Book & Film Reviews

Figure 1: *Death of General Wolfe*, by Benjamin West
During the development of the European colonies in the Americas, inevitably wars were fought for the mother countries’ benefit, some that helped their colonies, and some that set those colonies back. The early wars were simpler conflicts between the colonists and their American Indian counterparts, which mobilized members of the small, readily available populations. Later wars involved European-style soldiery and naval forces fighting for territory that may or may not remain in the hands of their country after being captured, much to the chagrin of participating colonial militia who expended men for their security and were made to relinquish it at the European negotiating table. In *The Colonial Wars, 1689-1762*, Howard Peckham presents the colonial conflicts at this time as fundamental to the shaping of the American mindset and fundamental political belief system for centuries in the future.

Throughout the text, Peckham argues that the settlement of North America specifically shaped a new world that did not have a formal military tradition in the same vein of Europe, with small numbers of Native Americans fighting small numbers of colonists, using tactics built on the Natives’ rather basic—in comparison to Europe at the time—style of tribal warfare. This background combined with more traditional European soldiery produced the major colonial wars of the time, which in turn, predicted the American
Revolutionary War and a uniquely American style of making war and managing conflict.

The book contains eleven chapters, each dealing with a different aspect or conflict in Colonial America. The first chapter deals with the initial conflicts between the European colonists and the Native Americans, while the second overviews the actions of colonial militia in King William’s War. The third discusses initial militia/professional forces cooperation during Queen Anne’s War, and the fourth deals with English colonial militia members and their relationships with authority during King William’s and Queen Anne’s wars, both local and continental professional officers. The fifth chapter examines the interactions between the militia and the Royal Navy during King George’s War, while chapter six looks across the aisle and pits French militia against Virginian militia at the beginning of the French and Indian war. The seventh discusses the interactions and relationship between the colonial militias and professional British army forces during the early war and the eighth covers the turning of the war towards British favor and the increasing coordination among British forces. The ninth discusses some of the Anglo-American allies, while continuing the ongoing narrative of the war, with the tenth covering the final campaigns of the war and the capture of New France. The book ends with chapter eleven, which overviews the aftermath of these events and the awakening of a collective consciousness among the colonists of their separation from Britain and their uniquely American identity.

Peckham presents a theme of the ever-increasing escalation of war, approached in a uniquely American way over the course of four successive colonial wars. The initial conflicts with the Native Americans had no real rules governing and did not serve to create a war tradition more complicated than a ‘burn and scalp’ mentality. This meant that the European tradition of large armies campaigning over land occupied permanently was not transplanted to North America until much later. However, by the time of transplantation, a sense
of American exceptionalism—which the author conveys throughout the text—had taken root in the British colonies and the grand tradition of denying and defying authority had begun, creating the culture necessary to build a nation from frontier.

Howard Peckham presents to his audience the tale of wars that involved European colonists from the perspective of 1964, when the focus on the uniqueness of American spirit in the face of the menace presented by international Communism was in vogue. However, this is not intended to be a derogatory statement; the book is an entertaining read, engaging in its style and flow. However, the text often reminds the reader that all books are products of their time.