One of the stranger conflicts in the history of warfare, the Hundred Years’ War was the painful and tumultuous transition of France and England from the medieval era to early modern times. It is misnamed; it lasted from May of 1337 to October of 1453, and perhaps should be the Hundred and Sixteen Years’ War. It was less one continuous war than it was a long chain of loosely related conflicts between the same nations. In the one hundred and sixteen-year time span, there were at least sixty-eight years of “official” peace, and forty-four of hot war to varying degrees.¹ And like many other wars, it did not achieve anything except massive carnage, disorder, mayhem, destruction, and general misery for the common people caught up in events, though it marked the start of early modern times for England and France.²

Though the war accomplished almost nothing, it did have lasting results. France and England were sped on their way to becoming independent nation states, rather than the constituent components of a feudal domain. A strong, centralized monarchy continued to grow in France, while strong monarchial rule arrived to stay in England after the Wars of the Roses. The roots of modern times began in the two nations with the end of the war. This paper will trace the causes of the Hundred Years’ War, the course of the war itself, and the long-term effects it had on both France and England.

Though the war started in 1337, its roots can be traced back to 1066 and the Norman Conquest of England. Duke William of Normandy, who went down in history as William the Conqueror, launched his invasion of England from Normandy, his duchy within France.³ William’s ancestor Rolf had led a band of pillaging Vikings up and down the river Seine. King Charles the Simple had managed to placate Rolf and his men by giving him a part of northern France as a fief. Rolf and his successors eventually took up
the French language, became Christianized, and their territory became known as the “Land of the Northmen”—eventually, Normandy. Thus William was a vassal of the king of France as Duke of Normandy, and since he retained Normandy after the Conquest, as king of England he was now technically also a vassal of the king of France.

The situation only grew more complicated in later years. In 1135, Henry I, the last of William the Conqueror’s sons, died due to a fatal bout of indigestion after overindulging in lampreys. He left no male heir, and his daughter Matilda was married to Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou in France. Their union produced a son named Henry. Unfortunately for England, Stephen of Blois, Henry I’s nephew, seized the English throne and plunged the kingdom into civil war for nearly two decades. Eventually Stephen was defeated, and forced to name Henry Plantagenet his successor, who took the throne of England as King Henry II in 1154.

By the time he became king, Henry ruled over vast territories in both England in France. He had taken Normandy as his own in 1150, inherited Anjou from his father in 1151, and married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1153, adding still further sectors of France to his rule. Henry, in fact, ruled more of France than the king of France. However, he had enormous difficulties keeping his far-flung lands under his control. His sons later used the French possessions as a base for rebellion against him, and the French kings were ever watchful for an opportunity to seize French land in English hands. The French reclaimed most of these lands under the shrewd leadership of King Philip II Augustus. Philip had been foiled for years by the skillful generalship of Richard I of England, but when Richard’s incompetent brother John came to the throne, Philip summoned him to Paris since he was John’s feudal overlord. When John refused to come, Philip seized
Normandy, Anjou, most of Aquitaine, and defeated John’s allies in the Battle of Bouvines in 1214. Almost all of France, save for Gascony and bits of land in northern France, had been returned to French hands, and John died unmissed and generally despised by his English subjects two years later.  

During the next century, France and England sniped at each other from time to time in expensive, inconclusive wars, but the two nations’ main concerns turned to other matters. England suffered through the long reign of the erratic Henry III, followed by the further development of Parliament under Edward I. In France, King Louis IX, later canonized as St. Louis, devoted his time to governing his subjects and frittering his resources away on unsuccessful crusades. Though Philip IV “the Fair” of France and Edward I engaged in a war, and taxation struggles with the church to pay for the war, it was inconclusive. Edward was more occupied in his wars with Wales and Scotland, and Philip was far more busy liquidating the Knights Templar, confiscating their wealth, and battling in clashes of will with the pope.

Events took a drastic turn in 1328, however, when King Charles IV, the last of Philip the Fair’s sons, died without an heir. This brought the centuries-old Capetian dynasty in France to an end. In England, the young Edward III had just come to the throne a year earlier, the son of the incompetent and despised Edward II and Isabella, one of Philip the Fair’s daughters. This gave Edward III a claim to the throne of France. The French, however, had no intention of letting him claim the throne, and instead chose a cousin of Charles IV, Philip of Valois, who became King Philip VI, first of the Valois kings of France. Edward III, still beset by the internal problems left over from his father’s reign, was in no position to enforce his claim, and so did not press the issue and as Duke
of Gascony did homage to Philip of France. Edward did not renounce his claim to the French crown, however, and merely waited for a favorable time to press the issue.\footnote{9}

Meanwhile, a thriving wool trade had developed between Flanders and England, and a favorable time arrived in May of 1337, when France and England clashed over control of the Flemish wool industry. In retaliation, Philip VI of France invaded Gascony, finally providing Edward III of England with a good reason to press his claim to the French crown.\footnote{10} Edward signed treaties of alliance with the Flemish cities, and prepared for an invasion of France. In 1340 the English fleet defeated the French fleet in a decisive battle at the Bay of Sluys, but Edward’s follow-up effort to invade France via Flanders met with failure.\footnote{11} Financial problems in England forced the war to halt for a few years, but Edward returned to invade in 1345. In 1346 Edward led Philip VI and the French army in a chase through France, almost reached Paris, then turned and defeated the French soundly at Crecy. A year later Calais fell to the English. The Black Death struck soon afterwards, however, and forced campaigning to come to a halt until the calamity passed.\footnote{12}

However, Edward III’s initial victories were stunning, and did not bode well for France. France had three times England’s population, many times the wealth, and had the advantage of fighting on its own familiar soil. However, numerous internal problems crippled France. The French king could not levy effective taxes to pay for his soldiers, as could the English king. In addition, the French military forces were still wedded to the old and inefficient system of vassals and mounted knights. The English found it cheaper to send infantrymen to France, armed with longbows, which would make a powerful...
impact, figuratively and literally, on the French forces. Finally, France was afflicted with numerous kings who were incompetent, dim-witted, or simply insane.¹³

The war resumed in 1355 when Edward III’s eldest son, Edward (called the Black Prince because of the color of his armor), launched a destructive raid into France. These raids would become the preferred English method of campaigning, and would leave much of the French countryside in ruins before the war ended.¹⁴ French King John II (called ‘the Good’ for his chivalry, though he was actually fairly incompetent) chased the Black Prince with the full might of France and caught him at Poitiers.¹⁵ John had twenty thousand men, while Edward’s force barely totaled sixty-five hundred. John had every confidence that this would prove a decisive battle, and the prospect of defeat did not even seem to cross his mind. He was right on the first count, but wrong on the second. The Black Prince, through a combination of his possession of excellent defensive ground, his skillful generalship, and English archers, absolutely devastated the French army. King John and most of the high-ranking French nobles were taken captive back to England, and France fell into chaos. King Edward III forced a “peace” on France in which he surrendered his claim to the French throne, but kept Aquitaine, Gascony, and most of northern France.¹⁶

But as so often in war and politics, England’s fortunes soon reversed themselves. King John of France died in captivity in London, and was succeeded to the French throne by his physically weak but mentally shrewd son Charles V, who became known as Charles the Wise. Charles did indeed show considerable wisdom when he made a knight named Bertrand du Guesclin his Constable (an office of military leadership) of France. One chronicler wrote of Du Guesclin that “there was none uglier between Rennes and
Dinant”, but what Du Guesclin lacked in physical appearance, he more than made up in courage, tactical sense, ability to control the fickle French soldiers, and sheer grit.\textsuperscript{17} English difficulties were exacerbated by Edward III’s advancing age and frailty, and his son the Black Prince’s terminal illness. Ably aided by Du Guesclin and Olivier de Clisson, a defector from the English side, Charles V drove the English from some of the territories they had conquered.\textsuperscript{18} The French were further aided by the deaths of both Edward III and Edward the Black Prince, and the ascension to the throne of the Black Prince’s son, Richard II. Discontented nobles and peasant revolts would occupy Richard throughout his reign, and he had little interest in prosecuting the war with France. Due to the deaths of Edward III and the Black Prince, Richard II’s disinterest in the war, and the skillful leadership of Du Guesclin and Clisson, the French drove the English from almost all of their conquests, except for a few cities on the northern coast. Charles V laid plans for an invasion of England, and the English were forced onto the defensive.\textsuperscript{19}

Unfortunately for the French, Charles V died, and his eleven-year-old son came to the throne as Charles VI. Charles was a weak child, and as he reached adulthood he began to suffer from incapacitating bouts of insanity, earning him the name Charles “the Mad”. To make matters worse, court factions battled for control of the country during Charles’s minority and long bouts of madness. His uncle, the duke of Burgundy, and his brother, the duke of Orleans, battled for control of the incompetent monarch and through him the kingdom.\textsuperscript{20}

France’s woes would increase in 1399, when Richard II was overthrown by Henry of Bolingbroke, who took the throne as King Henry IV, the first Lancastrian king of England. Henry planned to resume the war against France, taking advantage of France’s
internal weaknesses, but died before he could carry out the invasion. His son, Henry of Monmouth, came to the throne as King Henry V and invaded France. The French caught Henry’s outnumbered and starving army at Agincourt. As so often, the French outnumbered the English army. Unfortunately, the French no longer had canny leaders like Du Guesclin and Clisson to lead them, and reverted to their usual massed cavalry charge. The result was a disaster. Henry’s forces won a resounding victory at Agincourt in 1415, a victory so one-sided that most of the French nobles were massacred by English longbowmen. Henry continued to win victories, and by 1420 he forced the French to sign the Treaty of Troyes. Henry would keep most of northern France, and married Charles VI’s, Catherine of Valois. Their son would inherit the crowns of both England and France, at least according to the treaty. Henry V and Charles VI both died in 1422, and Henry and Catherine’s infant son Henry VI became the king of England and France. Charles VI’s son Charles ruled a portion of southern France, but the English continued their offensive under Henry V’s brother, the Duke of Bedford. Aided by the Burgundians, the English dominated the northern half of France. The Duke laid siege to Orleans, a major city in central France, in 1428.21

At this, the utter nadir of French fortunes, one of the most astonishing reversals in the history of warfare began, led by the most unlikely of individuals, a peasant girl named Jeanne d’Arc, i.e., Joan of Arc. Joan was a typical peasant girl from a village in Lorraine; however, at the age of thirteen, Joan claimed to hear voices she believed belonged to the saints Michael, Catherine, and Margaret. Whether these voices were divine, demonic, inspired by mental illness, the result of mold growing on grain, or a fabrication by Joan remains a subject of debate to this day. Regardless of their origin, the voices told Joan to
save France. Joan convinced a captain of Charles’s soldiers of her legitimacy, and he took her to Charles’s court. After several weeks of examination Charles became convinced of Joan’s legitimacy; that, or he had become so desperate that he would take any gamble. He gave Joan a horse, armor, an army, and sent her off to fight the English at Orleans. The English had not expected any resistance from the beaten Charles, and so were caught utterly unprepared by Joan’s army. The siege was lifted, and the English withdrew from Orleans.22

The victory at Orleans reinvigorated the demoralized French, and Joan’s army battled on to Reims, where Charles was crowned as King Charles VII in 1429. Joan then turned on Paris, but was hampered by Charles’s indecision and cowardice. Charles also had decided Joan was a dangerous idealist, and was perhaps even afraid of her. When the Burgundians captured Joan and sold her to the English, Charles made no effort to save her. The English burned her as a heretic at Rouen in 1431. A royal secretary present wept with grief. He believed the English were lost, because they had burned a holy person.23

The secretary’s words proved prophetic; Joan’s life would lead to numerous legends and conspiracy theories, but she had set in motion events that would finally bring the Hundred Years’ War to a close. Charles VII negotiated a peace with the duke of Burgundy in 1435, and the French, unified behind their king, went on the offensive.24 The various reforms and improvements Charles V had made were revived. In addition, with the advent of powerful field artillery cannons, the French now had a weapon to trump the English longbow. Charles VII rode into Paris in 1436. The French retook Normandy in 1450 at the battle of Formigny, and in 1453 the battle of Castillon, retaking Aquitaine.
The battle of Castillon ended the Hundred Years War. England would retain the northern city of Calais until 1558, but would never again try to conquer France.25

The war had accomplished very little. Edward III had wanted to unify the crowns of England and France. He never succeeded, and later English kings only succeeded for a short while. The war brought much death and misery to France, and economic unrest and social conflict to England. The war had accomplished almost nothing, but would have several long-lasting effects. It had awakened the spirit of French nationalism. When the war had begun, England and France were feudal nations, and by the time it ended, they were at the start of modern times, with centralized governments and professional armies. Burgundy rose as a powerful state on the border of France. The English developed their own clothing industry in response to vacillating alliances of the Netherlands.26

The power of local nobles declined, and the strength of kings and national government grew. The war had begun in one age, the medieval period, and ended in another, early modern times. Perhaps the greatest effect of the war was the rise of nationalism in France and England. The two countries no longer viewed themselves as part of a feudal structure of government, but rather as individual nations with individual identities.
4 Hollister, 116-117.
5 Hollister, 252.
6 Hollister, 253-257.
7 Hollister, 257-270.
8 Kagan, 292.
10 Waugh, 14-15.
12 Waugh, 16-17.
14 Waugh, 17-18.
15 Hollister, 338.
20 Hollister, 340.
22 Morris, 316-317, 319.
23 Morris, 318-319.
26 Kagan, 297.