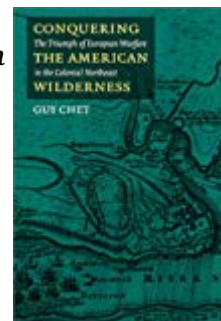


Guy Chet. *Conquering the American Wilderness: The Triumph of European Warfare in the Colonial Northeast.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. xiii + 207 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55849-382-7.



Reviewed by Lance Janda

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The Myth of "Americanized" Warfare

We Americans do love our myths. From Frederick Jackson Turner's vision of the West as the driving force in creating a distinctive national character to the idea that early colonists were divinely inspired to create a new nation, we steadfastly cling to the idea that we must be special. That sense of uniqueness has even permeated military history, where nineteenth-century U.S. historians planted the notion that American concepts of warfare were distinct from those of the stodgy Old World. They insisted that European strategic and tactical concepts were no match for the American wilderness or Native Americans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that colonists adapted by embracing a new style of war modeled on the indigenous peoples they sought to subdue. Rather than fight in the open, the colonists fought guerilla style, hiding behind trees and conducting raids rather than clinging to outmoded European drill, and in that manner were able to defeat Native Americans and ultimately the British Army during the American Revolution.

As Guy Chet convincingly proves in *Conquering the American Wilderness: The Triumph of European Warfare in the Colonial Northeast*, however, there is no strong evidence whatsoever to back up such a claim. Instead, the record shows that European strategy and tactics were almost uniformly successful in the colonial northeast, and were instrumental in helping English colonists and the British Army conquer Native Americans and the French between 1620 and 1756.

This thesis is not entirely new. Military historians have long known that colonial militia and irregular units were seldom effective during the American Revolution, and that the British Army played an increasingly important role in defending Great Britain's North American colonies as the quality of colonial militia gradually declined. Indeed, Chet builds upon the work of historians like Ian Kenneth Steele, Stanly McCrory Pargellis, and Daniel J. Beattie, each of whom has helped re-interpret our understanding of early colonial warfare over the last decade. What is original is Chet's concise synthesis of the field to date, and his extension of the study of European strategy and tac-

tics all the way back to the first English settlements in New England. By taking this linear and long-term approach he is able to show that orthodox European warfare was successful from the very beginning in New England, and that there was no re-evaluation of military doctrine by colonists at any point prior to the Seven Years' War (1756-63) as some historians have suggested. Moreover, he demonstrates that Native Americans were not generally superior in their tactics against either colonists or European armies, that the success of irregular colonial forces like Roger's Rangers was extremely limited, and that British defeats (even Braddock's famous debacle on the Monongahela in 1755) stemmed from poor training, weak discipline, or bad leadership rather than from any flaw in British or European tactics and theory.

Chet's thesis is remarkably compact as well as extremely well-documented, and he includes a nice historiographical overview of related works and critical concepts in his introduction. Ironically, his work grew out of research he originally hoped would document the emergence of an "Americanized" military society in New England. Instead of a new culture that tailored European concepts of tactics and strategy to fit the reality of North America, however, he found that cultural and military continuity in the northeast mattered far more than any differences. His research indicates that previous historians who emphasized colonial leaders like Benjamin Church or conflicts such as King Phillip's War as being crucial in demonstrating the influence of Native Americans on rapidly evolving rules of war were simply mistaken, relied on minimal sources, or were clearly biased. Rather than any new concepts of warfare, the wars of the colonial period were won through attrition, superior logistics, and European tactics which the American colonists never abandoned and which paved the way for eventual victory in the Seven Years' War.

Conquering the American Wilderness rests on very strong primary research and an exhaustive review of the relevant secondary literature, and includes an overview of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tactics and weapons technology that can be read with great benefit by specialists and lay readers alike. It does not deal with Native Americans, atrocities, or colonial forces other than the British in any detail, and therefore cannot be considered any sort of military overview of either the Atlantic World or the colonial era. Instead, it is a focused monograph that persuasively argues that European concepts of warfare were imposed with great success on the American wilderness; that European armies (especially the British) emphasized firepower, defensive fortifications, supply networks, wars of attrition, and the combination of strategic offensive action with tactical defensive operations; that regular troops were typically far superior to colonial militia; and that less affluent, less technologically advanced, less organized Native American societies had little chance of resisting such tactics for any extended length of time.

Chet's book is occasionally repetitive and his maps need more detail, but these are minor criticisms. His work is an excellent contribution to the study of the military and societal evolution of the early American colonies, and presents a fascinating study that should interest military historians and a wide cross-section of scholars in other fields as well as the general public. After all, what Chet is really doing is destroying one more cherished myth of American uniqueness, and along the way offering a window through which to view the success of European armies in other parts of the world as well. His work goes a long way toward explaining why the European way of war ultimately triumphed in North America and throughout the Atlantic World.

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