European colonists often remarked upon the differences between Native Americans’ way of war and their own. Indians, colonists asserted, were reluctant to absorb casualties and fought for captives, revenge, and personal glory rather than for political reasons such as territorial expansion. Historians have too often taken such claims at face value. Broad generalizations about low-risk tactics and individual or kin-group motives for Indigenous warfare inadvertently echo a neo-Rousseauian tradition of distinguishing between state and non-state warfare that, like other manifestations of Rousseauian thinking, implicitly characterizes Native Americans as people with cultures but not political histories. As a corrective to this tendency, this article advocates a “war-and-politics” approach, presenting as an example the rise to power of the paramount chief Wahunsonacock/Powhatan. The Powhatans’ diverse tactical repertoire overlapped with that of Europeans, was equally deadly, and was, as in Europe, an expression of the strategic concerns of political leaders. Those concerns included the conquest and colonization of entire peoples, and the acquisition of their territory, under Wahunsonacock’s direction. The Powhatan example demonstrates how historians might de-exoticize Native warfare more generally, recognizing its historical and cultural specificity without marking it as fundamentally different from war in the rest of human history.