

## War of 1812 Bicentennial: Why does no one remember the war that made Andrew Jackson famous?

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Happy 200th Birthday, War of 1812!

A primer on America's most bumbling, most confusing, and most forgotten conflict.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, a fact that may elude all but the most committed enthusiasts of America's more obscure wars. Don't expect coverage to compete with or even register alongside the steady drumbeat that has accompanied the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. It's hard to imagine a flurry of 1812 books flying off the shelves, or the New York Times commissioning a blog series about the conflict. Like Avogadro's number or the rules of subjunctive verbs, the War of 1812 is one of those things that you learned about in school and promptly forgot without major consequence.

There are plenty of reasons for this. The War of 1812 has complicated origins, a confusing course, an inconclusive outcome, and demands at least a cursory understanding of Canadian geography. Moreover, it stands as the highlight of perhaps the single most ignored period of American History—one that the great historian Richard Hofstadter described as “dreary and unproductive ... an age of slack and derivative culture, of fumbling and small-minded statecraft, terrible parochial wrangling, climaxed by a ludicrous and unnecessary war.”

Historians of the period and of the war may resent Hofstadter's summary dismissal, but it offers some clues as to why neither is the subject of much popular interest. The very things that put Hofstadter off—the bumbling diplomacy, the bitter infighting, the ineptly executed war effort—force us to confront a vision of the United States that doesn't generally fit our understanding of its origins. The war plays out as a disappointing second act to the Revolution, with the nation suddenly at the whim of Europeans and Indians and riven by internal dissent, and the heroes and heirs of 1776 acting without the pluck and ingenuity that we expect of them. How are we to commemorate that?

Uneasily, to be sure. But while Hofstadter was right in many ways, his broadside fails to register the war's central place in the national story. The Revolution was supposed to have been a discrete event, one that created the indisputable fact of the American nation. Revisiting the War of 1812 reminds us that the nation remained incomplete in the early decades of the 19th century. The peculiar story of America's second war with Great Britain is generally forgotten, but it was essential in affirming the legacy of the Revolution and the nation that it made.

The war was rooted in the tenuous diplomatic relationship of the United States with the traditional European powers. As much as Americans liked to see themselves as being providentially free from the wars and “entangling alliances” of the Old World, maintaining such freedom proved exceedingly difficult amidst the near constant war between France and Britain. When Napoleon's reach for European hegemony renewed hostilities between the two countries in 1803, both sides implemented policies that denied American rights to neutral trade, making commerce with either an act of allegiance to one nation and hostility to the other.

British policies and actions proved the most inflammatory. British ships patrolled the Atlantic, lurking close to American ports and subjecting American merchant vessels to search and seizure. The British used those searches to address a manpower problem in their navy. Renewing the practice of “impressment,” they seized sailors judged to be either defectors from British naval service or simply born British. Mistakes were common, leading American citizens to be dragged into the miseries of service in the British navy—miseries that Winston Churchill would later sum up with characteristic pith as “rum, buggery, and the lash.” Seizing sailors from merchant ships was bad enough, but offense turned to outrage in 1807 when a British frigate opened fire on an American naval vessel, killing three men before seizing four alleged Britons.

Though full-throated calls for war could be heard up and down the country, President Jefferson demurred. To begin with, the country was in no position to fight. Upon taking office, Jefferson had pared the military down to a bare-bones army and a navy of just a handful of ships ready for service. Aside from insufficient military might, Jefferson believed that wars and the armies and navies needed to fight them brought nothing but debt, taxes, more wars, and the destruction of republics. Better, he said, to bring the British to heel through a total embargo—a form of what he called “peaceable coercion” that would achieve the same ends as war at a fraction of the cost. The policy failed miserably, choking the economy and fanning an already intense opposition to Jefferson and his party among New Englanders that would carry into the war itself.

The next few years brought more provocations from the British, but still no war. Standing 5-foot-4, Jefferson’s successor James Madison shared a diminutive stature with Napoleon, but not, apparently, the dictator’s bellicose tendencies. Still hoping to avoid war, Madison asked Congress to pass a Non-Intercourse Act—not an early measure for abstinence education, but a slight loosening of Jefferson’s embargo that proved no more effective.

But if Madison remained reluctant to go to war, a new generation of young congressmen began to embrace the idea that saving the republic was a matter of prosecuting war, not avoiding it. The British clearly had nothing but contempt for American sovereignty. Some Americans saw a vast plot to recolonize the United States, not just in the impressment of sailors, but also in the growing unrest of Indians in the West. After William Henry Harrison’s clash with Shawnee Indians at Tippecanoe on November 11 (which would be later immortalized in his 1840 presidential run), many Americans suspected that the British were encouraging and supplying a growing Indian confederacy.

The time had come for what a young John C. Calhoun called a “manly vindication” of American rights, and Congress declared war on June 18, 1812. Two days earlier, the British foreign minister had lifted the offending trade restrictions against the United States, but that news wouldn’t reach American shores for weeks, and the die was cast for the bizarre war that followed.

Canada stood out as the first and most convenient place for the Americans to strike at the British. A vast territory peopled by barely half a million souls with an apparently loose allegiance to Britain, Canada seemed an easy prize. Once it was taken, the British would have to acknowledge U.S. sovereignty, its dominion over North America, and to cease the disruption of American trade. Jefferson confidently predicted to Madison that enacting the plan was a “mere matter of marching.”

This may have worked if the Americans had been able to assemble a force capable of marching. At the outbreak of hostilities, however, the army was a dissolute and ragtag force of fewer than 7,000 troops, led by an aging and ineffectual officer corps. Where the regular army fell short, state militias of public-minded citizen soldiers were to fill in. But New England governors, who blamed the war on the policies of Jefferson and Madison rather than the actions of the British, opposed the war and refused to raise militias (thus creating yet another vexing aspect of the war: The very people who were most adversely affected by the British were the most loathe to go to war with them). Meanwhile, those units that did form in other states were filled with so many unruly and disobedient men that even the ablest commanders found it difficult to lead.

No one more fully embodied the pathetic state of early American military might than General William Hull, the bloated and incompetent governor of the Michigan territory charged with the initial matter of marching into Canada. Entering present-day Ontario from Detroit at the head of an ill-trained troop of 2,000 militiamen, Hull met with little initial resistance, but his triumph ended there. Upon hearing news that the British had taken Fort Mackinac at the northern tip of Michigan, Hull panicked and pulled his men back to the American fort at Detroit. When he received a bogus document warning of a vast force of Indians on the march, Hull lost it. Barely coherent, stuffing his mouth with so much tobacco that the juice ran down his face, and crouching to avoid imaginary artillery shelling, Hull yielded Detroit without any real fire from a smaller force of British Canadians and Indians. Incursions to the east didn't go much better that fall. The war was just a few months old, and the entire Michigan territory had fallen into British hands.

Surprisingly, the Americans had better luck on the water against the vaunted British Navy than they did on land against the Canadians. A series of small but significant victories on the Atlantic in 1812 gave the British the rare experience of naval defeat. An outraged cabinet official summed up the common shock registered in the British government and press: "It is a cruel mortification to be beat by these second-hand Englishmen upon our own element."

Success at sea reversed the Canadian disasters of the early part of the war. In September of 1813, the rakish-looking Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry withstood a pummeling from British naval forces at Put-in-Bay off the Ohio coast of Lake Erie before turning the tide and forcing the entire fleet to surrender. In addition to presenting the splendid spectacle of a 15-ship naval battle on a Great Lake (both sides had rushed to build up their inland fleets), Perry had opened the way for William Henry Harrison to record a smashing victory the following month at the Battle of the Thames in Ontario (about 50 miles east of Detroit).

The war was not over, however, and the British prepared for a large counteroffensive in the summer of 1814. By August they had amassed a large force along the mid-Atlantic coast, preparing to deal the Americans their greatest humiliation of the war. After easily dispensing with the small militia force in place to defend the capital, 4,000 Royal Marines marched into Washington. Madison and his government had left in such a hurry that British officers found a dinner for 40 sitting uneaten in an executive mansion dining room. They stuffed themselves before torching the place and moving on to burn the Capitol and various other public buildings around the city. Their efforts amounted to little more than vengeance for the American burning of York (Toronto) the previous year, and the troop headed north. But the British incursion stalled in Baltimore. A small garrison of American troops withstood a siege of Fort McHenry in September, the sight of which inspired the lawyer and

sometime poet Francis Scott Key to scrawl out the words to the “Star Spangled Banner” on the back of a letter.

Both sides had proven able arsonists, but in the absence of clearer objectives and more decisive victories, there wasn’t much reason for war to go on. It was entirely characteristic of the conflict that efforts to negotiate peace had begun even before any fighting had broken out back in 1812. But when news arrived to envoys in Ghent in October that an American fleet had held off a British invasion of New England, the way to an agreement was cleared. On Christmas Eve, 1814, the two sides signed the Treaty of Ghent, which was simply an accord to end the war. Envoys agreed on prisoner exchanges and little else. Neither side lost or gained anything and the border between the United States and British Canada went unchanged.

If the inconclusive and unsatisfying Treaty of Ghent had truly been the end of the War of 1812, Hofstadter’s assessment may well have been correct. After nearly two and a half years of fighting, the country was nearly bankrupt, New Englanders remained bitterly opposed to the war to the point of contemplating secession, and the conflict had yielded no appreciable gains. It would take the war’s final irony—a technically unnecessary battle contested after the treaty had been struck—to make it anything but “ludicrous and unnecessary.”

News from Ghent had reached neither the 5,000 British troops gathering to take New Orleans nor Andrew Jackson and the force of 4,000 that he had dug in to defend the city and the control of the Mississippi River that came with it. Jackson, the frontier upstart from Tennessee, was already earning a national reputation for his vigorous Indian fighting across the Southeast, but he would become a national hero at the Battle of New Orleans on Jan. 8, 1815. Occupying well-entrenched positions, Jackson’s troop would easily repulse the British attack and inflict heavy casualties.

Though Jackson’s famous victory at New Orleans didn’t force a reconsideration of the peace terms, it had the effect of transforming the entire meaning and perception of the war. When the news of the battle reached Washington in February, Congress ratified the Treaty of Ghent not as the indifferent conclusion to a stalemate but as a seemingly great triumph over the old empire. The war had become a glorious redeclaration of independence; its missteps were forgotten and a new generation of national heroes was born—Andrew Jackson first among them. It was fitting that he would eventually come to dominate the age that the war ushered in as a national symbol as powerful as George Washington had been to the Revolution and its aftermath.

When we sing the words to Francis Scott Key’s hastily composed poem that would later become the national anthem, we may not be aware that we are revisiting the War of 1812. Nor are we generally aware that the song’s first verse is phrased almost entirely in the form of a question. “O say can you see,” the narrator begins, initiating a lengthy query as to whether or not the flag above Fort McHenry has survived the previous night’s relentless shelling from British ships. The War of 1812 was carried out amid similar questions about the Revolutionary legacy and the endurance of nation itself. But the popular perception of the war, like the dawn’s early light in the “Star-Spangled Banner,” ultimately gave affirmative answers to those questions—answers that would last until the Civil War raised them anew.



