Politics, Persistence, and Power: The Strategy That Won the French Wars

Jackson Prather
University of North Alabama

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.una.edu/nahr
Part of the European History Commons, and the Public History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.una.edu/nahr/vol2/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNA Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Alabama Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNA Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact jpare1@una.edu.
Politics, Persistence, and Power: The Strategy That Won the French Wars

Jackson Prather

In the year 1815, as the dust settled on the battlefield of Waterloo and the ink dried on the various agreements signed at the Congress of Vienna, Great Britain emerged as the undisputed hegemon of Europe. She commanded the seas and vanquished Napoleon. The Industrial Revolution powered the dynamic, robust British economy, and the Empire extended from the Caribbean to Southeast Asia and from the British Isles to the southern tip of Africa. Great Britain seemed invincible and the greatest power the world had yet known. However, the previous twenty-two years were among the most difficult and perilous in British history. For those two decades Great Britain was at near constant war with her age-old rival: France. Ultimately, Great Britain won the French Wars because of strategy.

The French Wars, as they were known in Britain, lasted from 1793-1815, with a brief ceasefire in 1802-1803 called the Peace of Amiens. The hostilities in Europe actually began in 1792 with the Coalition of Kings – an alliance between Prussia and Austria – that was created to end the French Revolution and reinstate the Bourbon monarchy. The combat expanded and soon embroiled Europe in the most destructive war it had yet seen. The first period of the war, lasting from 1792-1802, is known as the French Revolutionary War. By the time the war resumed in 1803, French General Napoleon Bonaparte had become the leader of France, and as such started the second phase of the war, the Napoleonic War
The wars were fought as a series of seven Coalitions against France, and these alliances were made up primarily of Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia. The Coalitions were named in order of their formation, from the First Coalition (1793-1797) to the Seventh Coalition (1815).

Great Britain was the most persistent and steadfast opponent of France, refusing to accept French dominance in Europe and remaining totally dedicated to the destruction of the French Empire. Although Britain would emerge with a complete victory over France, such a victory seemed unlikely if not impossible for the majority of the French Wars. France was a military juggernaut, and on numerous occasions Britain’s allies were forced to surrender and left the British as the only power left opposing France’s quest to conquer all of Europe.

Great Britain’s strategy was to proceed with caution and pragmatism throughout the wars. Victory was a byproduct of Britain’s ability to overcome and persevere when the odds were against her. The British political system encouraged dissent yet managed to consistently find solutions. Great Britain had far fewer soldiers than France but was much better at forging alliances. Britain’s willingness to adapt when plans failed allowed her to develop a comprehensive strategy that would eventually lead to victory.

I. Overcoming Difficulties

Britain’s victory in the French Wars is all the more impressive when the difficulties she overcame are considered: internal political dissent and upheaval, a constant shortage of manpower, and recurring chaos in the Coalitions. Much of the domestic dissent was caused by the epic events unfolding across the English Channel. The British watched everything the
French did very closely, and this was no exception.

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, the reaction in Britain was altogether confused. The previous century had seen the most intense stage of the Anglo-French rivalry, often referred to as the Second Hundred Years’ War.¹ Hatred for the French was as fervent as ever in Britain, and the sour taste left by the French intervention in the War of American Independence still lingered. The British, always conscious of economic competition, saw the French Revolution as an opportunity to reassert their naval power globally and once and for all become the world’s commercial titan.² The French Revolution was more than a mere regime change and, much like the American Revolution, produced strong ideology that challenged the status quo that existed in Europe. Many in Britain sympathized with this new political philosophy, including powerful men in Parliament, like Charles James Fox and William Pitt the Younger.³ The British considered themselves to be a free people and the French to be subjects of a despotic government. Fox was a proponent of Britain welcoming the Revolution with open arms and embracing the revolutionary spirit that was sweeping the world. Fox’s ideological rival, Edmund Burke, almost instantly recognized the threat that the French Revolution posed to both France and the whole of Europe. Burke went so far as to call the events in France an “irreparable calamity to mankind,” and predicted that the Revolution would soon be taken over by some charismatic general that would lead France into perpetual war.⁴ The rivalry between Fox and Burke would be played out not only in

⁴ Emsley, 10; Lloyd, 64.
Parliament, but also throughout the British public. Many were appalled at the behavior of the French, while others thought the Revolution wonderful and a sign of possible political reform in Britain as well.

Opinion began to sway in favor of the conservative opponents of the French Revolution in 1792. Tension between France and her two primary continental rivals, Prussia and Austria, reached a breaking point on 20 April 1792 when France declared war. Prussia and Austria were longtime rivals, having just fought a war in the late 1770s. The events in France terrified the two nations enough to force an alliance of convenience, and they prepared for an invasion of France. This alliance, known as the Coalition of Kings, was expected to crush the disorganized French armies and restore the Bourbon monarchy. Regardless of how confident many were of victory, the people of Britain had no interest in waging yet another war against France. British finances were still in poor order following the loss of the American colonies, and war against France did not provide any advantages for Britain. Therefore, Britain remained neutral. It was not until the surprising French victory over invading Austro-Prussian forces and the subsequent French invasion of the Low Countries that Britain became concerned with France’s behavior. Britain had always feared French expansionism, and in November 1792 France conquered and occupied present-day Belgium at the Battle of Jemappes.

The situation escalated in January 1793 with the execution of France’s King Louis XVI. This action horrified the British people because they remembered what chaos and bloodshed resulted from the execution of a monarch in their own civil war during the 17th century. Then, on 1

---

5 War of Austrian Succession
7 Present-day Belgium and the Netherlands
8 Pope, 17, 529.
February, France declared war on Great Britain. Although the British
government had positioned itself to oppose France long before this
declaration, the fact that France appeared the aggressor united many in
Parliament and the public.9

Political and public dissent would continue for the course of the
war. George III was involved in strategic planning, and his opinion was
widely respected in Parliament. He supported prosecuting the war against
France and finding European allies to fight alongside Britain.10 William Pitt
the Younger, George’s hand-chosen Prime Minister, honored the King’s
wishes and sought peace only when it appeared favorable for Britain - as
it did in 1802.11 George III’s involvement prevented any type of broadly
supported coalition from forming within Parliament and alienated many
factions, such as the Foxites. Fox strongly supported peace in 1796 as the
First Coalition appeared to be on the brink of collapse, but George III
insisted that no peace negotiations be held until after the completion of
British expeditions to the East and West Indies.12

Popular dissent was also a problem for Britain throughout the
war. Riots raged constantly and grew increasingly violent as the war
affected more and more Britons. The Burdett riots in April 1810 and the
food price riots that resulted from the poor harvest of 1811 epitomized
this trend. Compounded by the ever-present fear of Irish insurrection,
Britain was forced to tie down over forty thousand infantrymen and five
regiments of cavalry for the purpose of maintaining domestic security.13

---

9 Emsley, 23.
10 Christopher Hall, British Strategy in the Napoleonic War, 1803-1815 (Manchester:
Manchester University Press, 1992), 56.
11 Hervey Meyer Bowman, Preliminary Stages of the Peace of Amiens (Toronto: University
Library, 1899), 59.
12 John Holland Rose, Pitt and Napoleon: Essays and Letters (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1912),
238.
13 Hall, 71.
King George III had no tolerance for such insubordination, and in June
1798 he wrote to Pitt about these riots: “I trust … that as the sword is
drawn it not be returned into the sheath until the whole country has
submitted without condition.” These events siphoned valuable resources
that could have otherwise been used against France.

Great Britain faced a massive shortage of manpower during the
French Wars. At the outbreak of war, Britain’s population was a little more
than half that of France. The British Army was always outnumbered in
battle, and therefore was forced to rely on Coalitions to deploy enough
men to fight the French. Even the combined forces of Austria, Prussia,
Russia, and Britain struggled to match the enormous French armies,
which were the result of *levée en masse*, or mass conscription. After 1796,
France held the numerical advantage over the combined forces of the
Coalition. France neglected their navy and was able to put all of her
manpower resources into the army, creating the most formidable fighting
force the world had yet seen. Britain’s constitutional system forbade
such measures to force men into service. The British thought themselves
a free people in direct contrast to the French. Conscription is the most
coercive act a government can perform on its citizens, therefore the British
government would not dare to mimic the French. Britain struggled
mightily to convince men to sign up to be sent overseas. It was seen as a
death sentence by the public to enlist in the British Army, especially after
the horrifying casualties in the West Indies campaign of 1793 that resulted
in the death of over sixty thousand British regulars from disease.

This lack of manpower severely constrained Britain’s strategic

---

14 Rose, 243.
15 Lloyd, 65.
16 Pope, 18.
17 Mackesy, 156.
options and made large-scale offensive operations rare. The overwhelming majority of British soldiers were used in either the defense of the British Isles or in the protection of colonial possessions. This left small armies for invasions into Europe, which is the primary reason for Britain’s lack of continental success prior to the Peninsular War in 1808. The lack of available men encouraged caution on the part of British commanders and fostered a reluctance to use British soldiers unless all other options had been exhausted. This strategy caused distrust among the Coalition allies and made it difficult for Britain to convince her allies of her dedication to the cause.

Great Britain was well aware that she could not defeat France on her own; France was equally aware that she could not defeat Britain on her own. The stalemate was compounded by the tactical situation: Britain was dominant on the seas, and France’s land armies were unstoppable. These two great advantages cancelled one another out as Britain’s navy blocked France from invading the British Isles, and France’s army prevented Britain from being able to gain a foothold on the continent. In order to tip the balance of power in their favor the two rivals had to build powerful alliances. France and Napoleon conquered nations and conscripted their people into service or subdued foreign governments and forced them into alliances. The latter was the case in Spain and the Confederation of the Rhine. Great Britain, however, was the only power involved in the French Wars not interested in territorial gains in Europe, and therefore went about alliance building in a very different way: financial and tactical support. Despite Britain’s success in building these Coalitions, they were very turbulent and unhappy alliances that resulted in infighting, betrayal, and rampant distrust.
In wars past, such as the Seven Years’ War, Britain relied on significant numbers of European mercenaries (i.e. Prussians) and would support them with small detachments of British regulars. This, combined with a dominant British naval presence, was enough to defeat the enemy and emerge victorious. The Anglo-Prussian alliance was made all the more convenient by the lack of Prussian colonial ambitions and Britain’s disinterest in territorial expansion in Europe. However, with Prussia’s rise in the late 18th century and increased appetite for land in Northern Europe, notably in Hanover, the native land of the British monarchs, Britain could no longer rely on Prussia for ground forces. Furthermore, when Prussia and Austria formed the “Coalition of Kings” in 1792 to invade France, Prussia would need every soldier she could muster, leaving none to hire out to the British. For the British, a stronger, broader Coalition had to be built from all European countries threatened by French expansionism.

Britain built these Coalitions in two primary ways - financial support, through subsidies and loans, and tactical support, via weaponry donations and naval support. In this way, Britain was able to cobble together Coalitions time and time again to resist French expansion. Britain did not initiate the First Coalition (1792-1797), but soon joined in early 1793 after the French invasion of the Low Countries and France’s subsequent declaration of war on Britain. French victories in 1794 and 1795 threatened to collapse the Coalition, but Britain held it together until 1797 when Austria made a separate peace with France at Campo Formio. Almost two years later Britain, Austria, Russia, and several smaller nations formed the Second Coalition to oppose French actions on the Rhine.

18 Pope, 12.
19 Lloyd, 65.
and in Italy. Initial allied success soon gave way to humiliating defeat, primarily at the hands of France’s rising star: Napoleon Bonaparte. The Second Coalition collapsed in 1801 despite Britain’s valiant efforts to hold it together. By early 1802, Britain was the only nation still at war with France; soon the Peace of Amiens was signed between the two countries bringing about the only period between 1793 and 1815 that Britain and France were not at war.\(^{20}\)

Great Britain was able to assess her strategy during this brief cessation of hostilities, because even the most optimistic Britons knew that Amiens was a mere ceasefire and more war was on the horizon. Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and his top advisors believed that as long as Napoleon was in command in France, Britain would not be safe. Despite the peace treaty, Bonaparte remained aggressive with Britain, saying to the British ambassador Lord Malmesbury, “Our real enemy is England. The French Republic must either destroy the English monarchy or be destroyed by it.”\(^{21}\) Napoleon was not the only one making such declarations, however, as Lord Grenville, the British Foreign Secretary, had said that Britain would never allow France to be the ruler of the Low Countries.\(^{22}\) The Peace of Amiens was merely an attempt by both nations to address domestic issues and retool for impending war.

The way in which the first two Coalitions ended seriously hindered Britain’s trust in her allies. Despite agreements to the contrary, Coalition members made separate peace with France, alienating Britain and exposing the weakness of the Coalition to France. The lack of trust and respect was ubiquitous in the Coalitions. Prussia and Austria were

---

\(^{21}\) Bowman, 15.  
\(^{22}\) Duffy, 128.
age-old rivals; the flimsy Coalition of Kings in 1792 was marked by a total lack of coordination and rampant showmanship by the respective armies. Prussia, Austria, and Russia all had territorial ambitions in Poland, which constantly caused rifts in the Coalition and distracted valuable resources away from the war against France. The obsession with Poland heavily frustrated Britain due to its total irrelevance to the French issue. Conversely, Britain’s lack of interest in Eastern Europe caused Prussia, Austria, and Russia to view Britain as selfish. The three continental Coalition members also distrusted Britain because of her strategy during the first two Coalitions. While Britain maintained control of the seas and gained riches in the form of colonial possessions in the West and East Indies, Africa, and India, the continental allies endured heavy casualties and territorial losses (in the case of Austria and Prussia) at the hands of the French. The allies consistently overestimated Britain’s military strength, and at nearly every negotiation demanded that Britain open a western front against France.

Prussia, Austria, and Russia also repeatedly overestimated Britain’s financial reserves and the liquidity of her wealth. Following the War of American Independence, Britain was in a state of economic calamity. In 1783 William Pitt the Younger became Prime Minister, and because of his skill Britain’s finances began to slowly improve. But just as things started to look better in the early 1790s, the war with France broke out, placing enormous strain on the British economy. Though Britain weathered the war better than any other European nation, she was not immune to debt and deficits. The lack of available funds for loans posed a problem for Britain every time she attempted to form a Coalition.

23 Pope, 10.
24 Pope, 18-22.
or keep one together; an ally would ask for a significant sum of money but Britain could only provide a portion. Prussia, Russia, and Austria thought that Britain was being greedy and hoarding her money. Since, as the continental allies believed, Britain was not negotiating in good faith, they did not have to either. Russia had at the end of the Second Coalition formed the Armed Neutrality of the North and convinced Denmark, Sweden, and Prussia to join the league to oppose British commercial policy. Britain had used her navy to enforce a rule called the right of search, which essentially authorized British vessels to stop any ship, allied or neutral, to search for potential contraband headed for France. The sudden hostility from longtime allies posed several significant problems for Britain. Primarily, it threatened to undermine Britain’s last effective weapon against France - the blockade. It also cut Britain off from valuable resources that she acquired from the Baltic: grain to feed the people of Britain (compounding food riots at home) and timber to build and repair ships. In 1801, Britain used force to coerce the Danes out of the league, and soon thereafter it fell apart. Nonetheless, the Armed Neutrality of the North exemplified the hostilities among Coalition members and furthered the lack of trust among them.

Britain so heavily disliked her allies when war with France resumed in 1803 that many prominent British MPs such as Lord Grenville and Charles James Fox opposed the formation of a Third Coalition. Fox believed bringing Prussia and Austria into the war would “end in making Bonaparte as much in effect the monarch of Germany as he is France.” Had it not been for King George III’s insistence, it is unlikely that Britain would have sought another Coalition because the first two Coalitions

26 Chandler, 16-17.
27 Hall, 59.
ended in dismal failure. Britain loaned Prussia and Austria huge sums of money that were unlikely to ever be paid back, and the two continental allies had shown a complete inability to defeat or even slow down the French armies.\textsuperscript{28}

The distrust manifested itself tactically on the battlefield throughout the wars, mostly in the form of a lack of coordination. In 1793, the First Coalition had France in a compromised situation, with armies in disarray and the French frontiers open to invasion. An inability to manage a systematic attack on France allowed the Revolutionary armies to regroup. By 1794 the window had passed and the French armies were on the offensive again.\textsuperscript{29} The Sixth Coalition was also afflicted by the lack of coordination. Great Britain and Russia formed the alliance in 1812 following Napoleon’s ill-fated invasion of Russia; Portugal and Spain joined nominally to pledge support for their liberators, the British.\textsuperscript{30} When Napoleon’s armies limped back into central Europe, Prussia betrayed the French.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the state of Napoleon’s armies, he was able to regroup and destroy both Prussian and Austrian forces that launched dis-coordinated attacks against him. Even the victorious Seventh Coalition faced a lack of comprehensive battlefield strategy. Upon Napoleon’s return in 1815, disagreement about whether to strike at the heart of France or confront the French army that was invading the Low Countries almost caused disaster. Fortunately for the Coalition, the Duke of Wellington marched to meet the French and crushed Napoleon, winning the most famous battle of the age at Waterloo.\textsuperscript{32} Even with victory on the cusp,

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{29} Pope, 17.
\textsuperscript{30} Chandler, 97.
\textsuperscript{31} Napoleon forced Prussia into an alliance following the Treaty of Tilsit. See Chandler, 441-442.
\textsuperscript{32} Chandler, 481.
the allies struggled to come together and fight Napoleon as one unified Coalition. The Coalitions were victorious in spite of themselves, for the distrust and lack of coordination gave France far more opportunities to continue fighting than she had earned.

II. Colonial or Continental Strategy
When Great Britain joined the war in 1793 she faced a tough decision regarding her primary strategy. Henry Dundas, the Secretary of State for War from 1794-1801, was a strong proponent of a colonial strategy, which entailed conquering French and French-allied colonial possessions in order to deny France the income that would help continue the war.33 Lord Grenville, who served as the Home Secretary, the War Secretary, and Prime Minister at various times throughout the war, argued for a continental strategy and never supported any peace negotiations with France.34 Grenville believed that the only way to secure a true peace with France was total victory, and that included the defeat and abdication of Napoleon. Total victory could not be achieved by battles in the West Indies and India, so Grenville strongly advocated the use of British resources on the European continent to directly confront and defeat France. His opponents, including Dundas, disagreed primarily because of the potential cost of such a strategy; Britain had virtually no battlefield success against France in the first decade of the war and continued defeat could open up the British Isles to French invasion. The two strategies, colonial or continental, would be the primary argument among British policymakers throughout the French Wars.

At first, the debate was so heated and eloquently argued for both

34 Chandler, 184-185.
sides that Britain attempted to do both.\(^{35}\) This dual strategy was doomed to fail, for Britain did not have the resources to pursue colonial conquests and continental confrontation. Inevitable failure of such a strategy was obvious to most all policymakers; even King George III recognized it. He wrote to Pitt in September 1793: “The misfortune of our situation is that we have too many objects to attend to, and our force must be consequently too small at each place.”\(^{36}\)

Through trial and error – mostly the latter – Britain learned that Grenville was right. Britain could not have lasting peace and security without a total defeat of France. During the First Coalition, Britain aggressively sought French colonial possessions in the West Indies. In 1794, Britain captured Martinique, France’s major military outpost in the Caribbean.\(^{37}\) By 1795 the Dutch had joined the war on the side of the French, and the British seized the opportunity by capturing the Cape of Good Hope and Ceylon.\(^{38}\) This strategy was highly successful for British commercial and colonial interests. India was now protected from French and Dutch intervention, which allowed for great expansion on the subcontinent by the British East India Company. Britain rationalized the conquest of India with the potential threat of Napoleon marching his army from Egypt to India in the footsteps of Alexander the Great. Britain wanted total control over India before the French Revolution had even started, but the war with France provided an opportunity and excuse to pacify India.\(^{39}\)

The colonial strategy started to backfire by 1803. The West Indies campaign, although met with initial success, ended in disaster. Well over

\(^{35}\) Emsley, 55.
\(^{36}\) Rose, 225.
\(^{37}\) Emsley, 55.
\(^{38}\) Pope, 17-18.
\(^{39}\) Lloyd, 68-69.
60,000 British soldiers died from disease, with another 40,000 more being deemed unfit to fight. The effect of this mass loss of troops was twofold. First, many of the soldiers that died were Britain’s finest regulars, well trained with some experience in India. Second, the West Indies disaster ruined British troop morale. Defections increased and recruitment of fresh troops became nearly impossible.\textsuperscript{40} Strategically, the colonial strategy was ineffective relative to Britain’s war goal to establish peace and security. It became clear that Britain had overestimated France’s reliance on colonial income for her war effort, because with the French monarchy went the old systems of financing wars. France was not only able to harness all available domestic manpower for the war effort, but also all her financial resources. Napoleon paid little mind to the loss of the colonies, and only on one occasion - Peace of Amiens 1802 - did France want the captured colonies back. Following the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) and Napoleon’s sale of Louisiana to the United States in 1803, Britain realized that France was willing to abandon colonial possessions for the sake of continuing her European conquests.\textsuperscript{41} The British colonial strategy tied up huge numbers of warships and military personnel in the protection of Britain’s increasingly massive Empire. British forces were spread thin, and French blockade running was becoming more of a problem.\textsuperscript{42} Eventually, the fear of a French invasion forced Britain to refocus her efforts on Europe, but not before her strategy would cause problems with her Coalition allies.

While Great Britain was at the negotiating table with Prussia, Russia, and Austria trying to convince her allies of commitment to the \textit{European theatre}, she was also conquering and plundering French and

\textsuperscript{40} Mackesy, 156-157.
\textsuperscript{41} Pope, 23.
\textsuperscript{42} Mackesy, 152.
Dutch colonies. Prussia, Russia, and Austria had deployed large land armies in Europe to engage the French and had suffered heavily for it, so it was no surprise that the continental Coalition members saw Britain as getting rich and expanding her Empire while they endured embarrassing defeats and humiliating peace arrangements at the hands of the French. If Britain was going to defeat France, she needed the trust and cooperation of the continental allies. In order to gain and keep that trust, Britain needed a permanent western front against France. The memory of Britain’s repeated failures to gain a foothold in Western Europe made it very difficult for her to commit troops to a continental invasion.

When the French Wars first broke out in 1792 between France and Austro-Prussian forces, most European observers thought that the war would be short lived and end in French defeat. Rapid French victories at Valmy and Jemappes terrified the British, because it was at that point that it became obvious that France posed a threat to Britain directly. If a Revolutionary army full of untrained volunteers could so thoroughly defeat the professional armies of Prussia and Austria, all of Europe had something to fear in French expansionism. Jemappes was strategically very threatening to Britain as well, for it opened the way for French control of the Low Countries, which were Britain’s entry point for trade into Northern Europe. The great port of Antwerp provided a terrific location for France to assemble and launch an invasion force of Britain. Therefore, in February 1793, George III authorized Britain’s first military action of the war by deploying one brigade of Foot Guards to push the French out of the Low Countries. George III’s second son, the Duke of York, commanded this force. The Duke of York was not a competent

---

43 Duffy, 139.
44 Chandler, 455-456, 214.
military commander, but even if he were, the expedition was doomed to fail. No general - not even Napoleon - could have emerged victorious with one brigade of light infantry against the hordes of the French Revolutionary army and the expert French artillery. To compound the difficulties, George III prohibited his son’s forces from being amalgamated into a larger allied force, arguing that no British Royal would be made subordinate to a German commander.\textsuperscript{45}

By 1795, the British were expelled from the Low Countries and France had become their \textit{de facto} ruler. In June 1795, the British exhibited their trademark persistence and tried again, this time at Quiberon in southern Brittany, France. The Royal Navy deployed over three thousand French royalist émigré troops in an effort to create a counter-revolution. France quickly crushed the rebellion, which was marred by infighting among the royalist troops. Quiberon was the first and last major attempt by the British to use French émigré soldiers to foment a French rebellion, because as the British envoy reported to Parliament after the failure, “However [much] they hate one another, they all in the bottom detest us (the British).”\textsuperscript{46} These routine defeats at the hands of an increasingly confident and experienced French army forced Britain to nearly abort the continental strategy time and time again, for it was cheaper and easier to conquer French colonies.

Events in the Iberian Peninsula provided Great Britain with the opportunity to open up the long awaited western front against France. Portugal, long considered a British ally despite an official alliance with France, repeatedly refused to comply with Napoleon’s Continental System and continued to trade with the British and harbor Royal Navy

\textsuperscript{45} Rose, 223-224.
\textsuperscript{46} Duffy, 132.
vessels. The Portuguese disobedience infuriated Napoleon and led to the deployment of French soldiers throughout Spain in preparation for an invasion of Portugal. The Spanish were not content with French rule either, and by 1807 the Iberian Peninsula was in open revolt against Napoleon. Spain requested British assistance in 1808, and Britain seized the opportunity and sent Lt. General Arthur Wellesley and General Sir John Moore to lead a British army in the liberation of Spain and Portugal. Success was not immediate, however. Napoleon himself marched a massive army across the Pyrenees and re-conquered Spain. Before he could finish off the British army at Corunna, he had to return to Paris because of increasing instability in his empire. The British army was able to escape, but General Moore was killed in the evacuation. Arthur Wellesley was now in command of the British forces.

Wellesley waged a calculated war of successive defensive and offensive operations that frustrated and eventually defeated the French in Portugal and Spain. For his actions he was made the first Duke of Wellington and received the baton of Field Marshall from George IV. The Peninsular War lasted from 1807-1814, and at varying times held down between 150,000 and 350,000 French soldiers while the British never deployed more than 50,000 men. Wellington’s campaign was the most brilliant exhibition of British martial genius in history, causing France to bleed money and soldiers during a period when they could least afford it. Napoleon massively underestimated Wellington and the British, for in 1812 – the height of the Peninsular War – he embarked on the infamous invasion of Russia. The Peninsular War epitomized British strategy throughout the French Wars. Although at first unsuccessful,

47 Chandler, 102-103.
48 See Chandler 329-336 for background on Peninsular War.
49 See Chandler 336-340 for details on Peninsular War.
Britain remained persistent and refused to capitulate to the French. Outnumbered, Britain used her resources expertly, letting the French be the aggressors until the opportunity to strike presented itself. That opportunity came at Salamanca and Vitoria, where Wellington proved he was as capable an offensive general as he was defensive. By late 1813, Portugal and Spain were free from French oppression, and on 7 October 1813 Wellington led his army through the Pyrenees and onto French soil, becoming the first allied army to do so since 1793. This British victory combined with the shattering of Napoleon’s army in Russia reinvigorated French opposition in Europe. Nearly every European country was at war with France in 1814 in what was to become known as the Sixth Coalition, and the first victorious Coalition of the French Wars.

Once the successes of the Peninsular War became clear to those in Parliament and London, British strategy was firmly continental. If France were to be thoroughly defeated, they would not pose a colonial threat regardless, which would enable Britain to be master of the seas and the dominant colonial power in Europe. The Peninsular War led to the liberation of Portugal and Spain, but the French Wars were disastrous for both countries, resulting in the eventual loss of their South American empires. Britain realized that the war was naturally eliminating imperial rivals, which allowed them to focus their resources on the issue at hand - defeating Napoleon and destroying the French Empire.

III. Commercial and Strategic Interests

Great Britain’s strategy during the French Wars can simply be defined as pragmatic. With limited resources to expend, primarily those of manpower, and massive colonial commitments that required most of the Royal Navy to defend, Britain could not afford to waste her armies. It was

50 Pope, 24.
for this reason that Britain preferred not to capture and occupy France’s colonial possessions but rather to attack and open their markets by force.\textsuperscript{51} This strategy was beneficial, especially during a time of war where Britain could not waste men guarding remote islands that tactically did nothing to defeat Napoleon. Britain’s caution grew after the resumption of war in 1803, for the Coalitions that formed between 1803 and 1812 were less comprehensive; and often, Britain was alone in their war against France. During this period, Britain had few major allies: Austria in 1809, Prussia from 1806-1807, and Russia from 1805-1807.\textsuperscript{52} If Britain were to launch an attack against France, it would be without support from allies. For most Britons, the risk of a failed assault far outweighed the benefits. France’s empire at its height reached from Portugal to Poland and from Antwerp to the Aegean. In order to cover such a daring amphibious assault, Britain would have to momentarily abandon her colonial possessions and open the British Isles up to a potential invasion. If such an assault on Europe were to fail, Britain would be left with no choice to make peace with France, and it is unlikely that Napoleon would make peace with Britain if they were ripe for invasion.

The inability to fight every battle all the time severely restricted Britain’s strategic options. Therefore, Great Britain only exerted her resources if there was a direct threat to strategic or commercial interests, or a great strategic or commercial benefit could be gained by doing so. When continental allies accused Britain of being selfish in their strategy, they were partly correct. However, had Britain not pursued this pragmatic and cautious strategy, it is unlikely they would have been able to wage war almost continuously from 1793-1815. Prussia, Russia, and Austria did

\textsuperscript{51} Duffy, 139.  
\textsuperscript{52} Pope, 24.
not utilize such a strategy, and on numerous occasions were forced out of
the war by French victory.

Great Britain’s strategy of only engaging when her interests were
threatened is exemplified in the French invasion of the Low Countries
in 1792. The unexpected French incursion violated both strategic and
commercial interests for Great Britain. Strategically, the Scheldt River delta
and the city of Antwerp provided arguably the best location in northwest
Europe to assemble an invasion force to attack Britain. French control of
this area also cut off Britain from easily meeting up with Prussian and
Austrian forces, making any coordinated moves in northwest or northern
Europe difficult. Commercially, the Low Countries were a major trading
partner for Britain and were part of the primary trade route from Britain
into northern Europe. French possession or subjugation of the Low
Countries also meant that France controlled the Dutch fleet, which could
pose a threat to British commerce in the Baltic Sea, North Sea, and even as
far away as the Indian Ocean. For all of these reasons, Britain was obliged
to get involved. Britain attempted to wrest control of the area from France
in the 1790s, but the expedition ended in failure.53

The Iberian revolt in 1807 provided Great Britain with an
excellent opportunity to make substantial strategic and commercial gains.
Commercially, Portugal and Spain owned vast empires in Central and
South America that would make great markets for British goods. Portugal
was a reluctant ally of France and had continually given safe harbor
to British vessels en route to Africa, Asia, and the Mediterranean. The
primary advantage offered by British intervention in Spain and Portugal
was strategic. First, both Spain and Portugal possessed considerable
fleets. The Spanish navy had suffered heavily at the Battle of Trafalgar

53 Rose, 231.
in 1805 at the hands of Britain’s most famous Admiral, Lord Horatio Nelson, but still had a capable fleet. As was the case with the Dutch, the fewer ships the French had under their command, the easier the British Royal Navy’s task of total blockade became. Better still, if these fleets were allied with the British, more Royal Navy vessels were available for colonial aggrandizement that would fulfill Britain’s desire to defeat France and conquer her colonies. The ferocity of the Iberian insurrection also guaranteed Britain of strong allied ground forces in Portugal and Spain. The Spanish guerillas proved especially effective, giving the British the critical advantage of knowing the terrain. Wellington maximized this advantage, expertly using topography to his defensive advantage. The large number of local soldiers fighting alongside the British army also made it easier to acquire provisions, lowered the cost of the entire operation, and increased troop morale. The largest strategic advantage provided by the Peninsular War was how it aided Britain’s efforts to build the Coalitions. Britain had finally opened a permanent western front and convinced her allies that she was totally dedicated to a land war in Europe. The persistence and eventual success against French armies was an inspiration to all the oppressed peoples and defeated armies of Europe. The new western front tied down hundreds of thousands of French regulars, and combined with the destruction of France’s Grand Army in the invasion of Russia, the French Empire’s eastern frontiers were left exposed. It was not until this period in 1812 that the Coalition saw a total victory over France as realistic since the early 1790s.

Conclusion

British strategy during the French Wars was the result of years

54 Lloyd, 65.
55 Mackesy, 159.
of trial and error that eventually produced the winning combination of pragmatism, perseverance, and daring. The fact that Great Britain managed to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds in the 1790s speaks to the courage and persistence of her people and political system. Britain was reluctant to go to war with France, but once it began Britain would never surrender until victory had been achieved. The British may not have been totally united during these trying times, but it is through dissent and difference of opinion that many of the victorious strategies were devised. The British were willing to try anything: invasions into the Low Countries, support for French Royalists in Brittany, colonial conquests across the globe, and finally, liberation of the Iberian Peninsula. Many of these strategies failed, but British resilience kept the war effort going and pushed through until Napoleon had been defeated and peace once again fell over Europe.

Great Britain was undoubtedly the most crucial opponent of the French during the wars. Every other European nation had at some point been defeated, allied themselves with the French, or were content with French dominance. The British vowed from the beginning to never allow France to be the master of Europe, even under the guise of liberty and revolution. That veil soon fell with the rise of Napoleon and tyranny and oppression remained in its place. There is no doubt that Britain gained much from the French Wars – near unchallenged hegemony over Europe and the beginnings of what was to become the largest colonial empire in world history - but Britain had no interest in conquering the many nations of Europe. Great Britain, along with her allies, liberated Europe, just as she would twice more in the next one hundred and fifty years.

Sir Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington and Vice Admiral
Horatio Nelson, Viscount Nelson were the undisputed military heroes of the French Wars, but they were not the only reason Britain emerged victorious. Politics and diplomacy played a vital role in the war effort by crafting Coalitions and keeping the peace at home while Britain exerted all of her resources on war abroad. The French Wars provide a fascinating juxtaposition of a democracy waging war against an autocracy. The British parliamentary system was much messier and less efficient than the well-oiled war machine of France, but that did not prevent the British from achieving victory. The British were forced by their political system to accept failure and devise superior solutions; Napoleon never accepted failure. The British forged alliances by offering financial and tactical support, while the French created allies with coercion and military supremacy. In 1815, Britain was allied with most of Europe, while France was left friendless. The British strategy in the French Wars took nearly twenty years of evolution and revision to succeed, but when it did the victory was comprehensive and lasting. After nearly a millennium of warfare, the two nations would finally end their martial rivalry; 18 June 1815 was the last day that Great Britain and France would ever be at war with one another.