

An American Perspective on the War of 1812

by Donald Hickey

The War of 1812 is probably our most obscure conflict. Although a great deal has been written about the war, the average American is only vaguely aware of why we fought or who the enemy was. Even those who know something about the contest are likely to remember only a few dramatic moments, such as the writing of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the burning of the nation’s capital, or the Battle of New Orleans.

Why is this war so obscure? One reason is that no great president is associated with the conflict. Although his enemies called it “Mr. Madison's War,” James Madison was shy and deferential, hardly measuring up to such war leaders as Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, or Franklin Roosevelt. Moreover, the best American generals in this war – Andrew Jackson, Jacob Brown, and Winfield Scott – were unable to turn the tide because each was confined to a one or two theaters in a war that had seven or eight theaters. No one like George Washington, Ulysses Grant, or Dwight Eisenhower emerged to put his stamp on the war and to carry the nation to victory.

Another reason for the obscurity of this war is that its causes are complex and little understood today. Most scholars agree that the war was fought over maritime issues, particularly the Orders in Council, which restricted American trade with the European Continent, and impressment, which was the Royal Navy’s practice of removing seamen from American merchant vessels. In contemporary parlance, the war was fought for “Free Trade and Sailors' Rights.” These issues seem arcane today. Moreover, the only way that the United States could strike at Great Britain was by attacking Canada, and that made it look like a war of territorial aggression. Even today Canadians are likely to see the war in this light, and who can blame them? A war fought to secure maritime rights by invading Canada strikes many people as curious.

The Consequences of the War

If the causes of the war are obscure, so too are the consequences. The United States has won most of its wars, often emerging with significant concessions from the enemy. But the War of 1812 was different. Far from bringing the enemy to terms, the nation was lucky to escape without making extensive concessions itself. The Treaty of Ghent (which ended the conflict) said nothing about the maritime issues that had caused the war and contained nothing to suggest that America had achieved its aims. Instead, it merely provided for returning to the status quo ante bellum – the state that had existed before the war.

The prosecution of the war was marred by considerable bungling and mismanagement. This was partly due to the nature of the republic. The nation was too young and immature – and its government too feeble and inexperienced – to prosecute a major war efficiently. Politics also played a part. Federalists vigorously opposed the conflict, and so too did some Republicans. Even those who supported the war feuded among themselves and never displayed the sort of patriotic enthusiasm that has been so evident in other American wars. The advocates of war appeared to support the conflict more with their heads than their hearts, and more with their hearts than their purses. As a result, efforts to raise men and money lagged far behind need.

Despite the bungling and half-hearted support that characterized this conflict, the War of 1812 was not without its stirring moments and splendid victories. American success at the Thames in the Northwest, the victories at Chippewa and Fort Erie on the Niagara front, the rousing defense of Baltimore in the Chesapeake, and the crushing defeat of the British at New Orleans – all these showed that with proper leadership and training American fighting men could hold their own against the well-drilled and battle-hardened regulars of Great Britain. Similarly, the naval victories on the northern lakes and the high seas and the success of privateers around the globe demonstrated that, given the right odds, the nation's armed ships matched up well against even the vaunted and seemingly invincible Mistress of the Seas.

The war also produced its share of heroes – people whose reputations were enhanced by military or government service. The war helped catapult four men into the presidency – Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, James Monroe, and William Henry Harrison – and three men into the vice-presidency – Daniel D. Tompkins, John C. Calhoun, and Richard M. Johnson. The war also gave a significant boost to the political or military careers of other men. Indeed, for many young men on the make, the war offered an excellent launching pad for a career.

In some ways, the War of 1812 looked more to the past than to the future. As America's second and last war against Great Britain, it echoed the ideology and issues of the American Revolution. It was the second and last time that America was the underdog in a war and the second and last time that the nation tried to conquer Canada. It was also the last time that Indians played a major role in determining the future of the continent. In this sense, the War of 1812 was the last of the North American colonial wars. The war was unusual in generating such vehement political opposition and nearly unique in ending in a stalemate on the battlefield. Although most Americans pretended they had won the war – even calling it a "Second War of Independence" – they could point to few concrete gains – certainly none in the peace treaty – to sustain this claim.

It is this lack of success that may best explain why the war is so little remembered. Americans have characteristically judged their wars on the basis of their success. The best-known wars – the Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II – were all clear-cut successes. Although many people remembered the War of 1812 as a success, it was in a very real sense a failure, and perhaps this is why it attracts so little attention today.

The obscurity of this war, however, should not blind us to its significance, for it was an important turning point, a great watershed, in the history of the young republic. It concluded almost a quarter of a century of troubled diplomacy and partisan politics and ushered in the Era of Good Feelings. It marked the end of the Federalist Party but the vindication of Federalist policies, many of which were adopted by Republicans during or after the war. The war also broke the power of American Indians and reinforced the powerful undercurrent of Anglophobia that had been spawned by the Revolution a generation before. In addition, it promoted national self-confidence and encouraged the heady expansionism that lay at the heart of American foreign policy for the rest of the century. Finally, the war gave the fledgling republic a host of sayings, symbols, and songs that helped Americans define who they were and where their young republic was headed. Although looking to the past, the war was fraught with consequences for the future, and for this reason it is worth studying today.

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