



Benjamin Franklin

The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to Her Colonies

1760___EXCERPTS

In the midst of the French and Indian War (1754-1763), fought primarily in French Canada and the northern colonies, the question presented itself — When Britain wins, should it take possession of Canada, or let the French keep it in exchange for the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe? Which alternative will provide more security and opportunity for the British colonies? When an anonymous writer published a pamphlet in 1760 supported acquiring Guadeloupe instead of French Canada, Benjamin Franklin revved up his pen and printing press in firm opposition and only slightly veiled disdain, demolishing each of the writer's arguments. Here his remarks on the advantages of possessing Canada — and keeping France out of North America — are excerpted. (With its victory in 1763, Britain took possession of all the French claims in North America.)

I have perused with no small pleasure the *Letter addressed to Two Great Men* and the *Remarks* on that letter. It is not merely from the beauty, the force and perspicuity of expression, or the general elegance of manner conspicuous in both pamphlets, that my pleasure chiefly arises. It is rather from this: that I have lived to see subjects of the greatest importance to this nation publicly discussed without party views, or party heat, with decency and politeness, and with no other warmth than what a zeal for the honour and happiness of our king and country may inspire; and this by writers whose understanding (however they may differ from each other) appears not unequal to their candour and the uprightness of their intention.

But, as great abilities have not always the best information, there are, I apprehend, in the *Remarks* some opinions not well founded, and some mistakes of so important a nature, as to render a few observations on them necessary for the better information of the publick. . . .

But the *remarker* [anonymous writer] thinks we shall be sufficiently secure in America, if we “raise English forts at such [mountain] passes as may at once make us respectable to the French and to the Indian nations.” The security desirable in America may be considered as of three kinds:

1. A security of possession, that the French shall not drive us out of the country.
2. A security of our planters from the inroads of savages, and the murders committed by them.
3. A security that the British nation shall not be oblig'd on every new war to repeat the immense expence occasion'd by this, to defend its possessions in America.

Forts in the most important [mountain] passes may, I acknowledge, be of use to obtain the first kind of security, but as those situations are far advanc'd beyond the inhabitants, the expence of maintaining and supplying the garrisons will be very great even in time of full peace, and immense on every interruption of it, as it is easy for skulking parties of the enemy in such long roads thro' the woods, to intercept and cut off our convoys, unless guarded continually by great bodies of men.

The second kind of security will not be obtained by such forts unless they were connected by a wall like that of China from one end of our settlements to the other. If the Indians, when at war, march'd like the Europeans, with great armies, heavy cannon, baggage and carriages, the passes thro' which alone such armies could penetrate our country or receive their supplies, being secur'd, all might be sufficiently secure; but the case is widely different. They go to war, as they call it, in small parties, from fifty men down to five. Their hunting life has made them acquainted with the whole country, and scarce any part of it is impracticable to such a party. They can travel thro' the woods even by night and know how to conceal their tracks. They pass easily between your forts undiscover'd and privately approach the settlements of your frontier inhabitants. They need no convoys of provisions to follow them, for whether they are shifting from place to place in the woods or lying in wait for an opportunity to strike a blow, every thicket and every stream furnishes so small a number with sufficient subsistence. When they have surpriz'd separately, and murder'd and scalp'd a dozen families, they are gone with inconceivable expedition thro' unknown ways, and 'tis very rare that pursuers have any chance of coming up with them. In short, long experience has taught our planters, that they cannot rely upon forts as a security against Indians . . .

As to the third kind of security, that we shall not, in a few years, have all we have now done to do over again in America and be oblig'd to employ the same number of troops and ships at the same immense expence to defend our possessions there, while we are in proportion weaken'd here: such forts I think cannot prevent this. During a peace, it is not to be doubted the French, who are adroit at fortifying, will likewise erect forts in the most advantageous places of the country we leave them, which will make it more difficult than ever to be reduc'd in case of another war. We know by the experience of this war, how extremely difficult it is to march an army thro' the American woods, with its necessary cannon and stores, sufficient to reduce a very slight fort. The accounts at the treasury will tell you what amazing sums we have necessarily spent in the expeditions against two very trifling forts, Duquesne and Crown Point. While the French retain their influence over the Indians, they can easily keep our long extended frontier in continual alarm, by a very few of those people; and with a small number of regulars and militia, in such a country, we find they can keep an army of ours in full employ for several years. We therefore shall not need to be told by our colonies that if we leave Canada, however circumscrib'd, to the French, "*we have done nothing.*" We shall soon be made sensible ourselves of this truth, and to our cost. . . .

Now all the kinds of security we have mention'd are obtain'd by subduing and retaining Canada. Our present possessions in America are secur'd. Our planters will no longer be massacred by the Indians, who depending absolutely on us for what are now become the necessaries of life to them, guns, powder, hatchets, knives, and clothing; and having no other Europeans near that can either supply them or instigate them against us, there is no doubt of their being always dispos'd, if we treat them with common justice, to live in perpetual peace with us. And with regard to France, she cannot, in case of another war, put us to the immense expence of defending that long extended frontier; we shall then, as it were, have our backs against a wall in America, the sea-coast will be easily protected by our superior naval power; and here "*our own watchfulness and our own strength*" will be properly and cannot but be successfully employed. In this situation the force now employ'd in that part of the world may be spar'd for any other service here or elsewhere; so that both the offensive and defensive strength of the British empire on the whole will be greatly increased.

But to leave the French in possession of Canada when it is in our power to remove them, and depend, as the remarker proposes, on our own "*strength and watchfulness*" to prevent the mischiefs that may attend it, seems neither safe nor prudent. Happy as we now are, under the best of kings, and in the prospect of a

succession promising every felicity a nation was ever bless'd with: happy too in the wisdom and vigour of every part of the administration, particularly that part whose peculiar province is the British plantations, a province every true Englishman sees with pleasure under the principal direction of a nobleman, as much distinguish'd by his great capacity, as by his unwearied and disinterested application to this important department; we cannot, we ought not to promise ourselves the uninterrupted continuance of those blessings. . . .

I should indeed think it less material whether Canada were ceded to us or not, if I had in view only the *security of possession* in our colonies. I entirely agree with the Remarker, that we are in North America “a far greater continental as well as naval power,” and that only cowardice or ignorance can subject our colonies there to a French conquest. But for the same reason I disagree with him widely upon another point. I do not think that our “blood and treasure has been expended,” as he intimates, “*in the cause of the colonies,*” and that we are “making conquests *for them*”; yet I believe this is too common an error. I do not say they are altogether unconcerned in the event. The inhabitants of them are, in common with the other subjects of Great Britain, anxious for the glory of her crown, the extent of her power and commerce, the welfare and future repose of the whole British people. They could not therefore but take a large share in the affronts offered to Britain, and have been animated with a truly British *spirit* to exert themselves beyond their strength, and against their evident interest. . . .

The remarker thinks that our people in America, “finding no check from Canada would extend themselves almost without bounds into the inland parts, and increase infinitely from all causes.” The very reason he assigns for their so extending, and which is indeed the true one, their being “invited to it by the pleasantness, fertility and plenty of the country,” may satisfy us, that this extension will continue to proceed as long as there remains any pleasant fertile country within their reach. And if we even suppose them confin'd by the waters of the Mississippi westward, and by those of St. Laurence and the lakes to the northward, yet still we shall leave them room enough to increase even in the *sparse* manner of settling now practis'd there, till they amount to perhaps a hundred millions of souls. This must take some centuries to fulfill, and in the mean time, this nation must necessarily supply them with the manufactures they consume, because the new settlers will be employ'd in agriculture, and the new settlements will so continually draw off the spare hands from the old, that our present colonies will not, during the period we have mention'd find themselves in a condition to manufacture even for their own inhabitants, to any considerable degree, much less for those who are settling behind them. Thus our *trade* must, till that country becomes as fully peopled as England, that is for centuries to come, be continually increasing, and with it our naval power; because the ocean is between us and them, and our ships and seamen must increase as that trade increases. . . .

Our trade to the West-India islands is undoubtedly a valuable one: but whatever is the amount of it, it has long been at a stand. Limited as our sugar planters are by the scantiness of territory, they cannot increase much beyond their present number; and this is an evil, as I shall show hereafter, that will be little helped by our keeping Guadaloupe. The trade to our Northern Colonies is not only greater but yearly increasing with the increase of people; and even in a greater proportion as the people increase in wealth and the ability of spending as well as in numbers. I have already said, that our people in the Northern Colonies double in about 25 years, exclusive of the accession of strangers. . . .

. . . I shall next consider the other supposition, that their growth may render them *dangerous*. Of this I own, I have not the least conception, when I consider that we have already fourteen separate governments on the maritime coast of the continent, and if we extend our settlements shall probably have as many more behind them on the inland side. Those we now have, are not only under different governors, but have different forms of government, different laws, different interests, and some of them different religious persuasions and different manners. Their jealousy of each other is so great that however necessary an union of the colonies has long been, for their common defence and security against their enemies, and how sensible soever each colony has been of that necessity, yet they have never been able to effect such an union among themselves, nor even to agree in requesting the mother country to establish it

for them. Nothing but the immediate command of the crown has been able to produce even the imperfect union but lately seen there, of the forces of some colonies. If they could not agree to unite for their defence against the French and Indians, who were perpetually harassing their settlements, burning their villages, and murdering their people; can it reasonably be supposed there is any danger of their uniting against their own nation, which protects and encourages them, with which they have so many connections and ties of blood, interest and affection, and which 'tis well known they all love much more than they love one another? in Short, there are so many causes that must operate to prevent it, that I will venture to say, an union amongst them for such a purpose is not merely improbable, it is impossible; and if the union of the whole is impossible, the attempt of a part must be madness: as those colonies that did not join the rebellion, would join the mother country in suppressing it.

When I say such an union is impossible, I mean without the most grievous tyranny and oppression. People who have property in a country which they may lose, and privileges which they may endanger; are generally dispos'd to be quiet; and even to bear much, rather than hazard all. While the government is mild and just, while important civil and religious rights are secure, such subjects will be dutiful and obedient. The waves do not rise, but when the winds blow. . . .

But what is the prudent policy inculcated by the *remarker*, to obtain this end, security of dominion over our colonies: It is, to leave the French in Canada, to "*check*" their growth, for otherwise our people may "increase infinitely from all causes." We have already seen in what manner the French and their Indians *check the growth* of our colonies. 'Tis a modest word, this, *check*, for massacring men, women and children. The writer would, if he could, hide from himself as well as from the public, the horror arising from such a proposal, by couching it in general terms: 'tis no wonder he thought it a "subject not fit for discussion" in his letter, tho' he recommends it as "a point that should be the constant object of the minister's attention!" But if Canada is restored on this principle, will not Britain be guilty of all the blood to be shed, all the murders to be committed in order to check this dreaded growth of our own people? Will not this be telling the French in plain terms, that the horrid barbarities they perpetrate with their Indians on our colonists, are agreeable to us; and that they need not apprehend the resentment of a government with whose views they so happily concur? Will not the colonies view it in this light? Will they have reason to consider themselves any longer as subjects and children, when they find their cruel enemies halloo'd upon them by the country from whence they sprung, the government that owes them protection as it requires their obedience? Is not this the most likely means of driving them into the arms of the French, who can invite them by an offer of that security their own government chooses not to afford them? . . .

The objection I have often heard, that if we had Canada, we could not people it, without draining Britain of its inhabitants, is founded on ignorance of the nature of population in new countries. When we first began to colonize in America, it was necessary to send people, and to send seed-corn; but it is not now necessary that we should furnish, for a new colony, either one or the other. The annual increment alone of our present colonies, without diminishing their numbers, or requiring a man from hence, is sufficient in ten years to fill Canada with double the number of English that it now has of French inhabitants. . . .

There is a great deal more to be said on all the parts of these subjects; but as it would carry me into a detail that I fear would tire the patience of my readers, and which I am not without apprehensions I have done already, I shall reserve what remains till I dare venture again on the indulgence of the publick.

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