

Council with the Allies by Robert Griffing. Montcalm confers with the Aboriginals.

THE *PETITE GUERRE* IN NEW FRANCE, 1660–1759: AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

by Jérôme Lacroix-Leclair and Eric Ouellet

Introduction

rregular conflicts are not new, nor is the use of radically different tactics and strategies to fight an adversary that is perceived as superior. The long history of irregular conflicts should, in theory, have been assimilated by contemporary military institutions, but that has not been the case. Now, in the early 21st Century, irregular conflicts are just as prevalent as they were in the past, but they seem particularly difficult to manage. The question, then, is why they pose so many problems. The answers to that question are numerous and varied. However, one central element of the answer is rarely discussed: the fact that irregular conflicts are implicitly perceived by regular armed forces as illegitimate, and that it is therefore difficult for regular forces to adapt to them.

One of the key components for understanding contemporary conflicts is the institutionalization of the use of violence in the West. "Regular" armed forces, in the sense that we

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understand the term today, result from the formalization of states and the relationships between states since the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Those relationships were put

in place not only by the Treaty of Westphalia, but also by the introduction of the concept of national armed forces that are accountable to the State. But accountability means that the actions of the armed forces must be conducted within a framework of social legitimacy. In short, not everything is permitted in the name of victory; if it were, the very integrity of the military institution would be seriously called

into question. The tension at the heart of regular armies between what is permitted and what is useful has made itself felt since the 17th Century.

This article takes a comparative historical look at the relationship between institutional legitimacy and forms of warfare, using the example of the *Petite Guerre*¹ in New France. "Petite Guerre" is the designated term for the method of asymmetrical warfare inspired by the irregular warfare of North American Aboriginal peoples. The method has often been labelled as barbaric and as contrary to the ethics and morality of its time. It was employed by Canadian soldiers and militiamen during the 17th and 18th Centuries, in particular, during the Seven Years' War. The Canadian military institution used it successfully for almost a century to fight the British and their Aboriginal allies, but during the Seven Years' War, it was increasingly marginalized.

What led the military institution to use the technique of irregular warfare for almost a century? What are the factors that led to its rejection during the Seven Years' War?

To answer those questions, this article will employ institutional analysis—an analytical framework used to study how institutions evolve in response to external and internal factors.

Institutional analysis is based on three pillars: regulative, normative and cognitive. Those three pillars are used to characterize changes and trends in institutions and organizations.

The Institutional Analysis Framework

changes within institutions have long been studied by sociologists through the lens of institutional analysis. That form of analysis, which focuses particularly on environmental pressures and cultural beliefs, helps to explain decision-making processes in institutions. Institutional analysis is based upon the premise that the ultimate

goal of any institution is to preserve the powers and privileges that it affords its members, and therefore to protect, first and foremost, all the social legitimacy that enables it to justify

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those powers and privileges. Although institutional analysis has proven useful for explaining decisions which at first seem irrational, up till now few sociologists have applied it to military institutions.

There are many schools of thought that use institutional analysis. However, few specialists provide an analytical framework as

complete as that proposed by Richard Scott.² Scott brings together in one theory the ideas of institutional analysis specialists who focus mainly on one or another of the regulative, normative or cognitive aspects to characterize an institution. The regulative pillar is based on a system of formal or informal rules, sanctions and laws that regulate a society. The normative pillar emphasizes normative rules that introduce the dimensions of prescription, evaluation and obligation into social life. Thus, normative systems include values, norms and a sense of identity. They define the goals to be achieved but especially the appropriate (legitimate) way of achieving them. Lastly, the cognitive and cultural pillar is based upon convictions, beliefs, and systems of thought specific to the institution.

By combining the three pillars in his analysis, Scott brings together the sociologists' theories. He thus paves the way to an understanding of the reasons for action (or inaction), the decisions made by an institution, and the institution's evolution. The three pillars are interdependent and they influence each other. When they converge, they can ensure an institution's stability; when they diverge, the result is instability. For example, the regulative pillar, through laws and rules, can limit or even prohibit practices that the cognitive-cultural pillar permitted.



The Seven Years War in North America 1756-1763.

Defining the *Petite Guerre* in the Canadian Context

"While the French suffered enormous disadvantages in manpower and resources in the imperial wars, they possessed a clear advantage in the frontier warfare because of their Indian alliances and the adoption of the Indian way of war by colonial officers and militia."

It is important to define the *Petite Guerre* in the Canadian context in this study in order to avoid confusion. *Petite*

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guerre and guerrilla both mean "little war" in French and Spanish respectively, but they are not the same thing.⁴ Although guerrilla warfare has always existed,⁵ petite guerre was a specific phenomenon that developed in the 17th and 18th Centuries, as noted by numerous theoreticians who studied it, such as Turpin de Crissé and Hector de Grandmaison. Guerrilla warfare is combat led by an entity that is weaker in the military sense against armies that are stronger. The term generally refers to a civilian popu-

lation that takes up arms to fight an invader.⁶ *Petite guerre*, on the other hand, is described as "... all the movements that merely back up the operations of an army [translation]."⁷ Today, it can be compared to the actions carried out by commandos or special forces, as it shares the same characteristics.⁸ Historically, *petite guerre* was the specialty of regular light troops who harassed the enemy, gathered intelligence, and carried out deep strikes. They were organized into small groups called "parties," and terrorized the enemy's rear party.⁹ Thus, *petite guerre* was the way in which those light troops were used in Europe within the military institution.

But the Petite Guerre in New France also had a strategic dimension that did not exist in Europe. Although that form of warfare was influenced at the outset by Amerindian customs, it was the result of a careful strategic calculation aimed at ensuring the survival of the French colony, 10 which was still under-populated and was subject to the vagaries of its climate and agriculture.11 The Petite Guerre was based upon terrorizing the people of New England. By means of acts that were considered cruel, and raids that penetrated deep into the English colonies, the Petite Guerre created a permanent climate of fear that paralyzed the English colonists, and kept the military forces of New England on the defensive. That meant that it was always difficult for the English colonial forces to mount large expeditions against New France. As Starkey notes, it was "... a war in which the French and their Indian allies excelled and which terrorized the inhabitants of the English border settlements. The ferocity of those raiders still conjures up nightmares"12 Today, those tactics could be characterized as unlimited warfare.

The Regulative Pillar: Complicity of the Legal Authority

The regulative pillar, defined by royal authority and its representative, the Governor, supported the *Petite Guerre*

in New France for almost a century. It gave political support to the Amerindians and their practices, as well as to the *Petite Guerre* when it was waged by the Canadians themselves. ¹³ Louis XIV understood that the far-off colony, whose principal resource was furs, was vulnerable to the English, and that it had to be protected. Therefore, Louis XIV, and his successor, Louis XV, supported the use of the *Petite Guerre* because that method of warfare enabled them to hold New France without having to commit significant financial, military, or human resources there—resources that were absolutely essential for conducting a war in Europe. Moreover, that asymmetrical method was effective against the enemy: it

took almost 70 years for the British to triumph over their French-Canadian neighbours, even though the British outnumbered this group 20-to-1 from 1689 onward. 14 The Governor of New France institutionalized the *Petite Guerre* as the only way of waging war in the colony and beyond its borders, and as the only solution for ensuring the colony's survival. The military institution of New France, which was essentially maintained and led by Canadian officers who had formerly prac-

tised Amerindian-style warfare, therefore received political support for its use of the *Petite Guerre*.

"...[T]he French government did not concern itself with specific forms of violence practiced by the colonial soldiers of New France. The crown harped on the exorbitant costs of Indian diplomacy on the frontier, but did not criticize the performance of violence." ¹⁵

Consistent with this attitude was the French authorities' policy of paying the Amerindians for the scalps of English enemies and their allies. Although it was intermittent, between 1692 and 1760, that policy enabled the French authorities to ensure the cooperation of the Aboriginal peoples and thereby maintain the French presence in New France at a lower cost. Thus, from a strategic point of view, the policy contributed to reinforcing the psychological impact of the Petite Guerre on the English population. Although the practice of scalping was considered immoral in Europe, it was tacitly supported, and, on occasion, officially encouraged, as shown in correspondence between Versailles and the colonial administrators.¹⁶ Indeed, the policy was directly implemented by some governors of New France, 17 such as the Comte de Frontenac, or the Marquis de Vaudreuil.¹⁸ One of the first governors to put a policy in place offering bounties for scalps was the Comte de Frontenac, who had promised 10 écus to the Amerindians in exchange for the scalps they brought him. Later, during the War of the Spanish Succession, the bounties were suspended, but they were later reinstated by the Marquis de Vaudreuil.

Torture was also institutionalized in New France. 19 The Canadians themselves carried out torture, as described by Bacqueville: "[A] Frenchman started pressing a rifle barrel against his feet, an Outaouais took another one, they burned him one after the other up to the back of his knees while he continued to sing softly [translation]." 20 This policy of torture was encouraged by the French administrators, such as

Governor Frontenac.²¹ The Amerindian custom was thus transposed into colonial culture within the legal system, and its use was legitimized: "... it became more acceptable through being used to serve the purposes of the colonial authority."²²

Political support for the *Petite Guerre* was easy to obtain, as the colony was first and foremost a military society²³ acquired through the *Petite Guerre* and led by a military government.²⁴ The French government had favoured the promotion of officers born in Canada to the highest military positions. Those officers were accustomed to the *Petite Guerre*, and were still convinced of its legitimacy. The military institution of New France ensured its long-term sustainability and its inherent stability by promoting only Canadian-born officers. Thus, the officer corps became definitively Canadian. In addition, even though the other ranks were recruited in France, the naval troops were also led by Canadian officers.²⁵



Major-General James Wolfe, pyrrhic victor of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham at Québec in 1759.

The Cognitive Pillar: The Legitimacy and Necessity of the *Petite Guerre*

"Necessity and familiarity drew the Canadians to the Indian way of war... Because of fewer people guerilla war was a necessity for the French-Canadians who made it into an art." ²⁶

Given the nature of the French colony, isolated from Paris and from the human and military power of New England, the *Petite Guerre* was, to Canadians' minds, clearly the only effective means of ensuring their own survival in a hostile environment. From a cognitive point of view, therefore, the Canadians justified its use and accepted its deviant practices,

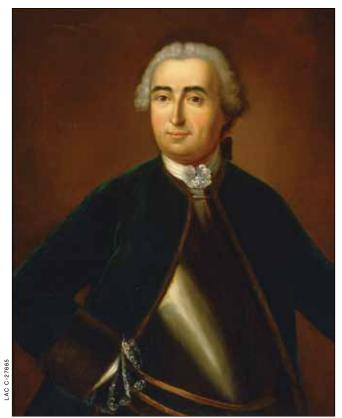
such as scalping and the use of torture during the 17th and 18th Centuries. Over time, the *Petite Guerre* became an informal doctrine on how to conduct warfare.

Cognitive support for the *Petite Guerre* first developed because of the French colony's isolation. The Canadian climate meant that the St. Lawrence River was impassable for almost six months of the year, thus preventing French ships carrying food, men, and correspondence from reaching Quebec City. But the isolation of the French colony was also the result of the French authorities' relative lack of interest, and the British navy's superiority at sea. The Royal Navy, which had succeeded in controlling the Atlantic, prevented aid from Paris from reaching the French colony. But it was the "Canadianization" of the military institution, more than anything else, which ensured cognitive support for the *Petite Guerre*.

The beliefs of the period justified the use of the Petite Guerre because it had become the most natural way of fighting. The learning and transfer of that method of irregular warfare were possible because of the Canadians' absolute need to ally themselves with the Amerindians. Indeed, the vastness of the territory, and the fact that it was so underpopulated, left the Canadians with little choice, in the face of threats from the Iroquois and the British, but to form an alliance with the Aboriginal peoples.²⁷ After coming into contact with the Amerindians, the colonists gradually adopted their customs. Amerindian culture enabled the Canadians to adapt to the climate and to meet their transportation, food, and clothing needs. Over time, a number of customs replaced and transformed the habits of the French colonists.²⁸ They soon adopted Amerindian war equipment and clothing, with the expeditionary corps wearing moccasins as their regulation shoes. And, by travelling on snowshoes in winter and in canoes in summer, the combatants could move around more stealthily. "The French went farther, often adopting the entire Indian costume from war paint to breech cloth."29 Little by little, the Amerindian style of warfare cut the colonists off from their European origins,30 and they lost their European cultural and ethical references.³¹ During the 18th Century, the King's representatives realized that the Canadians had become a people with a vision of the world that was very different from their mother countries.

Thus, even though scalping was seen at the time as barbaric, it hardly shocked the population of New France—because, for one thing, the practices of France's legal system at the time were just as barbaric, 32 but especially because it was seen as necessary, and people grew accustomed to the idea. The colonists arriving in New France tolerated the practice out of pragmatism, since the British were also using it, as were the Amerindian nations that were enemies of the French. By justifying its use cognitively, they gave it legitimacy.

Some experts on Aboriginal practices who later took positions in the militia transferred their knowledge, thus contributing to Ameridindian-style warfare's assimilation into the colony's military institution. Among these experts were militia captains Médard Chouart des Groseilliers, Guillaume Couture, and Nicolas Perrot.³³



Louis-Joseph, the Marquis de Montcalm.

The Clash between the Normative Pillars of New France and Paris

During the Seven Years' War, there was a confrontation between two normative pillars: the one imported from Europe by Montcalm, his officers, and the regular troops, and the one already in place in New France within the Canadian military institution. Bougainville describes that normative confrontation quite clearly:

"What a country, my dear brother, and what patience it requires to bear the distasteful spectacles we are subjected to. It seems that we are a part of a different, even an enemy, nation ... the Canadians and the French, although they have the same origin, the same interests, the same principles of religion ... cannot agree; it seems that they are two entities that cannot be amalgamated [translation]."³⁴

The cultural distance between Paris and the colony was also reflected in a normative divergence concerning the art of warfare. The European normative framework included the traditional method of warfare, and the concept of honour. At the time, European-style warfare was based upon battle lines that resembled a chess game. The routine on the battlefield was well established; it was a ceremony that the officers on both sides reproduced faithfully. In the 17th Century, and especially in the 18th Century, most sieges of cities and fortresses ended with conditions of honourable surrender if the besieged population had behaved well by limiting the number of victims and by avoiding exposing civilians to the consequences of the conflict, such as massacres or pillaging. They were then

allowed to leave the battle with all the honours of war.³⁵ In addition to the highly mechanical and rhythmic nature of the conflicts of that time, one of the fundamental principles of warfare in Europe was the notion of honour and respect for non-combatants. This method of conducting warfare was sometimes called *guerre en dentelles* ["lace wars"], but it was more than just a matter of appearance; it was a first attempt to limit the atrocities of war in the wake of the religious wars, and the Thirty Years' War.

The officers of those armies had understood that they were gentlemen, whose role was not to wage unlimited warfare upon civilians.³⁶ That had become an accepted rule in Europe, a rule which affirmed that respect for what we now call human rights should not be suspended in time of war.³⁷

From a European normative point of view, the *Petite Guerre* had become a dishonourable way of conducting combat, but it fit into the larger context of regular warfare in the form of an auxiliary tactic. French officers were very familiar with the *Petite Guerre*, yet its use was not banned on the battlefield. It had even become central to the thinking of many 18th Century theoreticians and strategists.³⁸

On the other hand, for regular officers in the 18th Century, the *Petite Guerre* was not a form of warfare, but a criminal act.³⁹ The practices it involved, such as ambushes, attacks upon civilians, and mistreatment of prisoners, were considered unjust or inhumane. Snipers did not hesitate to target sentries or officers, which was considered murder.⁴⁰ Torture had become a rite that the regular officers could no longer tolerate⁴¹—a rite in which Canadian soldiers were also participating.⁴² The Canadians themselves became adept at that kind of violence and its cruel methods. The catalyst for this rejection was undoubtedly the British surrender of Fort William-Henry on 9 August 1757. Those who surrendered were massacred, an act which violated the rules of honour and the principle of treating non-combatants differently.

In his writings about Canada, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville related that event, which traumatized him, as it did Montcalm and the French officers: "[I]t is never acceptable to sacrifice humanity to what is nothing but the shadow of glory [translation]."43 The British capitulated and negotiated their surrender in accordance with European habits and customs. The vanquished, who numbered about 2000 men, were supposed to be allowed to leave with the honours of war, but the Amerindians would not accept those conditions. Montcalm had obtained their promise to restrain themselves, but that was not what happened: they pillaged avidly.44 On 10 August, Amerindians dependent upon the French army, massacred part of the garrison at Fort William-Henry. But that incident was just one of the atrocities committed by Aboriginal people, and often led by Canadian officers. 45 The event illustrates that such practices were supported unconditionally by the Canadian soldiers of the period.

This normative opposition also exacerbated the continuing divergence between the French and the Canadians concerning the strategic objectives of war.⁴⁶ That split would manifest itself at the highest level between Montcalm and

Vaudreuil, who held opposing concepts of how to fight the British in New France:

"Unfortunately, Montcalm and Vaudreuil quickly came to detest each other.... Vaudreuil did, however, know the country and what warfare in it entailed. Montcalm rejected this strategic concept. He wished the war to be conducted on European lines, sieges and set battles."

While the Canadian governor Vaudreuil, his militias, and his Amerindian allies continued to wage war according to the frontier traditions of warfare, the defence of Canada was placed in the hands of a commander who intended to fight the war in the European manner.⁴⁸ Montcalm wrote that the nature of war had changed pro-

foundly because of the way the British attacked, and that there was no longer any place for the *Petite Guerre*.⁴⁹ He believed that asymmetrical warfare was no longer decisive in a conflict that would henceforth be based on mechanical, codified confrontation between the French and the British.

Not only was there a clash of values between Canadian and French soldiers, but, in addition, the strategic situation had changed radically. The British were determined to conquer New France. They had set up a naval blockade that was unprecedented and relatively effective. In addition, they had federated the colonial troops of New England so as to better protect the colonists against Canadian raids. Lastly, they increased the number of regular troops to an unprecedented level.

Thus, on the battlefields of the Seven Years' War, the military institution held within it two diametrically opposed ways of doing battle. For the Canadians and their allies, war

meant only the *Petite Guerre*, while the French conceived of warfare as a strictly mechanical activity conducted within a European context, and imbued with the humanist values of chivalry and honour. The military institution had to find its way and to choose between the Canadian normative vision and the French vision. That confrontation, which undermined the institution's legitimacy, led it to favour the

European norm, relegating the *Petite Guerre* to a secondary role of *petite guerre*. Thus, the European norm supplanted that of New France in order to ensure the stability of the military institution. Although the Canadian military institution disappeared at the end of the Seven Years' War, it is interesting to note that some of its elements would resurface 50 years later in the irregular methods used by the French-Canadians in the War of 1812.⁵⁰



Montcalm Trying to Stop the Massacre, wood carving by Alfred Bobbett, based upon the painting by Felix Octavius. Montcalm attempting to stop Native Americans from attacking British soldiers and civilians as they leave Fort William Henry after the battle in 1757.

Conclusion

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S cott's institutional analysis model was particularly useful in analyzing the military institution through the use of the *Petite Guerre* in New France. Two parallel military institutions co-existed until the arrival of Montcalm: the French one, which was based upon honour and the fledgling concept of the law of armed conflict, and that of New France, which had adopted the *Petite Guerre*. The regulative pillar, common to both institutions, supported the *Petite Guerre* financially and politically, thereby enabling the kings of France to hold on to the colony without spending too much money on it.

The cognitive justification of the use of the *Petite Guerre* was that it made it possible to ensure the geostrategic survival of the population in the face of the threat posed by the British and the Iroquois, and despite the colony's isolation from Paris.

That cognitive acceptance was transformed over time into a true integration into the norms upon which the Canadian society of the period was built. Gradually, the *Petite Guerre* was assimilated into the Canadian military institution. It was therefore legitimate, stable, and sustainable. However, the massive deployment of European regular troops to fight the Seven Years' War changed the environment, and the balance

of the military institution of New France. The pressure for change was not only for pragmatic reasons; it was also a result of the importation of norms from the mother country to New France on the art of warfare as conducted by the Europeans, and the values associated with it. In order to survive, the Canadian military institution, which at the time was subject to the authority of France, had no other choice but to be absorbed by the French institution.



The Death of Montcalm. Inspired by Henry Woollett's famous engraving after Benjamin West's Death of General Wolfe (see cover), François-Louis-Joseph Watteau rendered this even more fanciful version of the French general's passing.

As we have seen, the institutional issues involved in regular armies' adaptation to irregular warfare are not new, and problems with that adaptation did not always stem from the

pragmatic issues of war. In most conflicts involving a significant irregular component, the conventional troops had to painfully relearn how to fight a war differently. We need only think of the invention of counter-revolutionary warfare in Algeria, or the trauma to the American army caused by the war in Vietnam, to realize that a military institution cannot adapt without endangering the very foundation of its legitimacy as an institution. Moreover, the adaptation is often temporary. As sociologist and anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, institutions tend to have a selective memory in order to protect their legitimacy.51 The Americans' difficulty adapting in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly illustrate those memory problems. Irregular warfare is a foreign body that endangers the survival of the regular military institution, and sooner or later, the institution must shed that foreign body in order to preserve its legitimacy. In the 21st Century, we can expect petite guerre to play a frequent

role. Will the 'regular' military institution remember?



NOTES

- The Petite Guerre (capitalized) refers here to the irregular war method used by the North American Aboriginal peoples and adopted by the Canadians.
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- 6. Boissau, «Combattre, gouverner, écrire,» p. 161.
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. Starkey, European-Native American Warfare, p. 19.
- 9. Boissau, «Combattre, gouverner, écrire,» p. 162.
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- 12. Starkey, European–Native American Warfare, p. 86.
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- 28. Ibid., p. 8.
- 29. Morton, A Military History of Canada, p. 4.
- 30. Ibid., p. 5.
- 31. Delage, «L'Influence des Amérindiens,» p. 103.

- Chaffray, «Regards croisés sur le Canada et la France,» p. 213.
- 33. Fournier, L'Art de la guerre sous le Régime Français, p. 8.
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- 35. Starkey, European–Native American Warfare, p. 26.
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- 38. Nicolai, «A Different Kind of Courage,» p. 54.
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- 41. Starkey, European-Native American Warfare, p. 30.
- 42. Nicolai, «A Different Kind of Courage,» p. 7.
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