect: Colonial Administration under the Duke of Newcastle* (Princeton, 1972); Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 507–8.

⁶² The most sophisticated example of this approach is Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2000). For a critique of Gould's arguments about the Stamp Act, emphasizing the centrality of partisan politics, see Claire Priest and Justin du Rivage, “The Stamp Act and the Political Origins of American legal and Economic Institutions,” *Southern California Law Review* 88, no. 4 (2015): 875–911.

⁶³ For example, see R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1989), esp. 226–40; Anil Seal, *The Emergence of India Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1968); Lucy Stuart Sutherland, *The East India Company and Eighteenth Century Politics* (Oxford, 1952); Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies* (Oxford, 1936).

⁶⁴ John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976); James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, 1986).

⁶⁵ Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995); Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989); Sarah Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire* (New York, 2007); Max Skjornberg, *The Persistence of Party: Ideas of Harmonious Discord in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2021); Vaughn, *Politics of Empire*; Justin du Rivage, *Revolution against Empire: Taxes, Politics, and the Origins of American Independence* (New Haven, 2017), esp. 14; Pincus, *Heart of the Declaration*; William Deringer, *Calculated Values: Finance, Politics, and the Quantitative Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Abigail L. Swingen, “Security, Stability, and Credit: The Hanoverian Succession and the Politics of the Financial Revolution,” in *The Hanoverian Succession in Great Britain and Its Empire*, ed. Brent S. Sirota and Allan I. MacInnes (Woodbridge, 2019), 100–18; Amy Watson, *Patriots before Revolution: The Growth of Political Instability in the British Atlantic, 1714–1763* (New Haven, forthcoming); Christian Burslet, *An Empire of Laws: Legal Pluralism in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (New Haven, forthcoming); Heather Welland, *Political Economy and Imperial Governance in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 2021).

By 1753–54, three developments crystallized alignments: the growing realization of French commercial and geopolitical success on a global scale, the divisive Jewish Naturalization debate of 1753–54, and the death of Henry Pelham in 1754. These developments together served to reduce support for the intellectually prestigious middle-ground position of the Old Guard—associated with Henry Pelham himself, David Hume, and Josiah Tucker. These men had argued that Britain held an unassailable first-movers’ advantage in the competition with France and that negotiation rather than military aggression or constitutional rethinking was therefore the proper response. While Hume continued to denounce advocates of war based on jealousy of trade and Tucker published frequently on the dangers of belligerent policies, most in Britain and across the empire had come to accept the reality and urgency of the French threat. But they did so in the ideologically supercharged environment that defined the immediate aftermath of the Jewish Naturalization debate.

Two issues, among others, divided politicians on either side of a newly supercharged political spectrum: the basis of imperial wealth and the proper organization of the empire in the face of the growing French threat. One group of politicians and polemicists, an authoritarian Whig/neo-Tory⁶⁶ grouping, argued that Britain’s economic malaise and geopolitical weakness was caused by Britain’s obtuse European commitments. These costly wars and subsidies had dramatically increased labor costs in Britain, making British manufactures uncompetitive in overseas markets. The remedy was for Britons to turn their backs on Europe and pursue an aggressive, hierarchical, and highly centralized imperial policy in the Atlantic modeled in part on the French Empire. This group, then, emphasized the importance of colonial production of goods and raw materials and the urgency to create a centralized empire and insisted on the urgency of colonial incorporation.

A Patriot coalition in Britain and across the empire argued for a radically different response to the French threat. These politicians and polemicists agreed that the French state was making a determined effort to establish global hegemony through commercial and colonial domination. Only a global response would suit. But they called for a radically different response from that of the authoritarian Whig/Tory grouping. They began from the argument that colonial consumption rather than colonial production was the key to British economic resurgence. As a result, because they valued the behavior of thousands of local consumers in a variety of locations, they called for tailoring policies to the specific local conditions in each region. Patriots emphasized the political and economic contributions of a far broader segment of society than their authoritarian opponents. Their political economic impulses were far more democratic. They therefore advocated a confederal rather than centralized hierarchical response to the French threat. They felt that in the areas of local economic regulation and taxation provincial governments were far more likely to be responsive to the needs, interests, and habits of local consumers. They called for a horizontally integrated empire based on confederation rather than incorporation.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ These terms, though not actors’ categories, have become standard in the most up-to-date historiography; see Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 13–14; Vaughn, *Politics of Empire*, 15–16, 201–31; Du Rivage, *Revolution against Empire*, 6.

⁶⁷ I thus disagree with Shannon’s claim that there was “an emerging consensus among imperial officials that the colonies needed to be reduced to a uniform dependence.” Shannon, *Indians and Colonists*, 64.

The debate over the Jewish Naturalization Act provided the occasion for Tories, a Patriot rump, and a group of disillusioned establishment Whigs, known as “authoritarian Whigs,” to advance a political economic blueprint for the empire.⁶⁸ That blueprint has often been seen as the British imperial position whereas it in fact was one position in a partisan political debate. From the outset John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, was seen as the head of this new grouping.⁶⁹ In spring 1753, the former Whig secretary of state, the Duke of Bedford, joined with William Beckford, a Tory London alderman and West Indian planter, to hire Pennsylvanian James Ralph to launch a new essay paper, the *Protester*, to enunciate their position. Ralph was a long-time opposition journalist. In many ways, the paper merely elaborated and coordinated the themes developed by Bedford, Beckford, and their friends.⁷⁰

The authoritarian Whigs insisted that the source of all Britain’s economic woes was the commitment of Robert Walpole and the Pelhamites to maintaining the balance of power on the continent and to protecting the Electorate of Hanover. “We were once undeniably rich, and are now rich in paper only,” lamented the *Protester*. The cause was clear: the misguided pursuit of “political moonshine”—in other words, “the balance of Europe.”⁷¹ “We have seen,” complained Bedford’s close friend and political brother-in-arms, John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, “the wealth of this nation, that wealth for which our manufacturers labor, and our sailors defy the oceans and winds; that wealth which is either the gift of bountiful nature, or the profit of incessant industry, squandered in projects which had no other tendency than to extend the bounds and improve the interest of Hanover.”⁷²

The Bedfordites, therefore, fully embraced a blue-water policy. They wanted Britain to turn its back fully on the European continent and aggressively pursue war and imperial expansion in the Atlantic. “We have nothing to do with the continent,” argued the naval man and Bedford client, Sir Peter Warren; “let us

Shannon’s argument is largely based on a reading of Abercromby and McCulloch with which I agree. The problem is that Shannon has not placed those works within their proper partisan context.

⁶⁸ Sarah Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 13–14; Vaughn, *Politics of Empire*, 165–200. Long ago, Jack Greene also noticed a move by imperial officials in the late 1740s to call for “more rigid controls.” Nevertheless, Greene does not place those calls within the context of the partisan ideological struggles in Britain in the period. Jack P. Greene, “An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution,” in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill, 1973), 32–80, at 65.

⁶⁹ William Beckford (Soho Square) to John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, 4 June 1754, in Lord John Russell, ed., *Correspondence of John, Fourth Duke of Bedford: Selected from the Originals at Woburn Abbey*, 2 vols. (London, 1843), 2:150.

⁷⁰ Richard Rigby to John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, 4 June 1753, in Russell, *Correspondence of Bedford*, 2:127; William Beckford (Soho Square) to Russell, 28 July 1753, in Russell, *Correspondence of Bedford*, 2:128. See also Robert W. Kenny, “James Ralph: An Eighteenth Century Philadelphian in Grub Street,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 64, no. 2 (1940): 218–42, at 226–27. On the ideological significance of the *Protester*, see Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*, 94; Thomas W. Perry, *Public Opinion, Propaganda, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study of the Jew Bill of 1753* (Cambridge, MA, 1962), 106–9; Robert Harris, *Politics and the Nation: Britain in the Mid-Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2002), 51–52. The *Protester* was wound up when Newcastle convinced his brother to provide Ralph with a pension.

⁷¹ *Protester*, 25 August 1753, 75.

⁷² John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, 31 January 1744, in Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 13:560.

confine ourselves to our own element, the ocean. There we may still ride triumphant in defiance of the whole House of Bourbon.”⁷³ “We have no occasion to attack France by land in Europe,” maintained William Beckford, “nor can they attack us.” Instead, Britain’s true element was the sea. “By confining ourselves therefore to a maritime war, and a war in America, we have from the nature of things every reason to expect success,” Beckford concluded.⁷⁴

The authoritarian Whig/Bedfordite grouping thought the benefits of empire lay in territorial acquisition and the acquisition of precious commodities—silver, gold, tobacco, sugar. They therefore had defined themselves as a party opposed to immigration to the colonies, since they saw no need to increase the number of consumers. Beckford and Bedford decided jointly to support the publication of “a small treatise” penned by the discontented North Carolinian land speculator Henry McCulloh.⁷⁵ McCulloh began his analysis, like so many in the mid-Hanoverian British Empire, with an account of the threatening progress of French commerce. “It is not above half a century since France was not a soil wherein one could expect to find trade flourish,” he recalled, but following the establishment of the Board of Commerce under Louis XIV and the centralization of French colonial and commercial affairs, there had been “a surprising increase of trade and navigation in that kingdom.”⁷⁶

McCulloh attributed that success to France’s centralizing and uniform policies. It was therefore hardly surprising that he thought the British would be best served by modeling their behavior on the French and fully incorporating the American colonies into a centralizing union. The British, he said, should not be afraid to adopt “every scheme” of the French “which may suit our present interest and designs.”⁷⁷ McCulloh was not the only one in this group to propose colonial incorporation. James Abercromby, a Scot who spent more than a decade in South Carolina, followed the Bedfordite line in complaining of long-term “ministerial misconduct” in focusing on “the affairs of another continent,” concerning itself with the European balance of power rather than turning its back on Europe and adopting an aggressive policy of colonial territorial expansion and consolidation.⁷⁸ In a 1752 tract, Abercomby argued that it was possible to derive “Universal maxims of government with

⁷³ Peter Warren, 5 February 1750, in Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 14:713. On his relationship with Bedford, see Peter Warren (Louisbourg) to John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, 4 October 1745, in *The Royal Navy and North America: The Warren Papers, 1736–1752*, ed. Julian Gwyn (London, 1973), 175–76; Russell (London) to Peter Warren, 30 October 1745, in Russell, *Correspondence of Bedford*, 1:54–55. When Warren stood for Parliament in 1747, Bedford contributed substantially to his election for Westminster.

⁷⁴ William Beckford, 14 November 1754, in Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 15:354–55.

⁷⁵ William Beckford (Soho Square) to John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, 4 June 1754, in Russell, *Correspondence of Bedford*, 2:150. While Beckford claimed to introduce McCulloh to Bedford, McCulloh needed no such introduction, having submitted a memorial to him several years earlier: see Henry McCulloh, Memorial Addressed to the Duke of Bedford, 2 May 1748, CO 5/5, fols. 292–95, TNA.

⁷⁶ Henry McCulloh, *The Wisdom and Policy of the French* [. . .] (London, 1755), 37–38, 74.

⁷⁷ McCulloh, *Wisdom and Policy of the French*, 79. For McCulloh, it was essential that plans agreed upon by the Board of Trade should never be deviated from. This was, he said, the French system; see McCulloh, 53, 67–68, 73–74. See the same point in Henry McCulloh, *A miscellaneous essay concerning the courses pursued by Great Britain in the affairs of her colonies* [. . .] (London, 1755), 13–15.

⁷⁸ James Abercromby (Craven Street, London) to William Pitt, 25 November 1756, in Charles F. Mullett, “James Abercromby and French Encroachments in America,” *Canadian Historical Review* 26, no. 1 (1945): 48–59, at 57.

regard to dependent states, such as colonies are.” Roman colonies, he insisted, came “the nearest to that of ours.” By contrast, the Greek colonies that stood in relation to their mother countries as mere “confederates” bore no meaningful relationship to the present situation. As a result, unsurprisingly, Abercromby called for the establishment “of a proper subordination in the exercise of legislative and judicial powers of government, as well as trade in the plantations.”⁷⁹ William Douglass, another Scot who had migrated to North America, agreed that in this crisis, confederation would not do. Douglass, in his stadial theory of governmental development, tellingly theorized that pre-Columbian empires were in fact “a confederacy of tribes” that had entered into “a federal union” but were no match for the conquering centralized Spaniards in Mexico or Peru. In the present, Douglass was sure, “combinations, associations, or partnerships, in an absolute sovereignty, or depending provinces, tend to the subversion, ruin, or at least confusion of the society.”⁸⁰

Given the importance they laid on colonial production and their admiration for French centralization, it was hardly surprising that McCulloh and the Bedfordites proposed new means to extract revenue from the colonies. In fact, McCulloh’s program exactly presaged the reforms implemented by George Grenville’s administration after the Seven Years’ War. This, of course, suggests that the war did not generate a radical new departure in British imperial thinking. McCulloh famously proposed a Stamp Tax to be applied to “all writings, deeds and instruments, or other matters relating to the law.” The result of such a new colonial tax, McCulloh thought, would be that the colonies would no “longer be burdensome to this kingdom, in advancing money for their security and enlargement.”⁸¹ Members of the Bedfordite coalition were convinced that an aggressive colonial policy, if properly administered, would pay for itself. Not only could the colonists be taxed but they would, according to Beckford, “join heartily with us in driving the French as far as possible from their confines,” and they would do so “without subsidy or reward.”⁸²

Transatlantic Patriots, by contrast, thought the best means to counter the French was to focus on colonial consumption and reimagine the empire in confederal terms. They argued for an imperial political economy that focused on colonial consumption as the key to generating imperial prosperity. And, as a direct consequence of their focus on consumers, they insisted on a confederal model of empire as the best means to ensure colonists’ purchasing capacity.

Malachy Postlethwayt, the Patriot political economist, argued that colonial trade was both the most important and the most dynamic part of Britain’s commercial portfolio. Postlethwayt estimated that “above half the trade and navigation of Great Britain” depended on “her American settlements.”⁸³ “Experience has hitherto shown that those powers who most wisely cherish their plantation trade and navigation in America,” he maintained, “are likely to have the greatest share of mercantile

⁷⁹ James Abercromby, “An Examination,” May 1752, in *Magna Charta for America*, ed. Jack P. Greene, Charles F. Mullett, and Edward C. Papenfuss Jr. (Philadelphia, 1986), 70–72.

⁸⁰ William Douglass, *A summary, historical and political, of the first planting, progressive improvements, and present state of the settlements in North-America* [. . .], 2 vols. (London, 1755), 1:152, 490.

⁸¹ McCulloh, *Miscellaneous essay*, 92–93. McCulloh also floated ideas that would become the Sugar Act and denounced colonial paper currencies.

⁸² William Beckford, 14 November 1754, in Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 15:358.

⁸³ Postlethwayt, *Universal dictionary of trade and commerce*, 1:55.

shipping, the best nursery of seamen, and in a word, to be the best capable of maintaining the dominion and sovereignty of the seas.”⁸⁴ Many Patriot publications in the period after the War of the Austrian Succession echoed this point. “Great Britain has enjoyed the benefit of a most extensive commerce since the discovery of America” argued Otis Little, a member of the powerful and influential Otis clan of Massachusetts; this trade, “if properly attended to, will contribute more to its future interest than any other branches of trade, by enlarging the demand for all its manufactures and increasing the means of its naval force.”⁸⁵ The polymath and Harvard alumnus William Clarke of Massachusetts agreed: “Near half the present shipping of Great Britain is improved in the commerce carried on with her plantations,” and given its current rate growth, it would “in time employ a much greater quantity of shipping than all the present shipping of Great Britain.”⁸⁶

Unlike the Bedfordites, however, Postlethwayt and the Patriots laid far heavier emphasis on colonial consumption than colonial production of raw materials. “As our colonies increase our navigation” by taking “off our manufactures and superfluities at home,” Postlethwayt argued, “they are justly looked on to be the greatest support of the power and affluence of the nation.”⁸⁷ Again and again he measured the value of colonies by the quantity of British manufactures they consumed.⁸⁸ “It is computed that the plantations purchase one-third of all the merchandize and manufactures of Great Britain,” calculated George Burrington, former governor of North Carolina and a long-time antagonist of Henry McCulloh. “And as the inhabitants and trade annually increase, they will be constantly more profitable to His Majesty’s European dominions.”⁸⁹ William Clarke agreed: “[T]he advantage accruing to the Mother Country from the greater number of inhabitants in her Northern Colonies, will appear from a consideration of the consumption they will occasion of British manufactures.”⁹⁰ Benjamin Franklin made the same point. In the colonies, “a vast demand is growing for British manufactures; a glorious market wholly in the power of Britain, in which foreigners cannot interfere, which will increase in a short time even beyond her power of supplying, though her whole trade should be to her colonies.”⁹¹

Postlethwayt and the Patriots, like the Bedfordites, praised French policy. Like the Bedfordites, they ascribed French commercial dynamism to a sea change in French political behavior. But unlike the Bedfordites, who ascribed French advances to the country’s uniform, centralized, and authoritarian military policies, Postlethwayt

⁸⁴ Postlethwayt, 1:56. Later in the work, Postlethwayt referred readers to Joseph Addison to affirm this point; Postlethwayt, 1:381.

⁸⁵ Otis Little, *The state of trade in the northern colonies considered* [. . .] (London, 1748), 9.

⁸⁶ William Clarke and Benjamin Franklin, *Observations of the late and present conduct of the French* [. . .] (London, 1755), 34.

⁸⁷ Postlethwayt, *Universal dictionary of trade and commerce*, 1:372.

⁸⁸ Postlethwayt, 1366–67.

⁸⁹ George Burrington, “London: To the Author, &c.,” *London Evening Post*, 27 March 1755. On Burrington, see Frederick G. Ribble, “George Burrington, Sometime Governor of North Carolina: The ‘Janus’ of Fielding’s Champion,” *Studies in Bibliography*, no. 50 (1997): 272–94, at 282, 288.

⁹⁰ Clarke and Franklin, *Observations of the late and present conduct of the French*, 33–34.

⁹¹ [Benjamin Franklin], “Observations concerning the increase of mankind,” in Clarke and Franklin, *Observations of the late and present conduct of the French*, 42–54, at 45.

and the Patriots favored state support for commercial endeavors. They did not think that territorial acquisitions would pay for themselves.

Postlethwayt praised the French for the substantial support they had given to commerce since the age of Louis XIV. They not only established a Council of Commerce in 1700 but the following year they created “several chambers of commerce in the principal cities of the kingdom.”⁹² These institutions, and the committed support of French politicians like the regent “Duke of Orleans” and the “late Cardinal Fleury,” following “the plan of that able statesman Colbert,” explained “the extraordinary rise and prosperity of that great and flourishing kingdom.” As a result, it was now clear that the French “must inevitably advance the trade and navigation of that nation to the height they aim at.”⁹³ Postlethwayt noted French state support for a variety of commercial endeavors and infrastructural projects. Where McCulloh highlighted French military construction and centralized control, Postlethwayt emphasized state support for manufacturers, merchants, and colonists.⁹⁴ The wise management by Jean-Louis Henri Orry de Fulvy, French *intendant des finances*, transformed the French East India Company. “In very few years,” thought Postlethwayt, Orry made the French Company “formidable in comparison to any in Europe.”⁹⁵ “The encouragement they have from the crown of France” explained the recent prodigious development of the French colonies in America and the West Indies.⁹⁶ “The French King grants lands in his plantations gratis to poor industrious people sent thither from France,” Postlethwayt wrote approvingly.⁹⁷ So successful was the new French economic system that Spain, too, had adopted it.⁹⁸ Britain, thought Postlethwayt, should do so as well.⁹⁹

Postlethwayt called for a fundamental reorganization of the British Empire. He agreed with the Bedfordites that British imperial policy needed more coherence. But whereas the Bedfordites advocated tightening restrictions and increased central control, Postlethwayt called for a confederal empire. In his *Universal dictionary of trade and commerce*, he outlined a proposal for “a special council of commerce to consist of experienced merchants, or such who have been long engaged in the concerns of trade and colonies.” The council would be “properly elected by the principal trading cities and towns of Great Britain and Ireland.” It would also include “deputies from our colonies in America, the interest of those colonies being intimately interwoven with that of England.” The council would “sit every week in London throughout the year” and would gather information “relating to the colonies and all branches of commerce and manufactures.” It would then advise Parliament on commercial and imperial policy. But it was clear that, in Postlethwayt’s formulation, this representative council from across the empire would in fact be the true policy-making body. Parliament, armed with information from this confederal council,

⁹² Malachy Postlethwayt, *A dissertation on the plan, use, and importance of the Universal Dictionary* [. . .] (London, 1749), 6; Postlethwayt, *Universal dictionary of trade and commerce*, 1:477–78.

⁹³ Postlethwayt, *Universal dictionary of trade and commerce*, 1:124, 828–30.

⁹⁴ Postlethwayt, 1:124.

⁹⁵ Postlethwayt, 1:830.

⁹⁶ Postlethwayt, 1:443.

⁹⁷ Postlethwayt, 1:870.

⁹⁸ Postlethwayt, 1:467, 469. Postlethwayt claimed that the Spanish political economist Don Geronimo de Uztariz, “the Patriot Spaniard,” modeled his proposals on the French design.

⁹⁹ Postlethwayt, 1:124.

would “with far more ease, and less liability of deceit and imposition have the true and genuine state of all branches of trade laid before them.” The council would deliver Parliament “the truth,” which would lead to more efficient policy. Parliament, in effect, would simply implement the policy recommendations of this fact-gathering body.¹⁰⁰

Confederal union, rather than central and uniform direction, would give vigor to British imperial policy, in Postlethwayt’s view. “Our great aim tends towards such a union amongst all His Majesty’s dominions, as will promote the strength and vigor, as well as mutual prosperity of them all. . . . For the happy general union that we would cement is no less constitutional than commercial, and such also as may the least interfere with the particular interest of each other but advance that of the whole.” This was the only way to “strengthen the whole British Empire.”¹⁰¹

By placing the discussions of confederation and political economy in their proper imperial partisan context, it becomes clear that the widespread enthusiasm for confederation in the aftermath of the War of the Austrian Succession had a specific ideological location. Lawrence Gipson and the Imperial School of American historians are right to point out that there was widespread agreement in the 1750s that imperial reform needed to begin with Parliament. They are also correct that that the colonists had yet to develop a critique of parliamentary sovereignty. But they are wrong to posit consensus. In fact, the Bedfordites/authoritarian Whigs rejected any call for confederation. They wanted a hierarchical, extractive empire based along the lines of what they understood to be the French model. Their Patriot opponents, on both sides of the Atlantic, instead called for a confederal union supported by the promotion of colonial consumption of British manufactured goods.

PLANS FOR CONFEDERAL EMPIRE 1754

What, in 1754, was the nature of transatlantic proposals advanced for confederal union? Did the American plan reveal widespread enthusiasm for confederation while the British plan unmasked the long-held preference for centralized government? Or did both plans reveal a general commitment to confederal union among Patriots and their allies on both sides of the Atlantic?

Increasingly concerned about the dangers of French encroachments and the weakening ties with the Iroquois, the British government “thought fit to recommend a convention of delegates from the Assemblies of the several colonies to assemble at Albany in the province of New York.” “The principal design,” recalled Thomas Hutchinson, one of the Massachusetts commissioners at the Albany Conference, was “to unite the colonies in measures for their general defense and to settle a quota of men and money, wherever they might be necessary against a common enemy.”¹⁰² “In 1754,” said Benjamin Franklin (who would agree with Hutchinson about little else when he came to pen his recollections of the event), “war with

¹⁰⁰ Postlethwayt, 1:873.

¹⁰¹ Malachy Postlethwayt, *Britain’s commercial interest explained and improved* [. . .], 2 vols. (London, 1757), 1:461, 469–70.

¹⁰² Thomas Hutchinson, *The history of the province of Massachusetts-Bay: from 1749 to 1774* [. . .] (London, 1828), 19–20.

France being again apprehended, a Congress of Commissioners from the different colonies, was by an order of the Lords of Trade, to be assembled at Albany, there to confer with the Chiefs of the Six Nations, concerning the means of defending their country and ours.”¹⁰³ No one who attended the congress at Albany was in any doubt that the British government supported, indeed demanded, the creation of a confederal plan for the American colonies.

The commissioners who met at Albany agreed to a confederal plan along Patriot lines. That plan for the union of the American colonies was first sketched out by Benjamin Franklin on his way to Albany. It was then vetted by the New York Patriots James Alexander and Archibald Kennedy before being discussed and further revised by the commissioners.¹⁰⁴ That group, all were in accord, “was an assembly the most deserving of respect of any which had been convened in America, whether we consider the colonies which were represented, the rank and characters of the delegates, or the purposes for which it was convened.” While some have debated how far the commissioners altered Franklin’s original plan, in the opinion of all, it was his plan that formed the basis for the confederation.¹⁰⁵

The Albany commissioners drew up a remarkable plan for confederal union. That plan, initially circulated for discussion among the North American assemblies, was widely noted in the British press.¹⁰⁶ Having rejected plans for regional unions in North America on the grounds that “each union would be separately weaker than when joined by the whole,” they set about outlining the scope of the plan.¹⁰⁷ The plan would have to balance “the just prerogative of the Crown” with “the just liberties of the people,” but some prerogative “must be abated to extend dominion and increase subjects,” while “some liberty” had to be sacrificed “to obtain safety.”¹⁰⁸ In the end, the Albany commissioners agreed to a plan that created a president general appointed by the crown and a grand council proportionately elected every three years by the colonial assemblies. This new confederal government would have the power to regulate Indian affairs, settle new colonies, and provide for and coordinate defense. The whole would be funded “from something that may be nearly proportionable to each colony and grow with it,” such as an excise tax on alcohol or a stamp tax.¹⁰⁹ The plan did not, as Cadwallader Colden perceived, assume that the colonies would pay all the costs for their own defense. The imperial Parliament would “provide the necessary funds” that could not be raised in the

¹⁰³ Joyce Chaplin, ed., *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography* (New York, 2012), 122.

¹⁰⁴ James Alexander (New York) to Cadwallader Colden, 9 May 1754, in *The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden*, 9 vols. (1918–1937; repr., New York, 1973), 4:442; Chaplin, *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, 122.

¹⁰⁵ Hutchinson, *History of the province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 20–21; Thomas Pownall (New York) to [Earl of Halifax], 23 July 1754, in Beverly McAnear, “Personal Accounts of the Albany Congress of 1754,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 3, no. 4 (1953): 727–46, esp. 744; William Shirley (Boston) to Sir Thomas Robinson, 24 December 1754, in Lincoln, *Correspondence of Shirley*, 2:113.

¹⁰⁶ The plan itself was printed in Stephen Hopkins, *A true representation of the plan formed at Albany, for uniting all the British northern colonies* [. . .] (Newport, [1755]), 9–12. For British press discussions, see *Whitehall Evening Post*, 14 September 1754; *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 September 1754; *Scots Magazine*, September 1754, 446; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 17 October 1754; *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 October 1754.

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Franklin, “Reasons and motives for the Albany Union,” July 1754, FP.

¹⁰⁸ Albany Congress Committee, “Short hints towards a scheme for general union of the British colonies on the continent,” 28 June 1754, FP.

¹⁰⁹ Albany Congress Committee, “Short hints towards a scheme,” 28 June 1754, FP.

colonies.¹¹⁰ The plan, the commissioners made clear, ensured that, unlike in the union of 1707 that incorporated Scotland into Britain, “the several colonies may each enjoy its own constitution, laws, liberties, and privileges as so many separate corporations in any commonwealth.”¹¹¹ One correspondent of Franklin correctly perceived that “this constitution has some resemblance with the court of the Amphictiones which was a kind of Council, where the general affairs of Greece were debated, which if they had preserved in its original purity, and to the first design of it in that country had not been so easy a conquest to the Romans.”¹¹² William Smith of New York, who was present as one of the commissioners, recalled both that the plan was a confederation that “might very properly be compared to one of the ancient Greek conventions for supporting their expiring liberty against the power of the Persian empire, or that Lewis of Greece, Philip of Macedon,” and that it was penned by men “inflamed with a patriot-spirit.”¹¹³

The commissioners at Albany knew well that their plan was only the first step toward making a confederation. They anticipated, correctly, that “the colonies were seldom all in equal danger at the same time, or equally near the danger, or equally sensible of it; that some of them had particular interests to manage, with which an union might interfere; and that they were extremely jealous of each other.”¹¹⁴ For this reason, it was next to impossible that all the colonies would accede to the union. They therefore resolved that “the union be established by act of Parliament.”¹¹⁵ Immediately after the Albany Congress, Franklin expressed to Colden his hope that the confederal plan proposed at Albany, “with some improvements that I think necessary,” would be “approved of by the King and Parliament.”¹¹⁶ In their debate in Boston later that year about the plan for confederal union, Benjamin Franklin and William Shirley agreed that the Albany plan was not perfect. Too much should not be made, however, of their disagreement or their disillusionment with the plan. Shirley, it is true, worried that it contained too much of a popular element and proposed instead a plan that would have the members of the grand council appointed rather than elected. Nevertheless, he had written in October to Robert Hunter Morris, the deputy governor of Pennsylvania, urging him “to lose no time for promoting the Plan of Union of the colonies for their mutual defense.”¹¹⁷ Franklin, it is true, did contemplate an incorporating union “uniting the colonies more intimately with Great Britain, by allowing them

¹¹⁰ Cadwallader Colden, “Remarks on Short Hints towards a Scheme for Uniting the Northern Colonies,” [May–June 1754], *Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden*, 4:449–50.

¹¹¹ Albany Congress Committee, “Short hints towards a scheme,” 28 June 1754, FP; Benjamin Franklin, “Reasons and motives for the Albany Union,” July 1754, FP; The best modern discussion of the plan itself is in Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven, 2008), 165–70.

¹¹² Unknown author to Benjamin Franklin, c.1754, FP.

¹¹³ William Smith et al., *A review of the military operations in North-America* [. . .] (London, 1757), 15.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin Franklin, “Reasons and motives for the Albany Union,” July 1754, FP.

¹¹⁵ Benjamin Franklin (Colden’s Landing, NY) to Cadwallader Colden, 14 July 1754, FP.

See also Hutchinson, *History of the province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 22; William Shirley (Boston) to Sir Thomas Robinson, 24 December 1754, Lincoln, *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 2:112–13.

¹¹⁶ Benjamin Franklin (Colden’s Landing, NY) to Cadwallader Colden, 14 July 1754, FP.

¹¹⁷ William Shirley (Boston) to Robert Hunter Morris, 21 October 1754, Lincoln, *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 2:96. For Shirley’s concerns about the popular nature of the Grand Council, see Shirley (Boston) to Sir Thomas Robinson, 24 December 1754, Lincoln, *Correspondence of William Shirley*, 2:114–16.

representatives in Parliament.” But he made clear that was a project that could only be imagined in the very distant future, since a prerequisite for such a plan was “that all old Acts of Parliament restraining the trade or cramping the manufactures of our colonies, be at the same time repealed, and the British subjects this side the water put, in those respects, on the same footing with those in Great Britain.”¹¹⁸ He told Shirley in the mid-1750s that a confederal union was the best available alternative that had any chance of acceptance on both sides of the Atlantic.

As Franklin and the commissioners were drawing up a plan for confederal union on the advice of the Board of Trade, the board too was working on a plan for confederation. In late June, as the American commissioners were meeting in Albany, the Duke of Newcastle in London reported that he had “given orders some time ago to the Board of Trade to prepare a scheme for a general concert among the Northern colonies.” To that end, Halifax had already “prepared very proper heads for that purpose, which are now under consideration.”¹¹⁹ On both sides of the Atlantic statesmen drew up plans to reorganize the empire in North America along confederal lines.

The Board of Trade’s Plan of Union, like the Albany Plan of Union, went through several drafts and was vetted by a range of experts. In mid-August, Halifax announced that the Board of Trade’s plan “for a general union and concert of the colonies in North America” had been formed and was only awaiting signatures from two members of the board who were in their country residences.¹²⁰ Far from being an attempt to impose centralized governance on the colonies, the Board of Trade “endeavored as much as possible to adapt the plan to the constitution of the colonies.” Nothing in the plan allowed the proposed commander in chief “to draw upon any province for one shilling more than the Commissioners for each colony shall have agreed to be the reasonable and just proportion of expense which such province is annually to bear.”¹²¹

The Board of Trade, like the commissioners at Albany, drew up a plan for confederal union with an executive tempered by a popularly elected council. Like the commissioners, the board argued that confederation was necessary to put “a stop to these [French] encroachments and invasions.” Again like the commissioners at Albany, the Board of Trade was aware that security in North America required improving relations with the Indigenous peoples. To that end, the board’s plan included provisions

¹¹⁸ Benjamin Franklin (Boston) to William Shirley, 22 December 1754, FP. Franklin would of course return to his proposals for an imperial Parliament in the 1760s, see Benjamin Franklin (London) to Lord Kames, 25 February 1767, FP; Benjamin Franklin (London) to William Franklin, 13 March 1768, FP. For a similar interpretation of Franklin’s position, see Houston, *Franklin and the Politics of Improvement*, 174.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle (Claremont) to Horatio Walpole, 29 June 1754, Add. MS 32735, fols. 597–98, BL.

¹²⁰ George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax (Horton) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 15 August 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 243r, BL. Compare with Henretta, *Salutary Neglect*, 337–39. In his useful discussion of the Albany plan, Craig Yirush dismisses the Board of Trade plan by following Henretta’s account and not consulting the original manuscript record. As a consequence, he overestimates the ideological differences between the settler elite and the Board of Trade in the 1750s: see Yirush, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675–1775* (Cambridge, 2011), 202–9.

¹²¹ George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax (Horton) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 15 August 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 243v, BL.

“for defraying the expense or presents to the Indians,” “for putting Indian affairs under one general direction,” and for augmenting defenses in Indian country. Like the commissioners at Albany, the board proposed the creation of a legislative council. Whereas the Albany commissioners had proposed proportional representation from each colony, the Board of Trade instead proposed that “the respect Councils and Assemblies” would “appoint proper persons (one of each colony) subject to the Governor’s approbation.” These “Commissioners” would in turn “agree upon the quantum of money to be supplied by each colony for defraying the expense of the service.” The quantum would be determined by considering “the number of inhabitants, trade, wealth, and revenue of each colony.” Calculations would in turn be based on “very full and authenticated accounts of these particulars and of the state of each colony respectively.”¹²² Far from imposing centralized governance on the colonies, the Board of Trade plan gave the American provinces a critical role both in choosing representatives or commissioners and in gathering the information that would form the basis of a proportional taxation scheme.

The Board of Trade proposed that the crown would appoint a commander in chief and a commissary general for Indian Affairs. But these executives could only draw upon the sums that the colonies had already agreed to provide to the general fund. The commander in chief and the commissary general were required “to transmit annually to each Colony a particular estimate expressing the particular service for which such draughts were made.”¹²³ The Board of Trade plan gave each and every colony the power to audit annually the expenditures of the commander in chief and the commissary of Indian Affairs, thus decentralizing fiscal oversight.

Finally, the Board of Trade did not imagine that the new confederal union would offload all the costs of empire onto the colonies. Its plan ordered the colonial governors to remind their respective assemblies that “His Majesty does not intend to withdraw that part of the expense which the Crown has been annually at for the security and protection of the colonies.” The imperial government would also continue to pay “whatever sums of money have been usually given by His Majesty for Indian services” as “His Majesty is willing to bear the ordinary establishment for this service, and that upon any great emergency they shall receive such support from His Majesty as shall be thought reasonable.”¹²⁴ The Board of Trade at that time had no notion that the colonies, even confederated, should be exclusively responsible for defraying the costs of their own defense and subsidizing Indian presents.

The plans for confederal union drawn up almost simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic resembled each other far more than they differed. While both plans insisted on the importance for coordination to repel French encroachments and to improve the all-important relations with the powerful groupings of North American tribes, neither called for the kind of centralized control on the French model demanded by Bedford’s authoritarian Whig/Tory grouping. While it is true that the Albany plan imagined a council based on proportional representation from the colonies—much like the House of Representatives in the United States—and the Board of Trade plan imagined a single commissioner elected from each colony,

¹²² Montagu-Dunk, “Draft of a plan [. . .] [August 1754],” Add. MS 32736, fols. 247–48, BL.

¹²³ Montagu-Dunk, “Draft of a Plan,” Add MS 32736, fol. 249, BL.

¹²⁴ Montagu-Dunk, “Draft of a Plan,” Add MS 32736, fols. 251–52, BL.

both plans imagined a centrally appointed executive whose power would be tempered by representatives of the individual provinces.

FAILURE TO ACHIEVE CONFEDERAL UNION

On both sides of the Atlantic, the French threat of mid-century evoked confederal rather incorporating plans of union. Why was the confederal solution not adopted? Why did the movement for confederal union that had reached a crescendo in the summer of 1754 fizzle? Why did the British Empire not reorient itself in a confederal direction?

Ironically, the answer that many scholars have provided has been deeply influenced by the retrospective assessments of one of the architects of the Albany plan, Benjamin Franklin. Writing in the very different ideological context of the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s, Franklin explained the failure of the confederal plans in terms that made sense in that later era. The “fate” of the Albany plan, Franklin recalled, was “singular”: “The Assemblies did not adopt it, as they all thought there was too much prerogative in it, and in England it was judged to have too much of the democratic.”¹²⁵ In other writings from later periods, Franklin claimed that Britain “rejected the plan we formed at the Congress at Albany”¹²⁶ because that plan formed “an union she was jealous of,”¹²⁷ or again “that a jealousy arose, lest such an union might in time render [the colonies] formidable even to the Mother Country.”¹²⁸

As was expected, the Albany plan was rejected by the American assemblies. Many of them were reluctant to relinquish local autonomy, and the Board of Trade’s plan lay fallow, despite enthusiastic endorsement from a range of British politicians, after events in North America made its adoption impossible. It is true that the Albany plan had slightly more democratic elements than the Board of Trade Plan—the commissioners at Albany imagined a more extensive legislative council that was proportional to popular size and commercial development, whereas the Board of Trade Plan provided for a single member from each colony chosen by the provincial assembly. Yet there is no evidence that the British ministry rejected confederal ideas for fear of American independence. Indeed, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the British ministry, increasingly in sympathy with Patriot political notions, considered and rejected exactly such arguments.

¹²⁵ Chaplin, *Franklin’s Autobiography*, 123. It is worth noting that in his autobiography, Franklin confuses William Shirley’s proposal, which the two men discussed in Boston in December 1754 with the Board of Trade’s proposal.

¹²⁶ Benjamin Franklin, Fragments of a pamphlet on the Stamp Act, [1765], FP.

¹²⁷ [Benjamin Franklin], “Intended vindication and offer from Congress to Parliament,” [written before 21 July 1775], printed in the *Public Advertiser*, 18 July 1777, FP.

¹²⁸ Benjamin Franklin, contribution to a *History of the British Dominions in North America* (1773), before 20 May 1773, FP. In this 1773 piece, Franklin also confuses Shirley’s plan with the Board of Trade plan. This may have been the origin of the mistake in the autobiography. William Smith, though he did not mention these sentiments in his contemporary gloss on the confederal plans, also thought retrospectively that if the Albany Plan had been embraced in North America it would have been rejected in Britain “as accelerating an event dangerous to the union and stability of the empire”: William Smith, *The History of the Late Province of New York: From its Discovery to the Appointment of Governor Colden in 1762*, *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, vol. 2 (New York, 1830), 225.

Assembly after assembly in North America rejected the Albany plan. Many in North America, including Benjamin Franklin, had anticipated this outcome. The very localist sentiments that had made confederation necessary helped doom the plan. “The jealousies the colonies have of each other, with regard to their real or imaginary different interests &c. will effectually hinder” a union from taking place, opined William Clarke of Massachusetts in language very similar to that Franklin would include in his “Reasons and Motives for the Albany Union.” The only hope for confederation, Clarke thought, was that the colonies would be “forced to it by the Supreme Authority of the Nation,” the imperial Parliament.¹²⁹ This view was shared by one of the foremost and best-informed British North American merchants, William Baker. “It is next to impossible they should agree” to any plan for “union or confederacy,” he claimed, because their competing interests rendered them “each independent of the other.”¹³⁰ As Thomas Hutchinson recalled, “Not one of the Assemblies from Georgia to New Hampshire” endorsed the Albany plan, because they were disinclined “to part with so great a share of power as was to be given to this general government.”¹³¹ Thus localist fears of financial demands made by their neighboring provinces, rather than anticipation of an increasingly aggressive imperial center, led most in the colonial assemblies to reject the Albany plan.

Colonists rejected the Albany plan precisely because it was seen to be a colonial initiative with no guarantee of imperial support. Contemporaries ranging from Franklin to Clarke of Massachusetts and the Virginia governor, Dinwiddie, as well as the collected commissioners at Albany, believed that with the imprimatur of the imperial Parliament, colonists would accede to confederation. This was in part because colonial assemblies up to this point obeyed, sometimes begrudgingly, Parliamentary legislation. The Board of Trade plan had the additional attraction of a promise from the imperial treasury to provide substantial support for colonial defense. Neither confederal plan involved offloading the cost of war onto the colonists; that was the project of authoritarian Whigs like Charles Townshend, the Duke of Bedford, and William Murray (the future Lord Mansfield).

The claim that British imperial officials rejected plans for confederal union rests on weak evidence. Many imperial politicians, most of whom had come to support Patriot policies, enthusiastically embraced the Board of Trade’s plan. Newcastle, who had increasingly come to endorse Patriot positions, had “long been inured to larger ways of thinking” than his brother Henry Pelham and the Old Guard and thought the Board of Trade’s plan “very proper.”¹³² Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, perhaps adopting his sons’ endorsement of confederations, thought the Board of Trade’s plan “very well drawn up” and “of great utility to the service of His Majesty and the public.”¹³³ The Patriot Duke of Cumberland enthused that the

¹²⁹ William Clarke (Boston) to Benjamin Franklin, 6 May 1754, FP.

¹³⁰ [William Baker], “Some thoughts on the expediency and manner of supporting a regular military force in North America,” [1 October] 1754, Add. MS 32737, fols. 16–17, BL.

¹³¹ Hutchinson, *History of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, 23.

¹³² Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle (Claremont) to George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax, 18 August 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 296r, BL. For the sense that Newcastle had drifted away from Pelham and the Old Guard, see Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke (Wimple), to Pelham-Holles, 3 October 1754, Add. MS 32737, fol. 27r, BL.

¹³³ Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke (Wimple), to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 25 August 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 340r, BL.

plan of union “would be as great a service as had been done to this nation for many years.”¹³⁴

As one would expect, British politicians of a more authoritarian bent were less excited by the Board of Trade’s plan. Charles Townshend, who would later spark imperial controversy with his own plan for colonial taxation, thought that Halifax’s plan proceeded in “a wrong manner.” Elected colonial “representatives of so many different provinces, divided in interest and alienated by jealousy and inveterate prejudice” would never agree to a scheme for “mutual security and reciprocal expense.” He believed that “the history of America for fifty years past” demonstrated that the colonies would stop at nothing to advance their project of “usurpating” power to themselves. The proposed union, he was sure, would provide a pretext to advance their strategy.¹³⁵ The Scot and former Jacobite William Murray, the future Lord Mansfield, thought Townshend’s “objection” to Halifax’s “plan of Concert unanswerable.”¹³⁶

Why was the Board of Trade’s plan not adopted? Many scholars have assumed that the objections aired by Townshend and Murray were decisive. But they were not. The Board of Trade adopted and circulated Halifax’s plan despite Townshend’s objections. Newcastle politely listened to Murray, but there is no evidence that he endorsed his views. Instead, the news of George Washington’s defeat in July 1754 in the back-country left the British ministry no time to implement Halifax’s proposal. Even before he sent the Board of Trade’s Plan to Newcastle, Halifax lamented that events were moving too fast in North America to implement it. He warned that “the delay which must necessarily attend the execution of this or any other Plan for an union of the colonies would not admit of its answering the purpose of present exigency.”¹³⁷

Events proved him right. The “present exigency,” Newcastle wrote after receiving the news of Washington’s reverse, meant there was not time to implement “the general concert.” He had not abandoned the plan but left it for “future consideration.”¹³⁸ Ministerial officials continued to convey “hints” that a “plan of union of the colonies for military purposes (not that sent from hence)” was still “under the

¹³⁴ Sir Thomas Robinson (Whitehall) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 15 September 1754, Add. MS 32736, fols. 529–30, BL. Cumberland’s association with the Patriots can be traced in Cumberland Papers, CP/Main/45, Royal Archives, Surrey.

¹³⁵ Charles Townshend, Remarks upon the plan for a general concert, [September 1754], Add. MS 32736, fols. 510–14, BL. When he received the Albany Plan, Townshend pronounced it “liable to many of the same objections” as he had voiced to Halifax’s plan; see Charles Townshend (Rainham) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 7 October 1754, Add. MS 32737, fol. 57r, BL. Townshend had sat on the Board of Trade since 1747, so the Board of Trade plan was adopted and circulated over his objections. For Townshend’s time on the Board of Trade, see Patrick Griffin, *The Townshend Moment: The Making of Empire and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 2017), 20–33.

¹³⁶ William Murray (Bath) to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 6 October 1754, Add. MS 32737, fol. 45r, BL.

¹³⁷ George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax (Horton), to Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, 15 August 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 244r, BL.

¹³⁸ Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle (Newcastle House,) to William Murray, 28 September 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 590, BL. Newcastle had written ten days previously that “everybody is full of North America, and our defeat there.” George II in particular was “in haste to have something done.” See Pelham-Holles (Claremont) to Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke, 21 September 1754, Add. MS 32736, fol. 554r, BL.

consideration of the ministry and tis thought will be enforced by Act of Parliament this sessions.”¹³⁹ If plans for confederation had been abandoned for fear that it would pave the way for American independence, the ministry was blissfully unaware of it.

In 1754, then, there had been a real possibility for a reorientation of the British Empire toward confederation. While the Albany plan stood little chance of success against the particularism of many sitting in the colonial assemblies, it was likely that the British ministry, increasingly gravitating towards a Patriot political vision, would have embraced a plan. The commissioners at Albany, of course, had always proposed that their plan be implemented by parliamentary act. They well understood that parliamentary legislation would lead to acquiescence by colonial assemblies in a way that proposals initiated in the colonies could not. Colonists still believed that reform of the imperial constitution needed to come from Parliament in Westminster, informed by advice from the colonial assemblies and colonial agents. Halifax, too, had imagined that the final confederal union would be based on a back-and-forth between the Board of Trade and the elected American commissioners.¹⁴⁰ That this did not happen, that neither plan was ever implemented, had less to do with American concerns about creeping prerogative power or British anxiety about eventual independence than with the exigencies of war. By the time the Seven Years’ war ended, Newcastle and his Patriot allies were not in a position to give the plans consideration. They had been replaced in the ministry by the authoritarian Whigs and Tories who had objected to the confederal plan from the outset.

CONCLUSION

In the 1750s, unlike in the first decade of the eighteenth century, the British ministry gave a serious airing to confederal union. A range of politicians, imperial administrators, and polemicists responded to the new French threat by revisiting and reimagining arguments for confederal rather than incorporating union. Patriots on both sides of the Atlantic advocated redefining the British imperial constitution. Not only did they take the possibility seriously but they drew up, debated, and vetted sophisticated plans for confederation. The advocates of these plans admitted that centralization and coercion had turned France into a formidable foe, but they rejected the French hierarchical model in favor of one that imagined a messier but more equally balanced polity. These advocates of confederation rejected traditional notions of empire based on unified sovereignty in favor of an imperial state in which power would be wielded at a variety of levels.

The American commissioners gathered at Albany and the British members of the Board of Trade, were committed to defending and improving British imperial governance. They knew that empires could be confederations and confederations could be empires.¹⁴¹ Benjamin Franklin, one of the authors of the Albany Plan of Union,

¹³⁹ Robert Hunter Morris (Philadelphia) to Horatio Sharpe, 3 December 1754, in William Hand Browne, ed., *Correspondence of Governor Horatio Sharpe, 1753–71*, 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1888), 1:128.

¹⁴⁰ Montagu-Dunk, “Draft of a Plan,” Add MS 32736, fols. 250–51, BL.

¹⁴¹ These statesmen knew that the Athenian Empire had been based on a confederal model and knew the United Provinces to be an imperial state. Others have noted the theoretical compatibility between confederations and empire. In discussing the Comanche empire, for example, Pekka Hamalainen notes that

later waxed nostalgic about what might have been. Confederal Union, he opined, “was really the true medium; and I am still of opinion for both sides of the water if it had been adopted.” Long after American Independence, he remained convinced that “the colonies so united would have been sufficiently strong to have defended themselves” against the French threat and then “of course the subsequent pretense for taxing America, and the bloody contest it occasioned, would have been avoided.” Had confederal union been embraced in 1754, Franklin believed, the British Empire would have persisted. “But,” he lamented, “such mistakes are not new; history is full of errors of princes and states.”¹⁴²

That neither the Albany plan of union nor the plan of the Board of Trade was adopted was not because of the incompatibility of British and American visions of empire. Such incompatibility only emerged as the authoritarian Whig/Tory faction tightened its grip on British government in the 1760s and 1770s.¹⁴³ Transatlantic Patriots reimagined the empire as a confederation. In the aftermath of the War of the Austrian Succession, political moderates, including Britain’s leading minister the Duke of Newcastle and his friend the Earl of Hardwicke, were compelled by French commercial and military aggression to reject any notion of political complacency. They were forced to choose between reorienting the empire in favor of a more centralized hierarchical structure based on colonial extraction modeled on the French, or a more decentralized and messy confederation. By 1754, these moderates had thrown in their lot with the Patriots. This rapprochement between the Pelhamites and the Patriots explains why the plans promoted by the Board of Trade and the Albany Commissioners were so similar. Both derived from a common transatlantic Patriot ideology. Their plans came to naught for highly contingent reasons. Had the Patriot coalition that ushered in the great victories of 1759 remained in power after George III’s accession, it is entirely conceivable that the confederal plans of 1754 might have been revived. The American Revolution, the imperial civil war that broke out in the 1770s, was by no means inevitable. The imperial crisis of the 1770s and 1780s, then, needs to be understood less as a colonial revolt than as the politically contingent consequence of a fiercely partisan debate about how best to govern the empire that divided people on both sides of the Atlantic.

“Comanche chiefs were local and regional actors first, but periodically they also ran a larger political entity, the Comanche confederacy.” See Hamalainen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, 2008), 348. Jennifer Pitts has pointed out the compatibility between European confederal thinking with empire; see Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 10–11.

¹⁴² Chaplin, *Franklin’s Autobiography*, 123.

¹⁴³ The best accounts of these developments are Vaughn, *Politics of Empire*; Du Rivage, *Revolution against Empire*; Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire*.