The overseas expansion of the Dutch Republic, culminating in the “First Dutch Empire,” is a remarkable story of the quick rise to prominence of a small country in northwestern Europe. Much smaller in population than European rivals like Spain, England, and France, and without considerable natural resources, the Republic was able within a few decades to lay the foundation for a colonial empire of which remnants are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands nowadays. This First Dutch Empire, running roughly from the beginning of the seventeenth century until the early 1670s, was characterized by rapid expansion, both in the Atlantic area and in Asia. The phase that followed, the Second Dutch Empire, shows a divergence in development between the East and West. In the East, territorial expansion—often limited to trading posts, not settlement colonies—continued and trade volume increased, but in the Western theater the Dutch witnessed a contraction of territorial possessions, especially with the loss of New Netherland and Dutch Brazil. Even so, Dutch trade and shipping in the Atlantic was not solely dependent upon colonial footholds, not in the least because the Dutch began to participate in the Atlantic slave trade. This Second Dutch Empire ended in the Age of Democratic Revolutions, when upheavals in Europe and America brought an end to both the Dutch East and West India Companies and led to the loss of a number of colonies, such as South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Essequibo and Demerara on the Guyana coast. A Third Dutch Empire can be considered to encompass the increasing dominance of the Dutch over the East Indies, especially the islands that now form Indonesia, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, ending
with decolonization after the Second World War. The fourth phase is one in which the term “empire” may appear to be less applicable. Rather, it is the phase of continued decolonization, with the independence of Surinam in 1975 and the subsequent migration of many descendants of slaves to the Netherlands.

This very general periodization of Dutch colonial expansion and contraction in many ways runs parallel to that of other European countries. Yet, when we take a closer look at the first phase, certain features of Dutch expansion appear to be unique. Some of these are the direct result of differences between the Netherlands and the European monarchies surrounding it and can be traced back to the origins of the Dutch Republic.

By the mid-sixteenth century, the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries had gradually been brought under the rule of the Habsburg monarchs, first Charles V, and subsequently his son Phillip II, who also ruled territories on the Iberian Peninsula, among other domains. Yet from the 1560s onward, resistance toward these overlords began to increase, partly fuelled by antipathy toward the attempts to quell the beginnings of the Reformation, partly also in defense against centralizing efforts which encroached upon privileges previously granted to cities and estates. The Iconoclastic Fury of 1566, in which Roman Catholic churches were purged of images to be made suitable for reformed worship, triggered an escalation into what is now called the Dutch Revolt. By 1600 the seven northern provinces had de facto become independent, even though Spain—and other European countries—did not officially recognize this until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The Dutch Revolt had a far-reaching impact on the seven provinces that constituted the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, also called the United Provinces or the Dutch Republic—the term most commonly used by historians nowadays. The most obvious effect was the decapitation of the customary early modern sociopolitical pyramid. In the sixteenth century, sovereign power over each province had rested with a monarch in a personal union, meaning he combined the feudal titles of individual provinces, such as Duke of Gelderland, Count of Holland, etc. In the 1581 Act of Abjuration, a number of the rebellious provinces, combined in the States General, cast off their allegiance to Philip II and voided his sovereign powers. Interestingly, the ideological foundation of this decision was remarkably similar to that used in the American Declaration of Independence almost two centuries later, which has fuelled speculation that Thomas Jefferson used it as an example, even though there is no documentary evidence to boost that claim. Rather, I would suggest, it points to the persistence of underlying currents of philosophies of governmental authority. A striking difference with the popular
tendencies of the American Revolution is that the States General after 1581 tried to bestow sovereignty on noblemen from France and England, before finally deciding in 1587 to stop such efforts. This left the Dutch Republic in a hybrid situation, with sovereignty becoming collective, partly residing in the States General and partly in the provincial estates.

If that was not sufficient cause for conflicts to come, the situation was muddied further by the position of the stadholder, usually filled by members of the House of Orange. This noble family, with its princely title deriving from the independent principality of Orange in the south of France, had played an important role in the Dutch Revolt. William of Orange had been stadholder—governor—of some of the provinces and acted as representative of the sovereign overlord. In that position, the stadholder in the sixteenth century held supreme military positions and also had the power to appoint local officials and supervise the meetings of provincial estates as well as the States General. Yet after the Dutch Revolt, the stadholder technically became the servant of the provincial estates, although foreign visitors often misunderstood his power. The locus of this byzantine state system was the Binnenhof in The Hague. This was, in the early decades of the seventeenth century, the place where both the stadholder, the States of Holland, as well as the States General, resided. Considering that much remained the same, with the exception of the concentration of sovereignty in a single person overlord, it might be better to describe the institutional changes between 1570 and 1650 not so much as the decapitation but rather as the collapsing of the top tier of the pyramid.

The Dutch Revolt caused another important socioeconomic change as well: the different role of the clergy. Prior to the Revolt, bishops, abbots, and parish priests were of importance at different layers in the socioeconomic structure. As a result of the Dutch Revolt, the Catholic Church lost its prominent position, as well as most of its property. Catholic churches were purged and turned into reformed houses of worship, while monasteries were confiscated and turned to other uses, for instance to financing universities that educated reformed ministers. Although the Reformed Church also instituted regional and provincial supervisory bodies, the Reformation did lead to a change in the relation between Church and State. The Reformed Church was not a state church, but rather a public church: the only denomination with a right to public worship. It did not encompass the entire population, but was confined to a vanguard consisting of its membership, which submitted voluntarily to ecclesiastical discipline. For many matters, including control over houses of worship, the clergy had to rely on secular magistrates. Their success depended on the extent to which they could sway local officials to act on their complaints.
The collapse of the top of the pyramid and the removal of the church brought more power to the middle class in Dutch society. These burghers—self-employed artisans, shopkeepers, farmers who owned their land—considered themselves the core of the local community. These men—always men—were their own masters, meaning they were not in anybody’s employ, like servants, and they were of sufficient means, unlike the poor. They manned the local militia (schatterijen). The burghers formed quite a broad layer, showing considerable differentiation. At the top end we find the rich elite of merchants and magistrates. The Dutch Revolt had removed from power a number of the old Catholic families. New families obtained a place in the city councils of the cities of Holland and other provinces. In many cases, these regents combined their mercantile activities with a position in government, and they used their influence to implement economic policies that favored their own group. Nowadays we would call this abuse of power, but our conception of corruption is different from that in the 1600s. Once the Dutch Republic had consolidated its military position in the late-sixteenth century, the marriage between commerce and politics greatly added to its increasing eminence. Within an essentially conservative frame of mind that pervaded the seventeenth century, there was yet room for innovation, both technological (windmills) and mercantile (such as in matters of finance and banking), with the Amsterdam Exchange Bank, the Merchant Exchange, and improvements in the use of shareholding, for instance. It is notoriously difficult for historians to capture the atmosphere of any age, but when studying the early decades of the seventeenth century, a sense of boundless opportunities seems to have pervaded Dutch society, a mentality in which daring bred success. The fact that political power was in the hands of the mercantile elite certainly helped. This lasted until about the mid-seventeenth century, when we find the number of magistrates with a commercial background waning. While some sons of elite families went into government, and some went into trade, fewer and fewer combined the two. In addition, the elite became less accessible to newcomers. Dutch society as a whole was less dynamic in the second part of the seventeenth century.

Yet by that time the foundations for a colonial empire had been laid. Of course, it was not just internal factors that assisted the Dutch Republic in its remarkable rise to the status of world power; external factors also played a role. The imperial overstretch from which Spain (between 1580 and 1640 combined with Portugal) suffered allowed Dutch merchants to make inroads into Spanish trade and shipping in the Atlantic and the Asiatic theaters. Cutting off the colonial supply, so as to cripple the Spanish effort to reconquer the rebellious provinces that formed the Dutch Republic, was
an important strategic consideration, and it was boosted by a virulent anti-
Catholic mood. This is more obvious in the West India Company than in the
East India Company, but in the first part of the seventeenth century it
played a major role in both. Privateering in the Caribbean Sea and attacking
Spanish settlements along the coast of South America was a favorite pastime
of West India Company operatives. Yet the biggest result came with the
capture of a Spanish silver transport in the Bay of Matanzas on the northern
coast of Cuba in 1628. West India Company admiral Piet Heyn took eight
Spanish ships carrying over 170,000 pounds of silver. The proceeds allowed
the Company to set up the expedition that captured the northeastern part
of Brazil in 1630.

Northern European rivals, like England and France, in the first half
of the seventeenth century, suffered from internal struggles that hampered
their ability to counter Dutch expansion. The English economy was not very
strong circa 1600 and soon afterward religious strife and political struggles
combined to produce the disruptive English Civil Wars (1642–1651). France
similarly underwent a couple of decades of problems: partly peasant revolts,
partly economic stagnation. Yet by the 1660s both countries had emerged as
strong competitors to the Dutch. The rise of increasingly powerful monar-
chies in France and England had resulted in a unity of purpose and a deter-
mination by its royal leaders to counter these Republican upstarts who had
appropriated a larger share of the world’s economy than they had a right to.
Faced with such opposition from centralized governments, the Dutch decen-
tralized state system became a disadvantage rather than an asset. Whereas
it had previously allowed an extent of flexibility beneficial to expansion, de-
centralization now made it more difficult to achieve a unified response
to external threats.

In a way then, the Dutch Republic’s phenomenal colonial expansion
could not have taken place at any other time than the first half of the
seventeenth century, wedged in between the Dutch Revolt and the rise of
absolutism in European states. In assessing this development, the difference
between the Atlantic and Asiatic theaters is striking. Initially, Dutch mer-
chants focused on Asia, where valuable spices could be obtained. Here, they
encountered relatively powerful Indigenous states, in which the economies
were well developed and the density of the population usually was high.
Partly because of these factors, the trading posts in the East remained small.
Territorial expansion, with the objective of establishing colonial settlements,
was difficult in the East, and it was rarely the intention, at least initially.¹

On the other hand, there were opportunities for expansion in the New
World. Here, resistance was not so much to be expected from the Indigenous
populations, whose numbers declined due to the European diseases previously unfamiliar to them, but from other European nations, who had established colonies earlier. The objectives of the two great Dutch trading companies expressed this difference. Trade was the main objective of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie [East India Company or VOC], and gaining footholds was a means to this. The principal objective of the Geoctroyeerd West-Indische Compagnie [West India Company or WIC] on the other hand was to inflict damage on the colonial resources of the Iberian enemies. In pursuit of this objective the WIC tried its hand at the conquest of enemy colonies and privateering on its shipping. But the combination of business enterprise and instrument of war ultimately proved unsuccessful.  

The format the Dutch employed for overseas expansion—privately funded companies with a state monopoly—shows the decentralization that characterized the Dutch Republic, especially in its organization in local chambers. For a number of years in the period prior to 1621, Dutch merchants had been sailing to areas of the Atlantic other than New Netherland. To patria they carried sugar from Brazil, the Canary Islands, São Tomé, and Madeira, and salt, essential to the Dutch fishing industry, from the Cape Verde Islands, the coast of Venezuela, and islands in the Caribbean. Dutch ships also sailed to the coast of West Africa to obtain pepper, ivory, and gold. Even before the Twelve Years Truce with Spain (1609–1621) there had been plans to amalgamate the separate ventures into a single chartered company, as had been done in the East India trade. 

Almost immediately following the resumption of hostilities with Spain at the end of the Twelve Years Truce, the States General issued the patent for the West India Company. Colonization scarcely played a role in the patent, whereas privateering and trade, which in the eyes of the merchants offered better opportunities for profit, were principal objectives. The political situation in the Atlantic demanded a belligerent company. But financiers in the Dutch Republic were not particularly enthusiastic, most likely because they perceived the West India Company, to a far greater extent than the East India Company, to be a privately financed weapon in the fight against Spain. The most lucrative areas had already been in the hands of Spain and Portugal since the beginning of the sixteenth century. To create an Atlantic empire, the Dutch Republic would have to wage war. So trade and war were allies in the formation of the West India Company. It remained to be seen, however, whether it would be a particularly fortunate combination. As long as the Company’s activities were limited to privateering and to carrying out attacks on Spanish colonies, private and state interests coincided to a
great extent. But the establishment of Dutch colonies, especially settlement colonies, was another matter.³

Dutch colonization proceeded under the auspices of the States General, the central government of the Dutch Republic, in which each of the sovereign provinces was represented. The States General issued charters for the East India Company and the West India Company. Like the East India Company, the WIC was a public-private partnership in the form of a joint-stock company with shipping and trade monopolies. Both companies exercised powers that we associate with states, such as the power to conduct treaties and engage in warfare against Spain and Portugal. The East India Company managed to sustain its commercial rights for over two centuries. In contrast, the West India Company soon lost most of its trade of shipping monopolies. The emphasis in its activities shifted to colonial government in the Atlantic world and de facto it became a hybrid institution of colonial government rather than a commercial company. The West India Company was subdivided into five chambers: Amsterdam, Zeeland, Maze, Noorderkwartier, and Stad en Lande. Its central administration, which was in charge of general policy, consisted of the Heren xix [Lords Nineteen], in which Amsterdam had eight votes, Zeeland four, and each of the other chambers two. One vote was reserved for the States General, ensuring that the government’s interests were represented at the highest level within the Company.⁴ The presidency of the Heren xix rotated between the chambers of Amsterdam and Zeeland. In principle, meetings were held in the place where the presiding chamber was established, but sometimes the States General called meetings of the Heren xix in The Hague.⁵ Since most of the voyages to New Netherland had been organized by Amsterdam merchants, New Netherland was supervised by the Amsterdam chamber, which had twenty directors. These were elected with a tenure of six years from the hoofdparticipanten [large shareholders], each of whom had to invest a minimum of six thousand guilders. Committees within each chamber were charged with specific executive duties, such as the management of the wharves, the equipping of the ships, and the sales of the cargoes brought in by those ships.⁶

At the height of its power, around 1640, the West India Company controlled several colonies in the Atlantic: northeastern Brazil, a number of islands in the Caribbean, forts on the West African coast, Congo, Angola, and New Netherland. New Netherland was supervised by the Amsterdam chamber which instituted a separate committee to conduct the correspondence with New Amsterdam. In all formal documents, the highest authority in New Netherland carries the title “director-general and council.” Exact titles
were important in the seventeenth century and in this case it indicates the relatively unimportant position of New Netherland among the Company's possessions. Petrus Stuyvesant was not a governor-general, like Count Johan-Maurits van Nassau-Siegen in Brazil. A step further down in the hierarchy were regular directors and vice-directors. In New Netherland, vice-directors, reporting to director-general and council, were positioned at Fort Orange [Albany] and on the Delaware. The highest official at Curaçao was also a vice-director. In the same way, the exact designation for the members of the council was “raden,” councilors, not High Councilors, as in Brazil. When in 1654–1655 the councilors in New Netherland assumed the title of High Council, they were sternly reminded by their superiors in Amsterdam that they had no authority to do so: “You will do well to abstain therefrom in the future and be satisfied with the title belonging to each office.”

Governance by council in a Dutch colonial setting meant that the responsibility for decisions was shared by a collective body. Councilors were not just there to give advice, which could be followed or discarded by the director-general at will. They actually shared power. In most cases, the council in New Netherland was composed of West India Company employees, such as the vice-director, the fiscaal (the chief law enforcement officer), and the secretary. The power to appoint councilors lay solely with the Amsterdam chamber. In some cases, colonial councils made provisional decisions on matters of succession, subject to later approval from the Dutch Republic. An example is the appointment of Stuyvesant as director of Curaçao in 1642. During Stuyvesant’s time as director-general of New Netherland, the council usually consisted of four men, including himself. In his seventeen years in the job, Stuyvesant had a total of twelve different councilors.” Only in two or three cases was he able to exert any influence on the choice, so this was not a hand-picked council as is sometimes suggested. Apart from the early years, when conflicts arose between Stuyvesant and both his vice-director and the fiscaal, the director-general cooperated very well with his councilors.

The task of the council was to give advice and work together with the director-general in running the colony. The director-general and council had legislative tasks, discussing and promulgating ordinances on several issues, as well as executive duties, with the director-general as CEO. Stuyvesant entrusted his councilors with several assignments, both within New Netherland, as well as in the contacts with the surrounding English colonies. Its third task was to act as a High Court, trying capital cases, and as a court of appeal.

The meetings of the council took place in the meeting room in the fort and were chaired by the director-general. He convened the meetings, decided
on the agenda, proposed policy decisions and put matters to a vote. In the case of a tie, the director-general had a deciding vote. So he had a position of considerable influence, but even a strong personality such as Stuyvesant was outvoted on occasion. An example is the appointment of a new commissary for Fort Orange in 1647. Stuyvesant had suggested Michiel Jansz, but only vice-director Dinclage agreed with him. The other councilors voted for Carel van Bruggen—actually an Englishman; Charles Bridges was from Canterbury, but his name was Dutchified. So Stuyvesant was outvoted and Van Bruggen was appointed.8

Majority rule also applied in special situations when members of the city government of New Amsterdam were added to the council, as happened a number of times. It is a sign of the good collaboration of Stuyvesant with the city government. In numerous cases a vote was taken and the individual opinions were recorded, but in many other cases of less importance the decision to be taken was obvious; thus, after a brief discussion all agreed, and the council minutes reveal unanimity.9 When important issues were at stake and when time was available, the procedure was different. Let me give an example: on 10 November 1655, Stuyvesant asked the council whether the Indian attack on New Amsterdam two months earlier should be avenged by declaring war. He submitted a paper to the council with various questions:

a) what were the military options;

b) how the war should be paid for;

c) would it be a just war; and

d) would the risk not be too great?

Stuyvesant’s paper was read aloud in the meeting and all councilors received a copy. They were asked to submit their opinion in writing prior to the next meeting. The aim of the procedure was also indicated:

We earnestly request the honorable councilors for their written opinion on the foregoing propositions, [to be] given either collectively or individually. The latter is preferred to avoid partiality. For our part we [meaning Stuyvesant] shall not fail to place our opinion on the table beside those of your honors, so that the lords superiors in the fatherland may be all the better informed concerning the state of affairs, and so that we may arrive at a salutary resolution.10
So the purpose of the procedure was twofold: to come to the best possible decision, and to justify it to the superiors back in the Dutch Republic. Individual opinions are recorded quite frequently in the New Netherland council minutes. They can also be found in records of other Dutch colonies. The quote above provides the explanation. The colonial officials could be called upon to account for their decisions by their superiors in the Dutch Republic. They could even be charged with neglect or mismanagement, and this actually happened to both Stuyvesant and some of his predecessors, as well as in the case of Frederick Coyett, who was in charge of Dutch Formosa (Taiwan) when it was conquered by the Chinese.

By the 1650s communication had become quite frequent. In the correspondence with New Netherland each letter covers several topics. Usually, the letters are ten to twenty pages long. There were other ways in which the directors in Amsterdam, housed in the West India House, were kept informed. Several people sent letters to the directors in Amsterdam. For instance, in a letter of 27 January 1649, the Amsterdam directors informed director-general and council that they had received four letters from the vice-director on Curaçao, a letter from the schoolmaster on that island, a letter from commissary on Fort Orange (Carel van Bruggen), three letters from the New Amsterdam minister, and a letter from the fiscal.

The Amsterdam directors had other sources of information as well. Returning ship captains and company officials provided information orally. All this communication gave the Amsterdam chamber a detailed view on what was happening in New Netherland. It allowed the directors to give specific instructions to their officials in the colony.

Usually, the letters to and from New Amsterdam are ten to twenty pages long, which is actually quite short, when compared to the correspondence with Batavia in the eighteenth century, which ran into hundreds of pages per letter. The correspondence consists of two categories: general letters, sent to the highest official and council, and private letters (particuliere missiven), sent only to the CEO. This distinction has been overlooked by the nineteenth-century translators who worked on the Dutch documents of New Netherland. The translations of the correspondence give the impression that the directors corresponded solely with Director-General Stuyvesant. Actually, most of the letters are direct at director-general and council.

We may presume the general letters from the directors in the Dutch Republic were read aloud in the colonial councils by a secretary. Unfortunately, we know little about those sessions of the council. As no decisions were taken, they left no trace in the council minutes. Likewise, there is almost no information about the procedure via which the letters from director-
general and council to their superiors were drawn up; it would seem that the highest official (i.e. Stuyvesant) composed drafts, which were then read in the council. After suggesting changes the council approved the final version, which was then written out by the secretary or one of the clerks, before being signed by the chief executive officer (again, Stuyvesant). Also, copies had to be prepared to be expedited by later ships. In some cases the whole process had to be done very speedily, as a sudden change of weather could hasten the departure of the ships. On the whole, the administrative setup of colonial government provided a system of checks and balances against abuse of power or of the highest officials acting autocratically, which is not to say that conflicts and corruption were completely absent, of course.

This brief overview indicates that some of the most important characteristics of the Dutch Republic, such as its economic structure, its mercantile mentality, and its governmental setup, were replicated in Dutch trading posts and colonies. The most important characteristic, though, was flexibility. As the Dutch encountered divergent situations around the globe, they seem to have been better capable and more willing than other European nations to work with what they found, rather than impose their own scheme of things. It was this ability that allowed the Dutch to maintain a presence in Japan, to the exclusion of all other European nations, and it was this ability that allowed the Dutch to shift from company-controlled shipping and trade in the Atlantic to private merchant-controlled, when the Dutch Republic found itself unable to counter the quest for territorially based colonization by other European powers.

Notes


3. Den Heijer, De geschiedenis van de WIC, pp. 26–34; Willem Frijhoff, Wegen van Evert Willemsz.: een Hollands weeskind op zoek naar zichzelf, 1607–1647 (Nijme-

4. Cf. Frijhoff, *Wegen*, p. 494. That the States General had only one vote does not imply that only one representative was present. In 1638, the whole of the committee of the States General, nine men strong, was present at the meeting of the Heren XIX: Nat. Arch., The Hague, Archive States General, loketkas WIC, inv. no. 12564.6 (28 February 1638–1 May 1638).

5. For example, with reference to the discussion on the opening of trade with Brazil in 1638, Nat. Arch., Archive States General, loketkas WIC, inv. no. 12564.6 (28 February 1638–1 May 1638).


