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Patterns and Perspectives

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Christian as well as traditional ceremonies. At Gay Head and Mashpee, in Massachusetts, where Indians became Christians as early as the seventeenth century, Native folk beliefs about ghosts, witches, and spirits survived into the twentieth century. In such instances, Christianity did not eradicate old beliefs; rather, it supplemented and even strengthened them, providing a new, broader spiritual basis. The new world that emerged was one in which Christian and traditional beliefs alike, sometimes separately and sometimes together, guided and gave meaning to people's lives.

CLAUDIO SAUNT

from "Our Indians": European Empires and the History of the Native American South [2007]

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Atlantic World histories, like more familiar narratives of the rise of the nation-state, frequently seem to convey a sense of European omnipotence. Capitalism reaches across the Atlantic to engulf the Americas, Old World biota invade the New World and push out indigenous species, and historical narrative replaces oral traditions about the past. Searching the frayed edges of transatlantic empires, however, historians have located peripheral regions, variously described as frontiers, borderlands, or middle grounds, that lay just beyond the reach of imperial control. Once characterized as the proving grounds of empire, scholars now recognize that these regions were sites of negotiation and compromise, where Indians and colonists together forged new worlds.

In a 1999 article, Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron summed up recent literature on borderlands, the contested regions lying between empires. These regions, they observed, were characterized by "fluid and 'inclusive' intercultural frontiers." They were places of "mutual acculturation," "replete with ethnic mixing, syncretism, and cohabitation." Where borderlands existed, Adelman and Aron concluded, "Indian peoples deflected imperial powers from their original purposes and fashioned economic, diplomatic, and personal relations that rested, if not entirely

Claudio Saunt, "'Our Indians': European Empires and the History of the Native American South," in Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Eric R. Seeman, eds., *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007). © 2007, pages 61–71. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, N.J.

on Indian ground, at least on more common ground. Since Adelman and Aron's essay, the emphasis on "fluid" borderlands has shown no signs of waning. One historian describes the "relatively harmonious past" of the Deep South, where Indians and colonists participated in a system of "mutually beneficial economic interactions." Another writes about a "world of equals" in the Texas borderlands, where Indians and Europeans "brought together respective traditions of ceremony, gift giving, and protocol to forge new systems of diplomatic exchange with one another."

Paradoxically, this historiographical turn toward borderlands may in fact perpetuate rather than destabilize a Eurocentric perspective of the Atlantic World. Metaphorically, "middle ground" and "borderland" suggest a sense of in-betweenness, of negotiation and compromise, but literally they reflect the viewpoint of colonial ministers in Paris, Madrid, and London who eyed the possessions of their European rivals and dreamed of extending their territorial claims across Indian lands. To Native Americans, by contrast, middle grounds and borderlands were simply homelands. Narratives that foreground negotiation, compromise, and boundary crossing between races and cultures perhaps reflect more the emancipatory fantasies of twenty-first-century scholars than the lives of eighteenth-century Indians, whose nations were invaded and reduced, if not destroyed. Any account of Indians in this period must consider the imperial dimensions of the Atlantic World without resorting to older narratives that assumed that conquest was inevitable and total.

To understand the dynamics of regions that were, from different perspectives, both imperial borderlands and Indian homelands, a twentieth-century neologism may be helpful. Where European empires fought each other and Indian nations for Indian lands, they frequently did so by means of proxy warfare. Loosely defined, proxy wars are local or regional conflicts in which competing imperial states covertly invest. They are "large small wars," as two scholars said of the thirty-five-year civil war in Angola that began in the 1960s.

There are a number of obvious differences between the well-known proxy wars of the twentieth century in places such as Angola and Afghanistan and those in the eighteenth century in the Choctaw Nation, Iroquoia, and elsewhere, but there are a number of revealing similarities too. First, in the eighteenth-century Atlantic World, European empires exported their conflicts to other nations, and those conflicts were deeply imbricated in international imperial rivalry as well as in regional colonial ambitions. Second, imperial administrators displayed a deep contempt for the people who lived in battlegrounds, arrogantly and erroneously imagining that they could control the actions of local residents. Third, although administrators' fantasies of control were not in the least warranted, the guns, textiles, and other trading goods that they poured into battlegrounds in the interest of manipulating native peoples frequently had devastating consequences for indigenous communities, not unlike the effects that machine guns and mortars had more recently on Angolans and Afghans. There is a significant disparity in the scale between eighteenth- and

twentieth-century proxy wars, reflected in the deadliness of modern weapons and the tremendous reach of today's superpowers, yet the parallels remain compelling.

This chapter explores one European borderland and Indian homeland, the Choctaw Nation, where French and British empires fought a proxy war in the first half of the eighteenth century. It outlines how France and Britain exported their imperial rivalry to the Choctaw Nation. It explores the French administrators' fantasies of control over native peoples. And it concludes by arguing that the proxy war in the Choctaw Nation, though hardly controlled by French and British officers, nevertheless had devastating consequences for native peoples.

In the early eighteenth century, the lower South was shared by three large Indian nations. The Choctaw Nation in east-central Mississippi numbered about 17,000 people. On its northern border (present-day northern Mississippi), the Chickasaw Nation had 14,000 residents. And farther east, in present-day Alabama and western Georgia, the Creek Nation comprised 10,000 people. The European presence in the lower South remained negligible until 1670, when Britain established a settlement in Charleston. Some thirty years later, France established a competing colony along the Mississippi River. Separated by more than 600 miles and by the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek nations, these two imperial outposts would spend the next sixty years struggling for control of the land lying between them. (Although Spain had settlements in present-day Florida, by the eighteenth century it was no longer able to mount a significant challenge to its imperial competitors.) For much of the time, France and Britain chose to fight by proxy rather than overtly.

The Choctaw and Chickasaw nations, with their relatively large populations and their strategic location, held the key to controlling access to the Mississippi River. In 1715, French colonists and their slaves numbered only 400, and even fifty years later, when the French abandoned their claim to the colony, their numbers would barely exceed 9,000. By making "striking comparisons" between the great numbers of people in France and the small numbers of Choctaws and Chickasaws in the South, Jean Baptist le Moyne de Bienville, the colony's governor from 1701 to 1713, tried to elide the power imbalance in Louisiana, but the fact remained, as the Indians pointed out to him in 1707, that "instead of increasing you are diminishing."

It should be noted that eighteenth-century states were far less cohesive than their twentieth-century counterparts. Dependent on slow-moving and unreliable ships, colonial officials sometimes received their orders months after they had been issued. Moreover, when it came to implementing Indian policy, traders played a critical role, and both French and British officials complained that these men had little allegiance to the crown. Britain faced the added disadvantage of managing affairs through several competing colonies. But the fact remains that French and British officials, schooled in the theory of mercantilism, believed they were engaged in a zero-sum game for control of the world's wealth. Even local

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traders, looking out for their own interests rather than those of the crown, spent a great deal of time trying to monopolize commerce for their own nation.

Despite the powerful presence of the Choctaws and Chickasaws, both France and Britain imagined that their true adversary for control of the lower South lay on the other side of the English Channel, not across the Atlantic Ocean. As one British agent put it, with the establishment of Louisiana, the "English American Empire" might become "unreasonably Crampt up." The key to thwarting the French colony, British officials believed, was the establishment of a western Indian trade. Carolina consequently organized an expedition in 1699 to forge commercial ties with Louisiana Indians and to claim the Mississippi region for the British crown, and that same year it began arming Indians against the rival colony. Friendly Indians, declared a Carolina governing committee, should be encouraged to make war "upon those Indians that are our and their Enemies." By offering high prices for enslaved Indians, Carolina and Virginia created a market that sent their native allies as far as east Texas in search of potential victims. Between 30,000 and 50,000 Indians were captured and sold into the British slave market between 1670 and 1750.

These actions did not go unnoticed in French Louisiana. "The English of Carolina are sparing nothing to have our Indians destroyed by theirs," Bienville wrote in 1709, using an expression of possession that became common among both French and British officials. By the end of Louisiana's first decade, it was clear to the governor that the Chickasaws would be "theirs." These people, whom the French could reach only with difficulty by ascending the winding path of the Tombigbee River, lay on a route frequently traveled by Carolina traders. As the Chickasaws expanded their relations with Carolina, Bienville announced that the more populous and more centrally located Choctaws were "the key to this country," an opinion that French officials would share for the next fifty years.

Like proxy wars in the twentieth century, the Choctaw-Chickasaw war was a regional conflict with connections to remote locales. The great distance between Paris and the lower South as well as the interest of French administrators in their far-flung colony is captured by the brief yet strongly worded comments left by Parisian officers in the margins of reports on Louisiana. "Last autumn, these savages killed two English," read one such report, to which a colonial minister noted in the margin, "*bon*." When French-allied Indians failed to attack the Chickasaws, another administrator wrote in the margin, "*tant pis*" ("too bad"). The King encouraged measures to have the Choctaws destroy the Chickasaws "as soon as possible," a more effusive marginal note explained in 1735, because if conflict with England became overt, the war with the Chickasaws would become especially costly. "I will spare no expense [*Je n'épargnerai aucun soin*] to achieve the total defeat of the Chickasaws," Bienville wrote to the minister of the Marine soon afterward.

The imperial dimensions of the conflict were made real when Louisiana governors coordinated forces against the Chickasaw Nation with their

ministerial counterparts in distant New France. In 1730, Governor Étienne Boucher de Périer (1726–1733) wrote to Governor Beauharnois in Quebec, requesting that Hurons, Iroquois, Miamis, and other northern Indians be sent against the Chickasaws. In that year, Hurons killed or captured some thirty Chickasaws. In later years, orders were relayed from New Orleans to Quebec to Fort Detroit to organize war parties against the Chickasaws. “The savages from the north are relentlessly harassing the Chickasaws,” an officer reported from Mobile in 1738. Given the concerted French efforts spanning nearly half a century to set their Indian allies against the Chickasaws, it is not surprising that more than one Choctaw concluded that the French themselves should be doing the fighting. “For a number of years,” one Choctaw reportedly said in 1745, they have fought the Chickasaws, who “never did anything to them except fail to be allied with the French.”

French officers believed that with well-directed gifts, cleverly timed encouragements, and occasional threats they could manipulate Choctaws to conform to their strategic plans. They manifested a deep conviction in their own superiority. The Choctaws might “take a few scalps here and there,” Périer wrote in 1731, but they would never be able to destroy a well-fortified nation such as the Chickasaws. By contrast, he wrote, “nothing is impossible for the well-led Frenchman,” especially when “the glory of the King” was at stake. But French arrogance was undercut by two disastrous military campaigns in 1736 and 1740. In the first, Bienville, frustrated with the lack of progress against the Chickasaws, decided to organize two French forces to invade their homeland simultaneously. One, led by Martin d’Artaguette, would descend from Fort Illinois on the Mississippi River, while the other, commanded by Bienville himself, would ascend from Mobile.

Although Bienville was delayed by a lack of supplies for two months, d’Artaguette did not receive word until his party of 130 French soldiers, 38 Iroquois, and 190 Illinois and Miami Indians was already on the march. He decided not to turn back. When his troops arrived in the Chickasaw Nation in late March 1736, 400 to 500 warriors rushed over a nearby hill and pursued the panicked soldiers back to their camp. The Chickasaws killed d’Artaguette and forty other men and seized their supplies. When news filtered back that ten prisoners were burned alive, the French took consolation by reporting that their compatriots had sung bravely during their immolation. One officer explained, “That is the custom of the savages, who judge the valor of a warrior only by the strength or weakness of his voice at the moment when they have him killed.” The stunning defeat, coupled with their painful adoption of Indian standards of valor, must have made colonists uncomfortable. Unwilling to attribute the rout to the skill of the Chickasaws, Bienville concluded that the English were to blame.

Bienville’s belated foray into the Chickasaw Nation, two months after D’Artaguette’s, fared no better. Numbering over 1,000 men, the expedi-

tion quickly got itself into trouble when French soldiers thoughtlessly set fire to several Chickasaw cabins providing cover from hostile gunfire. Forced into the open by the roaring flames, the soldiers were shot down by their own rear guard as well as by the Chickasaws. As their officers fell around them, the troops hurriedly took flight. Roughly eighty French soldiers were killed or wounded in the fighting, compared to perhaps twenty Chickasaws. Adding insult to injury, Bienville had to plead with his Choctaw allies to help carry the French wounded back to Mobile. A month later, Bienville humbly reported to the minister of the Marine that the campaign "occasioned the vacancy of several officers' positions." Once again, he attributed the defeat to the English: "What happened against my expectation was the assistance of the English, whom I did not think would take sides." Bienville also blamed the stature of his troops. Of fifty-two recent recruits, he wrote with dismay, only two were taller than five feet. Nevertheless, he recognized that this time he might not be able to avoid shouldering some of the responsibility. "Your silence, Monseigneur, regarding what I suggested about the cowardice of our soldiers," he wrote to the minister of the Marine, "leads me to believe that you are not well persuaded that it was the only cause of the poor success." This cowardice, he insisted, "was only too real and too public."

The 1736 expeditions did nothing to improve the image of the French in the minds of local Indians. Red Shoes, a noted Choctaw warrior, visited Mobile in May 1737 and told the commander that the French "know nothing about making war." They were unable to take even a small village of thirty or forty men, he observed, and in their failed attempt lost scores of soldiers without killing a single Chickasaw. French troops, encumbered by their heavy clothing, marched too slowly and too closely together, Red Shoes said, making it possible for the Chickasaws to fire blindly and still kill or wound several of them. Bernard Diron d'Artaguet, whose nephew had led the first expedition, listened to Red Shoes's humiliating reproach and responded as best he could: French soldiers had sacrificed themselves on the King's orders, he explained, to see if the Chickasaws were "true men" and if they, as "great warriors" merited a worthy attack. The Choctaws, he reported to the minister of the Marine, returned home impressed with the "great courage" and "obedience" of French soldiers, but his response could scarcely have soothed French doubts about their military prowess or bolstered the Indians' waning opinion of their neighbors. Bienville immediately began planning a 1740 campaign to redeem French honor.

This time Bienville intended to sail up the Mississippi and Wolf rivers, cross overland, and descend on the unwitting Chickasaws. The expedition, put into motion in the middle of 1739, ended in disaster because of a fatal oversight: there was no route from the Wolf River to the Chickasaw Nation that permitted a thousand French soldiers to pass with their artillery. Although by September the French troops were positioned on the Wolf River at Fort Assumption, not far from present-day Memphis, they could only bide their time while several parties desperately tried to

discover a route that did not demand the construction of dozens of bridges or the fording of deep waters. Three months later, the number of Frenchmen, Indians, and slaves at Fort Assumption had risen to close to 3,000, but Bienville still had not discovered a road to the Chickasaw Nation. Winter set in, and the waters rose, flooding the lands and making overland routes even more impassable. In the cold weather, the army's horses and cattle, many of which had already drowned in the high waters, began to starve to death. Although it was clear by the end of the year that the entire campaign would have to be abandoned, Bienville maintained the charade until mid-February, when he finally called off the disastrous expedition. How disastrous is illustrated by the extraordinary cost to the French crown: over a million livres, more than three times the annual budget of the entire colony, expended on a war that Bienville abdicated before it began. Along with this immense sum, Louisiana lost 500 soldiers, who died of disease during the long, fruitless wait at Fort Assumption.

"Even if we did not get out of this fix as successfully as we had the right to expect we would," Bienville wrote, "the glory of the king's arms did not suffer." But no one shared his opinion, least of all the Choctaws. They wondered aloud why their allies had tried to carve out such a difficult route to the Chickasaws. They "have an infinite scorn for the French," reported one officer. Even as late as 1750, the expeditions of 1736 and 1740 were inspiring "such a great scorn for our inability to subdue the savages that they all boast of it." "I see it every day," wrote Governor Vaudreuil, "which pains and embarrasses me."

Considering these French military fiascos, it is hard to imagine how southern Indians could have been put at risk by a proxy war mounted by France and Britain. Indeed, the self-aggrandizing pronouncements of colonial officials must be read with skepticism. "At present, I am . . . the master of reestablishing the tranquility and peace of the colony," Bienville claimed in 1733, insisting that the Chickasaws were desperate to settle at all costs. Seven years later, after his embarrassing 1740 defeat, Bienville announced another truce with the Chickasaws. This time, however, even his inferiors reported (with some exaggeration) that the peace was a sham, agreed to by a single elderly Chickasaw and obeyed by no one. To sustain the pretense, Bienville ordered his officers to refrain from reporting on Indian affairs. It would be wrong to believe that Indians were merely victims in the French-English proxy war. But if they did not passively participate in their own destruction, as historians used to maintain, neither did they preserve "indomitable tribal independence in the face of relentless European intervention," as scholars more commonly assert today. Like the chaotic and dangerous worlds created by twentieth-century imperial rivalries in Angola, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, the French and British competition for the lower South destabilized the region and created a situation dominated by no one.

The impact of French interference in Choctaw affairs can be seen in three related arenas: the enrichment of Choctaw leaders through French

presents, the introduction of firearms, and the creation of a scalp market. Although French trade with the Choctaws remained minimal, the governor of Louisiana annually awarded Choctaw leaders thousands of livres worth of cloth, guns, knives, and other items. The French were "masterly" at managing Indian affairs by the "great quantities of valuable goods they gave them with," observed one English competitor. In the early 1740s, these items averaged about 20,000 livres, rising to twice that amount by mid-decade. The goods were distributed to a little over 100 Choctaw leaders in the 1730s. Even if, in response to Choctaw demands, that number rose to 200 by the 1740s, it meant that each leader received 200 livres worth of commodities, the equivalent market value of fifty-four deerskins. By the measure of the Louisiana governor, who made 12,000 livres per year, this sum was not extraordinary, but for a common soldier, who made fifty-four livres, it was significant. More important, for Indians, the market value of fifty-four deerskins represented the profits of two years of hunting.

"The savages . . . learned from us to have true needs [*de vrais besoins*]," remarked P  rier in 1731. Indians, he therefore concluded, could be manipulated with a plentiful supply of textiles and firearms. The truth was more complicated. "They are insolent," wrote one of P  rier's fellow officers, "and one can say that they demand as tribute what we call presents." Whether textiles and guns were gift or tribute, the French distributed them to Choctaws inclined to kill Chickasaws and withheld them from those who were not. As a consequence, Choctaws always had to keep in mind the costs of opposing the French. When Alibamon Mingo agreed to the establishment of an English trading post in his town, he quickly realized that the disadvantages outweighed the benefits. "It turned me against the French leaders, who, to punish me," he explained, "deprived me for two years of the presents I was accustomed to receiving." This "disgrace," he continued, "made me lose all credit in the nation." Presents, concluded Governor Vaudreuil, "are indisputably the strongest ties that keep the Choctaws in our interest and the principal motive behind their actions."

Vaudreuil's dismissive assertion that the Choctaws were driven mainly by the desire for European goods flatly ignores the many other factors that influenced them: friendship; strategic considerations toward France, Britain, and Spain and toward other Indian nations; political competition within the Choctaw nation; and religious convictions. The French could not control the Choctaws merely by distributing textiles and firearms, but neither could the Choctaws control the effect of this new source of wealth flowing into their nation. The French first tried to channel goods through the great chief, an office created by them to facilitate the political manipulation of the Choctaw Nation. The great chief in turn redistributed the merchandise to the principal chiefs, who, according to French plans, were supposed to become beholden to their leader. Unfamiliar with such hierarchy, however, the principal chiefs successfully pressured the French to distribute goods more broadly.

The goods did not sow disorder because Choctaws abandoned their beliefs for the pursuit of wealth, as the French imagined. Rather, the

stream of wealth traveled down traditional lines of distribution in such great quantities that the number of influential leaders multiplied without precedent. Customarily, Choctaw leaders redistributed goods to their extended families, sustaining a network of people who were beholden to them. With the practice of French gift giving, Bienville explained, "each of these chiefs, by means of the presents that he receives and that he knows how to distribute appropriately, forms a party that he employs independently of the great chief, who is now so only in name." The new sources of wealth in Louisiana and Carolina strengthened and enlarged these parties and introduced a heated competition between leaders for recognition from colonial authorities, as Red Shoes revealed. "I will be as faithful to the English as you want to be to the French," he challenged Alibamon Mingo, "and we will see whether my warriors or yours will return more satisfied with the presents they receive."

The presents also introduced another element of disorder into the nation. Common warriors watched the growing wealth and power of the principal chiefs with envy. Hoping to become chiefs themselves one day, they explained, they did not object to the gift-giving practices of the French. Nevertheless, "their needs were not any less great" than those of the chiefs, nor did they lack "a sound ambition [*une honnête ambition*]," both unfulfilled by French presents. "It was not surprising," the Choctaws therefore explained, "that they sought their advantage elsewhere," that is, in South Carolina. This dynamic was evidently at work in 1738 when Red Shoes convinced a large number of warriors to welcome the English into the nation. They did so, Alibamon Mingo explained, because "all of the warriors were very discontent after returning last winter from Mobile, where the presents were delivered to the chiefs, who shared them among themselves and their relatives." The result of French gift giving was a more turbulent Choctaw Nation that experienced social upheavals controlled by neither the French nor the Choctaws themselves.

Among the gifts distributed by the French were muskets, which led to an increase in violence in the lower South. Historians have questioned the prevalence of guns in the Choctaw Nation before the American Revolution. There have been virtually no archaeological excavations in the old Choctaw Nation to settle this question, but there is enough documentary evidence to suggest that firearms were more widespread in Choctaw communities than previously thought. The French clearly believed that their Indian allies were dependent on them for munitions, especially powder and lead, which were prohibitively difficult for the English to transport on horseback from South Carolina. Governor Vaudreuil even suspected that the Choctaws would abandon Louisiana entirely if it were not for their dependence on French ammunition and French alcohol. In fact, English-allied Indians occasionally found themselves without any ammunition, as one Choctaw warned they would in 1746. "They will completely lack munitions," he reportedly said, "unless they want to load their muskets with Limbourg [a textile] and other merchandise." He was proven right two years later when Red Shoes's English-

allied followers desperately substituted pieces of hardwood knot and fire-dried oak for lead balls.

The importance and prevalence of firearms are best attested to not by the French but by the Choctaws themselves. In 1732, during a speech encouraging his men to go to war, the Choctaw great chief urged that "they had only to prepare their muskets and their war clubs to go take scalps." His reference suggests that guns already occupied a central place in Choctaw military campaigns. Indeed, Choctaws painted a bleak picture when they imagined what life would be like without firearms. In 1734, one Choctaw recalled when the British first began arming the Chickasaws, asserting, "Without M. de Bienville, our father who gave us muskets and munitions, we would no longer exist." At least one Choctaw considered the possibility of abandoning the French and "taking up the bow and arrow again," but others thought the prospect ruinous. The bow and arrow are a "pitiful resource for those who have a family to feed and support," said one Choctaw in 1748, "all the more because we have completely lost the ability to use them." Another, making the same point more forcefully, showed up with a bow and arrow at a debate about French alliance. He had just tried "his old weapons," he told this audience, but "he could no longer use them, having lost the ability." The Choctaws would be "miserable," he concluded, if the French abandoned them.

The Choctaw reliance on firearms, hastened by the violence unleashed by the French-English proxy war and encouraged by the French policy of supplying their Indian[s] with muskets, had two consequences. First, the Choctaws became dependent on a steady supply of weapons, severely limiting their ability to respond to the French and British invasion of their nation. Second, the violence in the Southeast became bloodier and deadlier. Musket balls pierced leather clothing, tore flesh, broke bones, and, if the victim survived, left irregular gashes that were more likely than arrow wounds to host fatal infections. The result was a Chickasaw population that, under sustained attack by French-armed Choctaws, plummeted by 50 percent between 1730 and 1760.

It is undeniable that the French-English proxy war made the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations more dangerous places to live. Periodically, to drive a wedge between their Indian allies and enemies, the French sponsored and hosted the burning alive of Chickasaw prisoners. One such fire occurred in October 1731 in New Orleans when Governor Périer sent three Chickasaw men to the flames despite pleas of clemency from Périer's Indian allies. "It will serve to enflame even more the war between the Choctaws and Chickasaws," he calculated. On another occasion, Périer reported that the Choctaws had burned to death twelve Chickasaws on the field of battle. He noted with satisfaction that "the war is more bitter than ever between these two nations" and suggested that the French should encourage "the Choctaws' fervor."

The role of the French in this upsurge in violence is visible in the transformation of scalping in the eighteenth century. Although likely an ancient practice among the Choctaws, scalping became both more frequent

and commercially motivated as a result of the French–English proxy war. As early as 1708, the governor of Louisiana was encouraging Choctaws to bring him the scalps of English-allied Indians, and some time before 1721, the colony adopted an official policy of paying the Choctaws a gun, a pound of powder, and two pounds of bullets for each Chickasaw scalp in order to “encourage better the nation of the Choctaws to carry on vigorously the war against the Chickasaws.” This bounty produced 400 scalps in a single winter, Bienville reported in 1723. When Choctaw ardor faded, French messengers appeared in the Choctaw Nation to reconfirm that Chickasaw scalps had a price, and when French governors wished to show special gratitude for a lock of enemy hair, they paid more “handsomely” than usual. No wonder Choctaws concluded that scalps were the “best gift” they could give the French governor. They would search out the Chickasaws “so as not to appear before him empty-handed,” they announced to Bienville in 1736. The results of the French bounty on scalps are impressive: French governors collected at least 1,000 scalps in the twenty-year period beginning in 1732, averaging about fifty per year, and they likely received many more not accounted for in the official records. It is not clear what the French did with their gruesome purchases.

Before the arrival of the French, it is unlikely that there was an Indian market for scalps, for the practice of scalping seems to have been linked to rites of passage rather than to commerce. One eighteenth-century visitor recalled that among the neighboring Creeks, boys took their first scalps to establish their manhood. “When a young warrior brings back a scalp, for the first time,” Louis Milfort explained, “the chiefs of the place where he lives assemble in the grand cabin to give him a name, and to take from him that of his mother.” Later in life, men took scalps to establish their bravery and to rise in the estimation of their families and communities. James Adair noted an additional purpose for these “joyful trophies of a decisive victory.” Mounted atop the houses of deceased family members, scalps marked the avenging of dead relatives and enabled their spirits to go to a place of rest. Although these uses persisted to the end of the eighteenth century, by the 1730s scalps had also become commodities. Responding to market incentive (albeit deceitfully), Choctaws adopted the practice of cutting enemy scalps into several pieces so as to receive more than one payment for a single scalp. “We paid them the price of ten scalps for a single enemy,” Bienville complained. For a brief period, French officers closely inspected their grisly purchases, paying for pieces in proportion to the whole, but this cost-saving measure soon had to be abandoned when Choctaws objected to such market regulation.

The Chickasaws highlighted the disturbing logic of assigning a market value to a human scalp. One warrior asked, “What do the French claim to be doing? What use are our scalps to them to pay for them? . . . Do they find treasure in our scalps?” He knew the answer but wished to draw out the link between money and violence in the South. Another warrior looked forward to the time when the Choctaws would “tire of selling our scalps.” But the Choctaws, the beneficiaries of this new market, said they

would continue selling scalps until the French ceased paying for them. By mid-century, Indians far and wide associated the French with scalping. One Cherokee said he had "little Knowledge" of the French but heard that they raised a "constant Cry": "go kill and destroy, bring us plenty of Hair, plenty of Scalps."

Divided between the French and the English, the Choctaws fought a deadly civil war between 1748 and 1750. Governor Vaudreuil boasted that, because he was short of troops, he "made use of the eastern Choctaws" to destroy the English-allied Choctaws. The violence was extraordinary. French allies shot and eviscerated the captain of Boukfouka, stomping his intestines into the ground before pursuing and killing eighty of his followers. They exterminated Red Shoes's family, including his children, and they destroyed several towns entirely. Vaudreuil estimated that more than 800 English-allied warriors died in the conflict, or almost one out of every four Choctaw men. "I engaged them as much as I could to make war against their rebellious brothers . . .," Vaudreuil boasted, "persuaded that while [the English] see a civil war among the Choctaws, they would not risk going there in significant numbers or with lots of merchandise." Purchasing hundreds of scalps and supplying firearms was costly, he admitted, but well worth the price.

By virtue of their numbers, political skill, and military acumen, Indians remained a significant presence in the lower South through the American Revolution. Nevertheless, describing the region as a borderland elides the destructive interference of France and Britain in the affairs of native nations. The analogy to twentieth-century proxy warfare captures the deadly influence of imperial powers as well as the chaotic and uncontrollable world that resulted. Regional conflicts and local communities in the lower South became part of a much larger hemispheric war between France and Britain. Although the number of French colonists in the region remained minimal, French officers, calling down Indian allies from the Great Lakes and ordering guns and munitions from across the Atlantic, drew on imperial networks that extended for thousands of miles. Choctaw warriors who carried muskets forged in France in place of their own hand-carved bows and arrows did not become the obedient foot soldiers of the French king. But neither did they remain immune from the rapid, unpredictable, and uncontrollable social transformations that were set off by the arrival of the French and English. As in Angola and Afghanistan in the twentieth century, the scale of geography in the lower South changed suddenly. Community rivalries, local economies, and regional conflicts all became international, immersed in networks of trade and warfare that encompassed millions of people and drew on vast amounts of capital. As the scale grew, so too did the order of violence. In the Atlantic World, it was sometimes a misfortune to have your homeland deemed a borderland.