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During the first decades of the eighteenth century, according to Stephen Saunders Webb, British imperial subjects lived in the shadow of one revolution and on the cusp of another. The first was the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, or, in Webb’s parlance, “Lord Churchill’s Coup,” an event that changed the line of succession and ensured that England and its empire retained its political liberty and Protestant faith.1 At the same time, however, there were tensions in the empire that, according to Webb, presaged its eventual dissolution in the wake of the Seven Years’ War. In the midst of this turmoil, one man attempted to hold the empire together. John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, was one of the leading generals in British (and European) history. He was also, in Webb’s telling, a key actor in American history, even though he never crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Instead, he sent his underlings: inferior officers who served in a variety of posts from New York to the Leeward Islands. It was these men who built “Marlborough’s America” and “cemented the culture of the Augustan age, and the institutions of the military-fiscal revolution, on Britain’s American provinces” (27).

Marlborough’s America is Webb’s fourth book on the development of England’s (and, in this book, Britain’s) empire in North America and beyond. His primary theme throughout these books has been the centrality of the military in building the empire. American colonies were “garrison governments” (xi), Webb has argued, anchored by the power of military commanders—“Governors- General” rather than simple governors—who translated England’s military revolution to the colonies.2 Webb’s latest work extends this argument forward in time, arguing for the continuing relevance of the military in a period often described, in Edmund Burke’s telling phrase, as the era of “salutary neglect.” This interpretation places


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him at odds with the bulk of early American scholarship over the past three decades, which, influenced by Atlantic and continental approaches, has tended to argue for the diffuseness and weakness of empires. Webb’s new book is unlikely to change many minds, but it offers an interesting counterpoint to the dominant paradigm and reminds us that military men did play an important role in colonial political development.

Webb’s narrative begins with the accession of Queen Anne to the English throne in 1702 and the subsequent beginnings of the War of the Spanish Succession. Europe’s uneasy peace shattered when rival Bourbon and Hapsburg claimants vied for the Spanish throne, and Britain soon found itself at the head of a coalition to halt Louis XIV’s Continental ambitions. At this point Webb’s hero enters the picture—and in the author’s mind, there is hardly a better word to describe him. The Duke of Marlborough was a consummate military commander, and many of the most gripping passages of the book recount his campaigns in the Low Countries and Germany. In addition, the duke played a key role in the rough-and-tumble world of partisan politics in the age of Anne, and Webb combines the military narrative with the political story to portray Marlborough as a common-sense moderate navigating between radical Whig and high Tory extremes. The duke’s political opponents usually appear as buffoons or even traitors to Marlborough’s grand cause: to “preserve English national independence, make England’s empire British, secure the Protestant succession to the imperial throne, and rescue both European and American liberty from the aggression of Louis XIV” (58).

Marlborough, of course, has inspired many previous historians—the most famous being his illustrious descendant Sir Winston Churchill—but Webb’s account differs by placing the great general’s career in an imperial context. Even while focusing on European campaigns, Webb’s narrative moves occasionally and abruptly to the American theater, mostly to chronicle the many veterans of Blenheim, Malplaquet, and other important battles who ended up in the colonies. All of this underlines his central contention that one of Marlborough’s aims was to “win America in Europe” (57). The source of this contention is not clear. The duke consistently opposed a naval war and specifically (and perhaps wisely) resisted the Tory attempts to send expeditions to the Caribbean or New France. Nonetheless, Webb insists that the duke and his men “fought the war for America” (200) and for a particular vision of “whig capitalism and imperialism” (4). After France’s defeat in Europe, therefore, Marlborough sent his surrogates to finish the job in the colonies.
Since Webb’s book is ostensibly about America, much of its interpretive weight depends on the third section of the book, which follows three of Marlborough’s favorites to their American postings. This composite biography of “the greatest generation of the royal executive in America” (218) provides a wonderful illustration of the chaotic state of eighteenth-century American politics but does little to elucidate exactly how Marlborough’s example influenced his underlings’ conduct. Webb’s first protagonist, Daniel Parke, was a high Tory who defended the royal prerogative against Antiguan assemblymen bent, he believed, on “an independency from the Crowne of England” (279). As it turns out, the Antiguans opposed Parke more than they opposed Queen Anne; they saw the governor as a tyrant who used military force to trample on their liberties, and they responded by taking justice into their own hands and killing him. Whatever lessons Parke learned from his military service, it seems they did him little good in the very different circumstances of ruling a plantation colony. Webb’s other two examples, Robert Hunter and Alexander Spotswood, proved more successful but only by working with rather than against local interest groups. Hunter embraced partisan politics and aligned himself with New York’s Whig merchant oligarchs, while Spotswood ingeniously used Virginians’ hunger for western lands to “do the work of empire” (363). Each of these men succeeded not by acting as military men pushing a uniform imperial vision but by immersing themselves in local politics and playing to local concerns.

As political pragmatists defending the legacy of the Glorious Revolution in the provinces, Hunter and Spotswood emulated Marlborough’s example in England. If they intended to translate the duke’s military strategies to America or establish anything resembling “garrison governments,” however, they were somewhat less successful. The military revolution advocated by people such as Parke and Spotswood proceeded only in fits and starts, and met many setbacks. A case in point appears in Webb’s epilogue on the “Golden Adventure” of 1749–50, when several of Marlborough’s veterans came out of retirement in a grand expedition against Spanish America. The assault failed miserably—perhaps vindicating the now-deceased Marlborough’s opposition to such naval endeavors—but did provide a military education to many provincials, such as Lawrence Washington, who passed the example on to his brother George. Webb’s attempt to find a “bridge between Marlborough’s America and Washington’s America” (413) is interesting, but the differences between the two men’s worlds surpass any continuity. More than that, perhaps America did not belong to great men at all. As important as military men were in shaping the empire, this book
confirms that we must widen our vision to understand how power actually worked on the distant margins of the British world.