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THE PROBLEM OF WESTERN POLICY UNDER PHILIPPE DE RIGAUD DE VAUDREUIL, 1703-1725

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When the Great War for Empire broke out in 1754, the French controlled an enormous portion of the North American continent. Between their settlements in the St. Lawrence Valley and on the Lower Mississippi ran a chain of forts and trading posts built for the purpose of keeping the Indian tribes in the French allegiance and excluding the English from the interior. It is common knowledge that this imperialist policy was one of the main causes of the war that resulted in the conquest of Canada in 1760. Yet, while much has been written and said about French North American imperialism in its final stages, few attempts have so far been made to analyse the circumstances that originally prompted the French to occupy the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley regions in the early eighteenth century. This paper will examine this formative period of French expansionism and, it is hoped, establish the following thesis: first, that the basic decision to hold the West against the English was taken during the administration of Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil; second, that this imperialism was essentially defensive in character and forced upon the French by the forces of English expansionism that first became evident after the treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

To understand the situation that developed under Vaudreuil the role played by the Five Nation Iroquois Confederacy in the Western fur trade of the seventeenth century must first be understood.¹ These Indians inhabited a highly strategic territory that extended from the Mohawk River westward to Niagara. They were flanked by the fur-trading center of Albany to the east; and by such tribes as the Ottawas, Illinois and Miamis, which can be collectively referred to as the Lake or Western tribes, to the west. The Lake Indians took their trade to Montreal and were incorporated into the French economic system while the Iroquois, by the forces of geography alone, traded with the English and Dutch merchants of Albany. Both groups obtained their supply of pelts by hunting and also by trading with tribes situated deeper in the interior. The constant search for new sources of fur frequently brought them into competition with each other and was one of the main causes of the wars that developed between in the seventeenth century.

¹ G. T. Hunt, *The Wars of the Iroquois, a Study in Intertribal Trade Relations*, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1960), *passim.*; A. W. Trelease, "The Iroquois and the Western Fur trade" *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 49 (1962), pp. 32-51.

The search for pelts was the first of two major problems that faced the Five Nations. The second was related to their position of middlemen in the English trading system, a position to which they owed much of their economic importance and which they were determined to preserve. This meant not only that they had to prevent the Western Indians from trading to Albany but also the English merchants from penetrating into the West. Their efforts to monopolize the entire New York fur trade may well have been another cause of friction with the Lake tribes, for English trade goods were cheaper and frequently of better quality than those of the French and for this reason all Indians were equally anxious to gain access to them.

The objectives of the Iroquois placed the French in a paradoxical position. On the one hand the Five Nations were the principal enemies of the Canadian trading system; on the other they were an essential part of it since it was their fierce obstruction that kept the Canadian allies away from Albany and diverted them to Montreal. The governors of New France had to keep both of these aspects in mind when they formulated their Indian policy. Thus, the ideal policy would weaken the Iroquois to the point where they would find themselves unable to wage war on the French or their allies but still strong enough to act as a barrier between Albany and the Western Indians.² If they should be weakened beyond this point the barrier would collapse and, quite possibly, the French trading system along with it.

Such a problem began to emerge after the peace treaty of 1701, concluded between Canada, her Western allies and the Five Nations, ended a war which had begun in 1685. As long as the Lake tribes had been at war with the Iroquois the road to Albany had been closed. The climate of peace, however, might facilitate an entente between them which would enable the French allies to market their pelts on the New York market. Preventing such a development was the basic problem that faced Canada after 1701. The colony's safety demanded that the peace be maintained; French control of the fur trade and of the Western tribes demanded, no less imperiously, that it be a peace without friendship.

Formulating a policy that would take these two basic considerations into account was made very difficult by fundamental changes that occurred in Iroquois policy at the turn of the century. The Five Nations had suffered terrible losses at the hands of the Lake Indians during the long war that ended in 1700,³ and they were now determined to pacify their old enemies permanently in order to secure their vulnerable

² W. J. Eccles, *Frontenac, the Courtier Governor*, (Toronto, 1959), p. 333.

³ By 1697 the fighting force of the Iroquois had dwindled to 1,400 warriors from a high of 2,800 in the mid 1680's. Bellomont to the Lords of Trade, October 24, 1700, *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York* NYCD vol. 4, p. 768.

western flank. The treaty of 1701 was no guarantee of future security for it had not eliminated the possibility of an attack from the West; it had simply restored peace and introduced the French as mediators between the Iroquois and the Lake tribes in case new quarrels should break out between them.⁴ Indeed, Governor Callières and the other French administrators who had prepared the treaty had never intended to eliminate the threat of the Western Indians. On the contrary, it was precisely on this threat that they proposed to rely to keep the Iroquois at peace in the future. After becoming governor in 1703 Vaudreuil frequently stated that nothing deterred the Iroquois more effectively from attacking the colony than the fear of reprisals on the part of the Canadian allies.⁵ The Iroquois, however, understood perfectly the purpose of the policy and realized that the bottom would fall out of it if the Lake tribes bolted the French alliance. Soon after the conclusion of peace they applied themselves to winning these Indians to their side.

Ancestral rivalries made such a task difficult but the situation at the turn of the century seemed to favour such a *rapprochement*. By 1700, as a result of many years of reckless overtrading in beaver, the Canadian trade had collapsed and by 1705 prices had fallen to an all-time low of 30 *sols* per *livre* weight.⁶ Because the Canadian allies now received next to nothing for their pelts on the Montreal market they were more anxious than ever to gain access to Albany. As early as 1703 a group of Hurons began to dicker with the Iroquois in order to obtain a right of way through their land.⁷ Should the latter refuse their request a new war might well break out in the West; on the other hand, should they agree to sacrifice their position of middlemen and allow the Western Indians to share in the New York trade, they might well secure their western flank and strike a devastating blow at the economic basis of the alliance linking the Lake tribes to Canada. The Five Nations resolutely came out in favour of the second alternative. In 1704, five canoes from the West went to Albany to trade and groups of Hurons, Miamis and Ottawas met with the Iroquois to maintain the peace and to ask for further commercial privileges with the English.⁸

⁴ This was the substance of the treaty of 1701. If an Indian nation violated the newly-established peace the treaty stipulated that those who had been wronged would not strike back but would take their grievance to the Governor of Canada. If the offending Indians then refused to compensate the injured party the French would join up with the latter to inflict punishment on them. Archives des colonies [AC], série C 11 A, vol. 19, pp. 41-44.

⁵ Vaudreuil au ministre, 4 novembre 1706, AC, C 11 A, vol. 24, pp. 215-215v.; Vaudreuil et Raudot au ministre, AC, C 11 A, vol. 28, pp. 8-8v.

⁶ Le ministre à Vaudreuil, 17 juin 1705, AC, B, vol. 27, p. 255.

⁷ Vaudreuil au ministre, 14 novembre 1703, AC, C 11 A, vol. 21, p. 53.

⁸ Vaudreuil au ministre, 16 novembre 1704, AC, C 11 A, vol. 22, p. 36v.; Parolles des sauvages du Détroit aux Iroquois Sonnantouans le 30 juillet 1704... Réponses des Sonnantouans... le 31 juillet 1704, AC, F 3, vol. 2, pp. 310-312.

Vaudreuil understood the purpose of the strategy and realized that the colony would find itself isolated, without allies and without trade, if it should succeed. Yet he found himself practically helpless to check the process, for unlike his predecessors he did not dispose of effective tools to deal with the natives. In the days of Frontenac the beaver boom had made it economically profitable to be associated with Canada and the presence in the West of garrisoned posts and of *congés* holders kept the tribes inhabiting those regions under the constant surveillance of the French. Vaudreuil's hand, however, was not only weakened by the collapse of the beaver trade but also by the restrictive political system developed by the Ministry of the Marine in an effort to cope with the economic crisis. In 1696, in order to reduce the flow of beaver into the colony, the Minister decreed the abolition of the twenty-five *congés* and ordered the garrisons and commanding officers withdrawn from the posts. He obviously hoped that the tactic would cut off the beaver trade at its source, but he had failed to consider that the posts remained a political necessity even though they had become an economic liability. Posts, garrisons and *congés* were the basic links between Canada and the West; they constituted so many centers of French influence in the interior.⁹ Their abolition dealt a crippling blow to French control of the Western tribes and made it all the easier for the latter to turn to the English on Hudson's Bay and in New York.¹⁰

The foundation of Detroit in 1701 by Antoine la Mothe de Cadillac was another factor which added to the confusion in the interior. A former commandant of the post of Michilimackinac, Cadillac had managed to persuade Jérôme de Pontchartrain, the Minister of the Marine, that a settlement at Detroit, where a considerable body of Frenchmen would settle and where all the Lake tribes would regroup, would be most useful to the French cause in America. From this strong point on the Great Lakes it would be possible both to prevent English westward expansion and to overawe the Iroquois.¹¹ The argument fell on fertile ground. The death of Charles II of Spain in 1700 had finally opened the question of the Spanish Succession and France was in an imperialist mood. The most tangible result of this new outlook was the foundation of the colony of Louisiana on the Lower Mississippi which was meant to exclude the English from that region and also to serve as a buffer zone between their settlements and those of the Spaniards. Farther north, however, the bankrupt condition of the beaver trade seemed to pose an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a parallel policy.

⁹ Mémoire présenté à Mgr. de Pontchartrain contre les congés et réponse des srs. de Vaudreuil et Raudot aud. mémoire, n.d., AC, C 11 G, vol. 6, pp. 80-89.

¹⁰ D'Aigremont au ministre, 14 novembre 1708, AC, C 11 A, vol. 29, p. 70.

¹¹ Projet du sr. de la Mothe Cadillac pour le Canada, 1699, AC, C 11 E, vol. 14, pp. 34-36v.

With a touch of genius, Cadillac was able to persuade the Minister of the Marine that a settlement at Detroit would not be at cross-purpose with the edict of 1696. The process of relocating there from scattered points in the West and the work to be done at the new settlement would keep both the Indians and the white population fully occupied and interrupt all trading activities for the first two years.¹² Moreover, unlike Michilimackinac, Detroit was situated in a region where *menues pelleteries* rather than beaver abounded. Ultimately, therefore, it might prove possible to reconstruct the entire colonial economy around these furs which were always in great demand.¹³ Pontchartrain was fully won over by these arguments which not only guaranteed that Detroit would close the Northwest to the English but also solve Canada's economic problems. In the King's memoir of 1700 the Governor and Intendant of Canada were told that unless "inconveniens invincibles" were discovered Cadillac's project was to be put to execution.¹⁴

Governor Callières showed considerably less enthusiasm. While he approved the Cadillac's project on the whole he detected two serious flaws in it. In the first place the Iroquois might take offense at a settlement built on territory which they considered to be their own hunting grounds and renew their war on the colony. Secondly, and here Callières was getting at the basic flaw, Detroit would draw the Western Indians very close to the settlements of the Five Nations. Such proximity would facilitate the growth of trade relations between the French allies and the Iroquois and economic intercourse might ultimately serve as the basis for a political connection. Much more important than Detroit, he thought, was the reoccupation of the ancient posts and the reestablishment of the *congés*. Despite the condition of the beaver trade, Callières thought that it would be poor politics to abandon the numerous tribes inhabiting the West. "Personne ne peut disconvenir" he warned "que tost ou tard nos sauvages tomberont sous la domination de Sa Ma'té ou bien sous celle du Roy d'Angleterre."¹⁵

No exact figures are available on the volume of the trade that the Western Indians carried on at Albany between 1701 and 1713. But doubts that it existed, that Detroit facilitated it and that it cooled the enthusiasm of the Lake tribes for the French allegiance cannot be entertained. "Les Hurons vont tous les jours chez eux [the Iroquois] porter leur castor aux Anglois" wrote d'Aigremont in 1708 in his momentous report on the situation in the Northwest. "Ils ont introduit les Miamis a ce commerce . . . leur ont fait faire une alliance très étroite

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ Mémoire de M. de la Mothe Cadillac touchant l'établissement du Détroit de Québec, 14 novembre 1704, AC, C 11 E, vol. 14, p. 169.

¹⁴ Mémoire du Roy à Callières et Champigny, n.d., AC, B, vol. 22, pp. 110-111v.

¹⁵ Mémoire de Callières pour répondre à celui de la Mothe Cadillac, AC, C 11 E, vol. 14, p. 54v.

avec les Iroquois. . . Ceci fait voir que les Iroquois ont profité du temps qu'il y a que le Détroit est établi pour attirer nos alliés afin de les avoir pour eux en cas de guerre, ce qui arriveroit infailliblement."¹⁶ In 1711, with an English attack on Canada apparently imminent, Vaudreuil summoned deputies from all the Western tribes to Montreal to rally them to the defense of the colony. On this occasion the allies experienced long moments of hesitation before coming out for the French.¹⁷ As the alliance between Canada and the Lake tribes became daily more uncertain, the Iroquois grew progressively bolder. In 1709, 443 of them had joined the English near Albany for an attack on Montreal.¹⁸ The project did not materialize but the English revived it in 1711. This time 682 Iroquois joined forces with them.¹⁹

Between 1703 and 1713 the Iroquois barrier, the most important factor in the trading system of the seventeenth century, lost much of its old effectiveness. As yet, however, it was only pierced in one direction, for while the Western Indians were travelling to Albany the Dutch and English traders made no attempt to penetrate into the West. To obtain their supply of pelts they were content to rely on what the natives brought to Albany and also on the contraband trade with Canada which reached enormous proportions during this period because of the saturated condition of the French market. Perhaps because the New York merchants were able to satisfy their need from these two sources they saw no necessity to send their own trading missions to the interior. They may also have realized that to do so while the War of the Spanish Succession was in progress would be an extremely hazardous enterprise. In the first place English agents would expose themselves to being plundered or even killed by the French or their allies. Secondly, despite the state of war existing between France and England and Canada and Massachusetts, a truce had been observed between Canada and New York since 1702. To challenge French ascendancy in the interior before the return of peace might well provoke Canada into breaking the truce and attacking their province. The times were clearly not propitious for expansion.

New York's passive attitude was reflected in the Western policy adopted by Vaudreuil and endorsed by the other colonial administrators. The Governor, the Intendants Jacques and Antoine-Denis Raudot, the

¹⁶ D'Aigremont au ministre, 14 novembre 1708, AC, C 11 A, vol. 29, p. 45v.; C. H. McIlwain, ed., *Peter Wraxall's Abridgement of the New York Indian Records* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 65, 66, 68; An Account of Governor Hunter's Conference with the Indians at Albany, August 7, 1710, *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies*, 1710-1711 [CSPA], pp. 490-499.

¹⁷ "Quelques uns ballancèrent longtemps entre l'envie de se déclarer et la crainte de se fermer par là le chemin d'aller aux Anglois. Car enfin, Monseigneur, toutes les nations d'en haut y vont." Vaudreuil au ministre, 25 octobre 1711, AC, C 11 A, vol. 29, p. 46v.

¹⁸ *Wraxall*, p. 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

commissaire de la marine François Clairambault d'Aigremont, all recommended that the French abandon Detroit and resolutely opposed a plan promoted by the Charron brothers calling for a fort at Niagara.²⁰ The Charrons had pointed out, quite correctly, that the site was extremely important since the portage around the falls was used by most of the Western Indians travelling towards the colony. The English, for this reason, had their eyes set on this immensely strategic position and they would be ideally situated to intercept the Lake Indians and monopolize their commerce should it ever fall under their control. But if the French seized it the opposite would be true. They could then keep the Iroquois in awe and, provided they sold their trade goods cheaply enough, cut off the Albany trade.²¹

Vaudreuil and the Raudots disagreed with the conclusions of the Charrons. Precisely because Niagara under New York control would jeopardize the Iroquois' role of middlemen between Albany and the tribes farther West, the Canadian administrators argued that the Five Nations would never allow the English to have a post there. The French for their part would gain nothing by settling Niagara. On the contrary they would simply draw the Western Indians closer to the Iroquois and facilitate the growth of trade relations between them much as Detroit had done.²² The French, in other words, need not preoccupy themselves with excluding the English from the West for the Iroquois could be relied upon to do so as they had always done in the past. It is rather odd that the Governor and his colleagues should have trusted so completely in the Five Nations to prevent English westward expansion when it was quite evident that they could no longer be relied upon to keep the Canadian allies from Albany.

Vaudreuil himself was well aware of the growing trade that was being carried out at the New York city between the Lake tribes and the English and he realized that energetic measures were necessary to bring it to a stop. This, he thought, might best be achieved by reviving the twenty-five *congés*, by raising the price of beaver pelts and lowering that of trade goods and, finally, by sending a garrison and commanding-officer to reoccupy the post of Michilimackinac.²³ Such a policy

²⁰ D'Aigremont au ministre, 14 novembre 1708, AC, C 11 A, vol. 29, pp. 66-66v.

²¹ Les frères Charron au ministre, 28 octobre 1706, AC, C 11 A, vol. 25, pp. 261-264.

²² Vaudreuil et Raudot au ministre, 14 novembre 1708, AC, C 11 A, vol. 28, pp. 35-37; J. et A. D. Raudot au ministre, 23 octobre 1708, *Ibid.*, p. 271; d'Aigremont au ministre, 14 novembre 1708, AC, C 11 A, vol. 29, pp. 31v-32v.

²³ Mémoire ou l'on propose les moyens de rétablir le commerce avec les sauvages du Canada, n.d., AC, C 11 A, vol. 27, p. 126; Raudot au ministre, 12 novembre 1707, *Ibid.*, p. 126; d'Aigremont au ministre, 14 novembre 1708, AC, C 11 A, vol. 29, pp. 68-68v., 73v-74; Vaudreuil et Raudot au ministre, 14 novembre 1709, AC, C 11 A, vol. 30, p. 13v.; Madame de Vaudreuil au ministre, n.d., *Ibid.*, p. 240v.; Vaudreuil au ministre, 8 novembre 1711, AC, C 11 A, vol. 32, pp. 73v.-73bis.; Vaudreuil au ministre, 23 juillet 1712, AC, C 11 A, vol. 33, p. 43v.

would unquestionably have proved effective since it would have drawn the Indian allies away from the neighbourhood of the Iroquois and the English, increased French influence in the West and made the Canadian alliance more attractive economically. Pontchartrain, however, was not prepared to approve of a programme that would stimulate the beaver trade as long as the market was still depressed.²⁴ As a result of the Minister's negative attitude the sole representatives of French authority in the interior for the duration of the War of the Spanish Succession were renegade *coureurs de bois*, a few irregularly appointed commanding officers, the Jesuit missionaries and the settlers and garrison of Detroit.

Only after the conclusion of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 were the insufficiencies of such a policy revealed. With the return of peace in both Europe and America, New York embarked upon a policy of westward expansion that the Five Nations soon proved powerless to resist. This was the turning point in the history of New France for it forced the French to rethink their entire Western policy.

From an economic and strategic point of view the Treaty of Utrecht struck a devastating blow at the French North American empire. The clauses relating to the cession of Hudson Bay, Acadia and Newfoundland to the British are well known and need not be gone into here. Not as well known, and equally important was clause 15, which related to the West. It contained a hidden challenge to French domination in the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley regions. "The Subjects of France inhabiting Canada" the clause began, "shall hereafter give no Hindrance or Molestation to the Five Nations or Cantons of Indians subject to the Dominion of Great Britain nor to the other native of America who are Friends to the same."²⁵

The implications of this statement were revolutionary. As the abbé Bobé succinctly put it in 1720: "Il y a longtemps que les Anglois tâchent de pénétrer dans les grands lacs et dans les pays d'en haut pour s'emparer du commerce des pelleteries et c'est sans doute pour venir à bout de leur dessein qu'ils ont obligé la France de leur céder la souveraineté du pays des Iroquois à la paix d'Utrecht."²⁶ Unlike the abbé the plenipotentiaries who represented France at Utrecht in 1713 did not realize that the British were reducing the Iroquois to the status of dependents in order to take possession of their land and move the boundaries of New York to the heart of the Great Lakes country. The Five Nations being British subjects, the French would have no

²⁴ For Pontchartrain's stand on the *congés* see *Mémoire du Roy à Vaudreuil et Bégon*. 25 juin 1713, AC, B, vol. 35, pp. 275-275v.; permission to send a commanding-officer to Michilimackinac was granted in 1710.

²⁵ Treaty of Peace and Friendship... concluded at Utrecht the 31/11 day of March/April 1713, (London, 1713), pp. 74-75.

²⁶ *Mémoire concernant les limites des colonies présenté en 1720 par le sr. Bobé*, n.d., AC, C II E, vol. 2, p. 205v.

legal basis for protest or interference once New York launched its epochal breakthrough to the Lakes.

The second part of clause 15 was no less important. The English apparently feared that the French would attempt to foil their strategy by invoking the status of the Western tribes. Since they were French allies, it might be claimed, their trade belonged entirely to New France. Not only did the Treaty of Utrecht destroy the validity of such an objection but it also gave explicit legal sanction to trade between the English and the Western Indians:

On both sides they [the French and the English] shall enjoy full Liberty of going and coming on account of trade. As also the natives of those countries shall, with the same Liberty, resort as they please to the British and French Colonies for Promoting Trade on one side or the other without any Molestation or Hindrance.²⁷

The English lost no time in attempting to exploit the advantages they had gained in the West. Between 1713 and 1715 the Carolina traders launched a powerful drive to expel the French from the Mississippi Valley.²⁸ They spread among such tribes as the Natchez, the Illinois and the Miamis and threatened to wean those Indians from the French interest and to disrupt communications between Canada and Louisiana. The authorities of both these colonies fought back by dispatching agents to the threatened areas who urged the Indians to expel the English and to plunder their supply convoys.²⁹ Their activities may have materially contributed to the outbreak of the ferocious Yamasee War which burst upon the Carolinas in the summer of 1715. The Creeks, Chactas, Alabamas and Cherokees rebelled against the English, drove out their traders and ravaged the Carolina border settlements.³⁰ The sudden mass defection of the Indians brought to an end the first large scale British attempt to wrest the Mississippi Valley from France.

Canada was soon faced with a similar situation in the region of the Great Lakes. As an immediate aftermath of the Treaty of Utrecht the New York merchants, for the first time in almost thirty years, began to mount an assault on Lake Ontario. Several trading missions journeyed through the territory of the Five Nations in order

²⁷ Treaty of Peace and Friendship... concluded at Utrecht the 31/11 day of March/April 1713, (London, 1713), p. 75.

²⁸ M. Giraud, *Histoire de la Louisiane Française* (2 vols., Paris, 1953-1958) vol. 1, pp. 298-300.

²⁹ Ramezay et Bégon au ministre, 13 septembre 1715, AC, C 11 A, vol. 35, p. 11v.; Le Moyne de Bienville au ministre, 15 juin 1715, AC, C 13 A, vol. 3, pp. 827-832.

³⁰ V.W. Crane, *The Southern Frontier, 1670-1732* (Ann Arbor, 1959), p. 167 passim.

to open a direct trade with the Western tribes.³¹ A fort was built among the Mohawks to help secure communications between Albany and Lake Ontario and a second was planned among the Onondagas.³² Claude de Ramezay, the Governor of Montreal, clearly perceived the purpose of the policy but realized also that the Treaty of Utrecht was a powerful obstacle to French interference. "Il n'y a pas lieu de douter" he wrote, "que les Anglois ne fassent ce fort dans le but d'étendre leur commerce dans les pays d'en haut, ce qui est d'autant plus facheux qu'il semble que par l'article 15 du traité ces cinq villages soient censés terres angloises."³³

Despite the unfortunate position in which the French found themselves they were not prepared to stand by idly while the West slipped from their grasp. Counter-measures were necessary. In a series of memoirs submitted to Pontchartrain in 1713 and 1714, Antoine Crozat, the influential proprietor of Louisiana, pointed out that the success of French colonization in North America depended on effective control of the Mississippi River. Should the English win control of this waterway the southern approaches to Canada would be thrown open and Louisiana would be deprived of its chief commercial artery. To oppose British hegemony Crozat proposed the erection of three forts in the Mississippi Valley, in the areas most exposed to English infiltration.³⁴ In a like manner Ramezay, who replaced Vaudreuil as Governor from 1714 to 1716 while the latter was in France on leave, pointed out that English occupation of the interior "causera la ruine entière de la colonie."³⁵ Once implanted in the Illinois country the English could spread among the Ottawa tribes and win their commercial and military allegiance. Like Crozat he proposed the development of a chain of strategically located and strongly garrisoned posts to keep the English out of the West.³⁶

During the two years he spent in France Vaudreuil, also, urged the home authorities to rethink their Canadian policy. The memoirs he submitted to Pontchartrain and to the Council of the Marine which succeeded him in 1715 emphasized two principal points: developing the

³¹ Ramezay au ministre, 23 octobre 1714, AC, C 11 A, vol. 34, p. 362v.; Ramezay au ministre, 28 octobre 1715, AC, C 11 A, vol. 35, p. 92; Ramezay et Bégon au Conseil de la Marine, 13 septembre 1715, Archives de la Marine, [AM], B 1, vol. 8, p. 269v., *Wraxall*, pp. 112-113.

³² Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations, October 31, 1712, *CSPA 1712-1714*, p. 84.; Ramezay et Bégon au ministre, 13 septembre 1715, AC, C 11 A, vol. 35, pp. 10-10v.

³³ *Loc. cit.*

³⁴ Crozat au ministre, n.d., AC, C 13 A, vol. 3, pp. 363-365v.; Crozat au ministre, 17 avril 1714, *Ibid.*, pp. 623-635; see also *Giraud*, vol. 1, p. 229, *passim*.

³⁵ Ramezay au ministre, 16 septembre 1715, AC, C 11 A, vol. 35, p. 73v.

³⁶ Etablissements nouveaux faits par les François sur le fleuve du Mississippi et autres établissements proposés dans les pays d'en haut, 7 novembre 1715, AC, C 11 A, vol. 36, p. 222.

colony internally by means of a vigorous immigration policy³⁷ and strengthening the network of Indian alliances.³⁸ The Governor was sure that the English colonies were only waiting for another war between France and England to renew their attempt to conquer Canada. Should they finally succeed in their designs, all of North America would be subjugated to England which would then become the most formidable power in Europe. It was therefore urgent for France to use the period of peace to strengthen her Canadian colony, both internally and externally.

Vaudreuil's basic policy was founded on the assumption that whoever held the alliance of the Indians would also hold the West. The French would be unable to oppose English progress in the interior once the Indians consented to it but the English would find themselves unable to make much headway in the West as long as the natives barred the way. For the moment, the Indian tribes held the balance between the two great colonizing powers and the policy of neither could succeed without their full collaboration. Winning this collaboration, however, was difficult and it might well prove completely impossible if the restrictive system, which had paralyzed French diplomacy in the interior since 1696 was allowed to continue in force. To enable Canada to hold the West against the English colonies Vaudreuil urged the home authorities to remove all checks on expansionism and to grant him a broad degree of personal authority in the framing of a new policy.

The French court was much impressed by this series of memoirs that all maintained, in slightly different terms, that the fate of Canada was indissolubly linked to the fate of the West. Between 1714 and 1716 a series of measures were taken to strengthen French positions in the interior. The subsidy annually appropriated for gifts to the Indians was increased; the twenty-five *congés* were revived; the brandy trade, outlawed since 1702, was made legal, on a limited basis; and the Governor was given full authority to build the posts that he judged necessary and to appoint the officers of his choice.³⁹ After almost twenty years of restrictions all the checks on expansionism were being suddenly removed.

³⁷ Mémoire de M. de Vaudreuil, n.d., *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98v.

³⁸ Mémoire à Son Altesse Royale Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans, Régent du Royaume, février, 1716, *Ibid.*, pp. 105-108v., p. 119v.; Postes à établir, n.d., AM, B 1, vol. 8, pp. 274-275; Ramezay et Bégon au Conseil de la Marine, 7 novembre 1715, *Ibid.*, p. 268v.

³⁹ Mémoire du Roy à Vaudreuil et Bégon, 15 juin 1716, *Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec*, 1947-1948, p. 300; Etablissements nouveaux faits par les François sur le fleuve de Mississippi et autres établissements proposés dans les pays d'en haut, AC, C 11 A, vol. 36, p. 222; Délibérations du Conseil de la Marine, avril 1716, *Ibid.*, p. 246v.-247; Déclaration du Roy portant rétablissement des vingt-cinq congés pour aller faire la traite avec les sauvages, 28 avril 1716, AC, F 3, vol. 9, pp. 356-357; Délibération du Conseil de la Marine, n.d., AM, B 1, vol. 8, p. 280v.; Mémoire du Roy à Vaudreuil et Bégon, 15 juin 1716, AC, B, vol. 38, pp. 223-223v.

Soon after his return to the colony in the fall of 1716 Vaudreuil began to implement the new programme. The location of the five posts that were founded in 1717 and 1718⁴⁰ suggests that he was hoping to cope with growing English pressure in the West by building up a zone of French influence in the region of Lake Michigan. Such important tribes as the Ouyatanons and Miamis were to be encouraged to leave their villages and migrate to this area, which was well removed from the English settlements.⁴¹ The factor of distance, joined to the persuasive powers of the commanding-officers and missionaries on duty at the posts might cause them to lose contact gradually with the English and turn to the French for all their needs.

The policy had other features to recommend it. In the first place the new posts would secure a passage to the rich beaver territories of the Sioux and enlarge considerably Canada's fur-trading empire.⁴² Secondly, the French would now be in a better position to arbitrate the quarrels that frequently developed between the bellicose tribes that inhabited the Green Bay and Lake Superior regions, notably the Fox and the Chippewas.⁴³ Indeed, maintaining the numerous Western tribes at peace was always a basic purpose of French diplomacy, for war interfered with hunting and trading and had an adverse effect on the fur trade. Furthermore, there was always the danger that the Iroquois might use incidents in the West to split the French allies, turn them against each other and win some to their side by promising to assist them against their enemies.⁴⁴ Preventing the success of such tactics was no less important than keeping the allies from trading to Albany for both were a direct threat to French influence in the West. It is perhaps ironic that Vaudreuil, who always worked assiduously at promoting harmony among the Lake tribes, should not realize that French attempts to trade directly with the Sioux would provoke the Fox Indians to war. Like the Iroquois in the seventeenth century the Fox were middlemen and they carried on a lucrative trade with the Sioux. They now took up

⁴⁰ St. Joseph des Miamis, 1717, on the St. Joseph River; les Ouyatanons, 1717, near Chicago; la Baye, 1718, Green Bay; Chagouamigon, 1718, Lake Superior; Pimitoui, 1718, the Illinois country. There was now a total of eight garrisoned posts depending on Canada, including, Fort Frontenac, Michilimackinac and Detroit.

⁴¹ Vaudreuil au Conseil de la Marine, 12 octobre 1717, AC, C 11 A, vol. 124, pp. 48-48v.; *Ibid.*, p. 46v.-47; a ninth post was built among the Miamis in 1721 when those Indians refused to migrate to the St. Joseph River, Vaudreuil au Conseil de la marine, 6 octobre 1721, AC, C 11 A, vol. 43, pp. 328-328v.

⁴² Vaudreuil au Conseil de la Marine, 12 octobre 1717, AC, C 11 A, vol. 124, pp. 49-50.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50v.; Vaudreuil au Conseil de la Marine, 28 octobre 1719, AC, C 11 A, vol. 40, p. 179.

⁴⁴ Vaudreuil au ministre, 8 septembre 1713, AC, C 11 A, vol. 34, pp. 43v.-44; Parolles des sauvages Hurons descendus du fort Pontchartrain du Détroit, 7 novembre 1713, *Ibid.*, p. 66.

arms to defend their trade connections, threatened by French expansion, and ignited a conflict that would last for twenty years.⁴⁵

While this policy of occupation did something to strengthen French positions in the West it did not put a stop to the trade between the Western tribes and the New York merchants. After his return to Canada, 1716, Vaudreuil soon had occasion to note that Robert Hunter, the Governor of New York, "travaille à attirer à Orange tous nos sauvages des pays d'en haut." The Indians were eager to accept such an invitation because of the high-quality trade goods supplied by English traders at prices that the French could not possibly match.⁴⁶ With the Iroquois unwilling to interrupt the traffic it was becoming more obvious every day that Canada would have to build its own chain of posts on Lake Ontario to intercept the Western Indians before they reached Albany. Le Moyne de Longueuil and Michel Bégon, the Intendant, had urged such a policy upon the home authorities as early as 1715 but the latter had not immediately accepted the suggestion. Because the English now had a claim to the Lake Ontario region by virtue of the Treaty of Utrecht they may have realized that any attempt to build posts there might easily lead to war. For the moment, to keep the English out of the West and the Lake tribes away from Albany, Vaudreuil could do little except bring diplomatic pressure to bear on Hunter and urge the allies to plunder the English merchants who ventured into their land.⁴⁷

Such a makeshift policy never achieved very satisfactory results and was breaking down completely by 1720. At that time Vaudreuil and Bégon were informed that a group of New York traders were preparing to build a trading house at Niagara.⁴⁸ To win the consent of a nearby Seneca village they had promised the chief a share in the profits. The Canadian administrators quickly understood that if the venture should succeed the English would be in a position to intercept almost all the convoys coming from the interior and monopolize the bulk of the fur trade. With Canada's Western empire hanging in the balance Vaudreuil decided to take action and occupy Niagara first. The obstacle raised against French operations in that region by the treaty of Utrecht might yet be circumvented if the Senecas, on whose territory Niagara was located, authorized the French to build a trading house there. To win their consent, Vaudreuil selected Chabert de Joncaire the elder, an

⁴⁵ Vaudreuil au Conseil de la Marine, 4 novembre 1720, AC, C 11 A, vol. 43, pp. 99-100v.; Longueuil et Bégon au ministre, 31 octobre 1725, AC, C 11 A, vol. 47, p. 134; Mémoire du poste des Illinois, AC, C 13 A, vol. 8, pp. 449-449v.

⁴⁶ Mémoire de M. Bégon au sujet du commerce des escarlatines, n.d., AC, C 11 A, vol. 30, pp. 485-485v.; Réponses aux propositions du députés du commerce de Languedoc sur les escarlatines, 6 novembre 1717, AM, B 1, vol. 28, pp. 27v.-30v.

⁴⁷ Vaudreuil au Conseil de la Marine, n.d., AM, B 1, vol. 29, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Vaudreuil et Bégon au Conseil de la marine, 26 octobre 1719, AC, C 11 A, vol. 40, p. 58; Vaudreuil et Bégon au Conseil de la marine, AC, C 11 A, vol. 41, p. 388.

officer who had represented Canada among the Senecas for over twenty years and who enjoyed enormous influence over them.

By skillfully blending cajolery and deceit, Joncaire was able to persuade the Senecas to allow him to erect a building at Niagara.⁴⁹ He then acted quickly, so as to give the Indians no time to withdraw their permission. On the south side of the Niagara River, some nine miles below the cataract, a group of soldiers from Fort Frontenac built a trading house where they displayed the French colours. Soon afterwards two smaller posts were built at Quinté and at Toronto.⁵⁰ In a series of lightning moves the French had closed their grip on Lake Ontario and driven a wedge between New York and the West.

News of these developments quickly reached Albany and spread consternation among the traders of that city. Robert Livingston, a resident for forty-five years, lamented that he had "never found our condition attended by more melancholy circumstances."⁵¹ The Albany authorities complained in a body of the "awe" the French had gained over the Iroquois and deplored that by means of their house at Niagara "an entire stop is made of the whole Far trade."⁵² But although the English protested strongly against those posts and pointed out, with some justification, that they violated the Treaty of Utrecht,⁵³ they were unable to dislodge the French from their new positions. The Senecas, thanks to Joncaire, were in the Canadian interest, while the four other nations sufficiently feared the French to refrain from undertaking anything against them without full English support.⁵⁴ The English would undoubtedly have liked to volunteer their assistance but the international situation prevented them from doing so. After being enemies for twenty-five years, France and England were now the principal partners in the newly-formed Quadruple Alliance that dominated the politics of the post-Utrecht period. Endangering such a *rapprochement* by attacking French installations in America was clearly out of the question for the New York colonials. Thus, by cleverly exploiting French mastery of the Senecas and the European situation, Vaudreuil had completely outmanoeuvred the English and stood triumphant in the West.

⁴⁹ *Wraxall*, p. 127; F. X. de Charlevoix, *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France*, (3 vol., Paris., 1744.), vol. 3, pp. 226-227.

⁵⁰ Mr. Durant's Memorial relative to the French post at Niagara, *NYCD*, vol. 5, pp. 588-591.

⁵¹ Livingston to Schuyler, August 23, 1720, *Ibid.*, p. 559.

⁵² Representations of the authorities of the city of Albany, September 14, 1720, *Ibid.*, pp. 570-572.

⁵³ Schuyler to the Lords of Trade, July 13, 1720, *Ibid.*, p. 550; Copie d'une lettre de M. de Vaudreuil du 11 juillet 1721 a M. William Burnet, gouverneur de New York, AC, C 11 A, vol. 44, pp. 148-150.

⁵⁴ Journal of Lawrence Clawsen's visit to Niagara, May 22, 1720, *NYCD*, vol. 5, pp. 550-551; Conference between Colonel Schuyler and the Indians, August 25, 1720, pp. 562-569.

Yet the victory was more apparent than real. Despite the strategic positions they now occupied along Lake Ontario and deeper in the interior, the French were finding it progressively more difficult to compete with the English commercially. Many Western Indians simply ignored their posts and travelled on to the English settlements to barter their furs.⁵⁵ In 1726, Longueuil encountered over one hundred of their canoes going to and coming from Albany.⁵⁶ The expansionist policy pursued by New York made the threat to French commerce still more acute. English trading missions were now travelling regularly to the shores of Lake Ontario where they played havoc with French commerce.⁵⁷ Governor William Burnet, who had succeeded Robert Hunter, was determined to multiply and strengthen New York's economic contacts with the Western Indians, conclude an alliance with them and ultimately destroy Canada's Western empire.⁵⁸ A giant step in this direction was taken in 1726 when New York traders, subsidized by their provincial Assembly, established a trading house at Oswego, on the south shore of Lake Ontario.⁵⁹ Thirteen years after the Treaty of Utrecht, New York had finally achieved the massive breakthrough so long in preparation and for the first time in the history of North America French and English stood face to face on the Great Lakes.

By the mid 1720's it was quite obvious that a very serious situation had developed. In fact, the French began to despair as they saw themselves gradually losing ground before the English assault. Despite the fact that clause 15 authorized New York's expansionist policy, Longueuil urged the Minister of the Marine to allow the French to use physical force to keep Lake Ontario closed to the English.⁶⁰ In a

⁵⁵ An account received from Schenectady indicates that from 1716 to 1720 only 30 canoes of Far Indians had come there to trade. From 1720 to 1724 there came 323, Burnet to the Lords of Trade, November 21, 1724, *NYCD* vol. 5, p. 739; In 1725 the Albany commissioners told Burnet that 52 canoes and nearly 100 persons had been employed in trade with the Far Indians and that above 788 bundles of skin had been brought to Albany. Besides that, 43 canoes of Far Indians had brought 200 bundles to Schenectady and Albany. During the same period only 176 bundles of beaver and deer skin had come from Canada via the contraband route. *Wraxall*, pp. 159-160.

⁵⁶ Longueuil et Bégon au ministre, 31 octobre 1725, AC, C 11 A, vol. 47, pp. 126-126v.

⁵⁷ From 29,297 *livre tournois* in 1724 the produce of the French trade on Lake Ontario fell to 9,151 *livres* in 1725 and to 8,108 in 1726. *Estat des pelleteries provenant de la traite faite au fort Frontenac, à Niagara et dans le fond du lac Ontario pendant les années 1724 et 1725*, AC, C 11 A, vol. 47, pp. 263-265; pour l'année 1726, AC, C 11 A, vol. 48, p. 274.

⁵⁸ On Burnet's Western policy see H. L. Osgood, *The American Colonies in the 18th Century*, vol. 2, pp. 418-422; also, Burnet to the Lords of Trade, November 26, 1720, *NYCD*, vol. 5, pp. 576-580.

⁵⁹ Burnet to the Lords of Trade, December 4, 1726, *NYCD*, vol. 5, pp. 782-785; Burnet to the Lords of Trade, May 9, 1727, *Ibid.*, pp. 818-819; Burnet to the Duke of Newcastle, May 10, 1727, *Ibid.*, p. 820.

⁶⁰ Longueuil et Bégon au ministre, 31 octobre 1725, AC, C 11 A, vol. 47, pp. 121-133.

dispatch written a few months before his death Vaudreuil stated that the collapse of Canada's Western empire was imminent and urged that the colony prepare to defend its claims to the interior by the force of arms.⁶¹ The behaviour of the Lake tribes seemed to justify those fears. The Governor had always considered that whoever held their allegiance would also hold the West, and by 1725 a large number of the natives, perhaps even a majority of them, were siding with the English.⁶²

The North American situation in 1725 differed considerably from the one which had obtained earlier in the century. When Vaudreuil had become Governor in 1703 Anglo-French rivalry for control of the interior still lay in the future. Canada at that time had only one major settlement in the region of the Great Lakes, Detroit, and the English had not yet begun to expand West of the Alleghanies. When he died in 1725 the English had crossed this mountain range and a struggle with the French for ascendancy in the West was clearly underway. The first result of the new rivalry was the collision on Lake Ontario, between the posts of Niagara and Oswego. The clash was a serious one, so serious in fact that war might have broken out in the colonies as early as 1726 had it not been for the European peace and the Anglo-French alliance. The situation thereafter did not improve. The forces of English expansionism became still greater as the interests of land companies were added to those of the fur trade. The French replied to those mounting pressures by consolidating their own positions and by rushing defenders to all threatened points. The inevitable explosion finally occurred in the Ohio Valley. A war, foreseen since 1713 and postponed since 1726, finally broke out in 1754 and consumed Canada in its flames.

⁶¹ Vaudreuil au ministre, 22 mai 1725, *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172v.

⁶² Les Outaouais des pays d'en haut... sont aujourd'hui autant dans les intérêts des Anglois et des Iroquois qu'ils paraissent être dans les nôtres." Vaudreuil au ministre, 22 mai 1725, *Ibid.*, p. 169v.; "Le commerce que les sauvages des pays d'en haut font à Orange depuis plusieurs années les attache de manière avec les Anglois, qu'il seroit à craindre qu'il ne les favorissassent autant qu'ils le pourroient." Longueuil et Bégon au ministre, 31 octobre 1725, *Ibid.*, p. 129.