

The War of 1812

Great Britain and the United States went to war for the second time in 20 years in 1812. It was a war that neither side wanted but which both seemed incapable of stopping. War aims on both sides were muddled and public opinion was deeply divided. In the United States support for the war was stronger the further south you got from the Canadian border. In Britain, all attention was on defeating Napoleon on the Continent and the British had ignored the problems that would spark the conflict until it was too late. The war was not avoided, lasted two bloody years and was unpopular with both sides, but the impact of the war created a desire to improve relations between the United States and Britain in the long term. The war also provided enduring historical myths for both sides (Canada and the United States) that became deeply ingrained in the national fabric of both nations. After the war, the United States turned its attention to the slavery issue and westward expansion and British North America (Canada) set itself on the path to nationhood.

The Chesapeake incident

In February 1806, it was reported to the British admiralty that several Royal Navy deserters had joined the crew of the USS *Chesapeake*, a 36-gun frigate. The British requested their return but an investigation by James Madison found that the men were US citizens (albeit only recently naturalized). Meanwhile, the British navy's admiralty issued orders for the men to be returned. The order stated that the *Chesapeake's* crew had many former Royal Navy sailors. The order continued that any British warship encountering the *Chesapeake* was to board and search for deserters.

On June 22, 1807, *Chesapeake* was on its way to the Mediterranean when the 50-gun HMS *Leopard* spotted it. A British messenger rowed to the *Chesapeake* and demanded permission to board and search for deserters. *Chesapeake's* Captain James Barron refused adding that he had no deserters on board. The *Leopard* replied to Barron's refusal with a devastating broadside that killed three and wounded 20. Caught by surprise, the *Chesapeake* immediately "struck the colors" (signalled its surrender by lowering the United States flag). The British boarded and arrested four men. One was hung, one died, the other two were repatriated in 1811. President Jefferson was incensed by this act of war and violation of American sovereignty, writing:

These aggravations necessarily lead to the policy either of never admitting an armed vessel into our harbours, or of maintaining in every harbour such an armed force as may constrain obedience to the laws, and protect the lives and property of our citizens, against their armed guests.

Pressured by an irate Congress, notably the "War Hawks" from the southern states led by Kentuckian Henry Clay, Jefferson signed the Embargo Act and the United States and Britain moved closer to war.

Causes of the War of 1812

The war resulted from three main causes. First, the search and seizure of neutral North-American trade vessels on the high seas by the French and British navies (mainly by the latter). Cargos were seized and ships impounded. Efforts to convince the British and the French to honor US neutrality through diplomacy and economic sanctions failed. Second was the **impressment** of sailors from US vessels by the Royal Navy. The British were looking for British sailors serving on US ships but that did not stop them from taking US sailors as well. Estimates vary on the actual number of sailors taken but the figure is in the vicinity of 10,000. Unrelated to these maritime causes was the desire for land in the American Midwest, particularly the territories south of the Great Lakes, the headwaters of the Missouri and Ohio rivers. As settlers crossed the Appalachians into the Ohio Valley, the Native Americans lead by Tecumseh and his twin brother the "Prophet" fought back. Many in the United States believed the British supported the natives and supplied them with muskets, shot and powder.

Impressment is a term referring to being forced to serve in the British navy.

Search and seizure

Great Britain began fighting Napoleon sporadically in 1793 and continually after 1803. The Royal Navy had destroyed the combined French and Spanish fleet off the Spanish coast in one of history's most important sea battles, the Battle of Trafalgar, in 1805. Thereafter, Britannia ruled the waves. The Royal Navy set up a blockade to starve France. American trade vessels were stopped and searched, cargos impounded, ships seized and ex-British sailors arrested (impressed). The French responded in kind but were no match for the Royal Navy. The US declared neutrality and demanded the British and French allow US-flagged vessels to cross the respective blockade lines and deliver their cargos. The British and French declined and continued to search and seize US ships. Jefferson called on Congress to ratify the Non-Importation Acts to stop the flow of specific manufactured goods to the United States. US manufacturers would fill the gap. But the Act was delayed pending further negotiations. In a last ditch effort, Jefferson sent trusted colleagues James Monroe and William Pinkney to Britain to negotiate a treaty to respect US neutrality and establish terms of trade between Britain and the United States. The mission failed, the British agreed to some terms but did not follow through and Jefferson signed a different piece of legislation, The Embargo Act, in late 1807 which prohibited the export of all goods from the United States. The Act backfired on US business interests.

At the time, however, the really important issue was impressment. British warships were short of sailors to trim sails and fire cannons. As early as 1803, they began stopping US ships and taking sailors they believed had deserted from the Royal Navy. To the US, this practice was unconscionable, a violation of their sovereignty, and an act of war. The United States demanded the British respect their neutrality and stop the practice but these entreaties fell on deaf ears. In the years leading up to the war, approximately 10,000 sailors were impressed, of whom 1,000 were British. The issue exploded into a full-blown crisis with the *Chesapeake* incident.

The War Hawks demanded action but were a vocal minority at this time. Jefferson proposed economic sanctions. First, he recalled US warships from foreign stations to protect east coast harbours. Next, in December, he convened cabinet to discuss options. Just prior to the meeting he learned of Napoleon's Berlin Decree, the French version of a new British policy requiring ships heading to France to stop at a British port and pay duties. Under the Embargo Act, the US state of New England suffered more than the intended targets but Jefferson countered that economic sanctions were preferable to cannon fire. Congress tried three amendments but these also failed. US business continued to suffer and worse yet, the embargo promoted smuggling notably on the Great Lakes. The British and French maintained their respective blockades and search and seizure continued.

The impasse was broken in 1810 when Napoleon, feeling the effects of the blockade, advised President Madison that France would honour US neutrality. Napoleon's capitulation to US demands was more symbolic than substantial; by this time the Royal Navy had reduced US trade with France to a trickle. The British were winning the economic war.

A house divided

The United States was deeply split. The Southern War Hawk senators demanded "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" and the annexation of the Ohio-Wabash country. The tribes in that territory had been united under the charismatic leadership of the famous chief of the Shawnee, Tecumseh, and were a formidable obstacle to the white man's idea of growth and westward expansion. Tecumseh's mystical twin brother "The Prophet" had been killed at the Tippecanoe in 1811. Tecumseh vowed to avenge his brother's death and joined the British, rising to the rank of Brigadier-General. The "War Hawks" blamed the British who supplied the Shawnee with arms. Joseph Desha, another War Hawk from Kentucky, argued that "you must remove the cause if you expect to perform the cure."

But why fight Britain and not France who had committed nearly as many maritime offenses? Traditional allegiance to France was partly the explanation. So, too, Canada's rich farmlands along the Great Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River were a valuable prize. Madison was reluctant to even discuss the matter. The Virginia Representative John Randolph opposed the "War Hawks" and stated that the real cause was to grab land:

If you go to war it will not be for the protection of, or defense of your maritime rights. ... The rich vein of ... land, which is said to be even better on the other side of the lake than on this. Agrarian cupidity, not maritime right urges this war. ... we have heard but on work. ... Canada! Canada! Canada! It is to acquire a prepondering northern influence, that you are to launch into war ..."

Source: Debates of the 12th Congress, November 29, 1811.

Seafaring New Englanders opposed the war and would greet its declaration with muffled bells, flags at half-mast and public fasting. Impressment, they said, was an old and exaggerated wrong. New England merchants were still making money trading with the British

*A house divided against itself
cannot stand.*

Abraham Lincoln, June 16, 1858

and many sympathized with the plight of Britain fighting tooth and nail against Napoleon, whom they regarded as the “Corsican butcher” and the “anti-Christ of the age”.

Federalists condemned the war as they opposed acquisition of Canada which, in their view, would merely add more agrarian states from the wild northwest. This in turn would increase the voting strength of the party of the west—the Republicans.

James Madison became president in 1810. In May, Congress directed the president to begin trade with either Britain or France if they agreed to respect US neutrality. If either accepted, the United States would forbid trade with the other. The French paid lip service but the British refused.

By 1812, the War Hawks position in Congress was gaining momentum. Henry Clay’s influence was at its zenith as speaker of the house and pressured President Madison relentlessly to declare war. On more than one occasion Henry Clay demanded war:

“It is absurd to suppose that we will not succeed in our enterprise against the enemy’s provinces. We have Canada as much at our command as Great Britain has the ocean. ... I would take the whole continent from them and ask no favours. I wish never to see peace until we do.”

Source: Sutherin, Victor. 1999. *The War of 1812*. Toronto, Canada: McClelland and Stewart. p. 23.

Historians on both sides of the border agree that attacking Canada was not the primary war aim but a bargaining chip. Jefferson said capturing Canada would be a matter of marching and provide practice for the assault on Halifax which would finally drive the British out of North America. What the US wanted was the British out of the west.

On June 1, Madison told Congress that he was cautiously optimistic that British might would follow the French example and end the blockade. He was right. The new British prime minister, Lord Liverpool, did not want a war with the United States and in late May rescinded the search and seizure orders. Unfortunately, the news took three weeks to cross the Atlantic and Congress had declared war before the mail packet arrived. The vote in Congress reflected the nation’s uncertainty: The house voted 79 to 49; the Senate 19 to 13. On June 18, Madison signed the declaration of war.

Opposition to Mr Madison’s war was so vociferous that New Englanders lent more money to the British than the federal treasury and sold foodstuffs to the British army throughout the war. New England Governors steadfastly refused to allow the militia to fight out of state. The divided nation went to war with uncertain aims and a Continental army numbering 12,000; the navy numbered 16 frigates (44 guns); fast and agile and capably crewed, these warships were ideal for catching pirates and smugglers. By comparison, the Royal Navy had over one hundred ships with 74 guns or more. The British army was battle-hardened, experienced and boasted many talented officers. One of the top military leaders was Arthur Wellesley, the

Duke of Wellington. Nick-named the “Iron Duke” he had driven the French out of Spain and in 1815 defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Fortunately for the United States, the British were tied down in Europe and considered the war with the US to be a nuisance, a distraction from the main event in Europe. They would limit the soldiers, ships and guns deployed to defend British North America. American strategy was based on this fact and they took a chance that they could defeat the British before the British defeated Napoleon.

The course of the war

In the spring, the United States launched a three-pronged invasion of Canada that according to Jefferson would be nothing more than “a matter of marching”. General Hull would attack at Detroit and head east with about 2,500 men. The second invasion would cross the Niagara, capture the Niagara peninsula and the third and most important, would head up Lake Champlain and secure Montreal. Montreal was the front door to the interior and once in American hands they would choke off the British forces fighting in Upper Canada.

The General in command of the Canadian forces, Sir Isaac Brock, would make short work of Jefferson’s pejorative musing. A capable, talented, charismatic officer, he faced long odds. How to defend a long border with a couple of British infantry regiments, a few cannons, undisciplined native allies and poorly trained militia of dubious loyalty and quality. Brock decided to seize the initiative and attack. In a series of rapid manoeuvres, Brock’s combined forces captured without firing a shot Fort Michilmackinac which commanded the upper Great Lakes of Huron, Michigan and Superior. Brock surrounded General Hull’s forces at Detroit and, fearing a scalping massacre, Hull promptly surrendered.

The defeat shocked the United States who demanded an end to Hull’s career. A courts martial sentenced him to hang but President Madison commuted the sentence because of Hull’s service record in the Revolution. Further east, Brock turned back the Niagara invasion in the first major engagement of the war, the Battle of Queenston Heights, in which Brock was killed leading the counter-attack. Brock was irreplaceable and thereafter the defense of Canada fell into the hands of the overly cautious and often indecisive Sir George Prevost. After that, the main US effort of 10,000 men driving north from Lake Champlain simply fell apart from bad management. The two sides would continue to stumble about the wilderness for the remainder of 1812.

The US army had learned valuable lessons in training, equipment and leadership. The next invasions in 1813 were more successful, notably the capture and burning of York (present-day Toronto). But the success was short-lived and the invaders were either forced back across the border or grew weary of occupation and returned home for the harvest.

At sea, the US frigates, most famously, the USS *Constitution*, defeated the British in four of five engagements. To the United States these victories signified their naval superiority; to the British they were a source of considerable embarrassment. The US navy’s frigates might

be able to defeat the Royal Navy's frigates but were no match for British battleships. The American frigates spent most of the war bottled up in port. The Royal Navy blockaded the US coast and put ashore raiding parties without opposition.

The Great Lakes were a different story. The US navy defeated the British in a series of significant major engagements and retained naval superiority on the Lakes until the war's conclusion. At the Battle of the Thames, Tecumseh was killed—breaking the back of Britain's alliance with the Indians. The battles were many all along the border and became increasingly European looking in architecture and tactics. Long lines of disciplined infantry exchanged volley fire at close range with cannons and cavalry adding to the fray.

The good news for the British was the defeat and exile of Napoleon. The US looked eastward and saw the British gaze firmly fixed on them. Events in Europe would no longer restrict British operations. In June 1814, the British launched a three pronged invasion against the top, middle and bottom of the United States. In August, four thousand British troops landed near Washington, defeated six thousand panic-stricken militia at Bladensburg, marched on the capital, burned the White House and looted the city. In one famous incident a British officer "captured" President Madison's love letters to wife Dolly.

Next, the British fleet attacked Baltimore—a haven for US privateers. During the attack on Fort McHenry, Francis Scott Key penned the "Star Spangled Banner." The British fleet was driven off and the invaders boarded ship and left. The next move came in September 1814, when ten thousand British "redcoats" stood ready to invade up-state New York near Plattsburgh but retreated after the US navy defeated the British flotilla.

Meanwhile, the two sides had agreed to start negotiations, bowing to pressure by the Russian Tsar. Both sides wanted to find a way out of the miserable struggle. The Treaty of Ghent was signed on Christmas Eve 1814 ending the war; it was more an armistice than treaty. Both sides agreed to return to pre-1812 borders and the treaty contained nothing about US war aims, such as the acquisition of Native lands in the west, search and seizure or impressments.

The war had ended in a draw lacking the decisive engagement that could have decided the war for one side or the other. For the British there was no equivalent of the Plains of Abraham or for the United States no repeat of Yorktown. Instead the war was a bloody stalemate on land and sea that doled out ample measures of misery, disease and death but no taste of victory. The weary armies went home, but the tragedy had one final act.

The final operation was a British attempt to capture New Orleans by landing an army of 15,000 Napoleonic veterans and seize control of the Mississippi River. Standing behind stacked cotton bales ready to repel the invaders were seven thousand defenders including many frontiersmen from Louisiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. Their commander was "Old Hickory"—General Andrew Jackson—the renowned champion of Indian removals, and supporter of slavery, and future president. The Battle of New Orleans was fought

January 8, 1815, two weeks after the Treaty of Ghent had been signed and was the greatest US victory of the war. The British attack was confused by fog: they advanced on the center of the US line and were shot to pieces suffering 2,000 casualties while US losses were less than 100. The war was over.

News of the triumph reached a jubilant capital but the celebration was short-lived when the treaty arrived. The US Senate quickly approved the treaty with the slogan "Not One Inch of Territory Ceded or Lost". No one mentioned the 1812 slogan "On to Canada".

The battle is important for three reasons. First, it ended British operations against the United States. Second, US folk legend created the frontier myth of the buckskin-clad frontiersmen who had defeated the British army's best and gave the US victory in a second war of independence for US democracy over imperial domination. Third, the battle marked the start of Andrew Jackson's march to the presidency.

The end of the war

What had been gained? The British kept Canada but realized defending it was difficult and moved quickly to repair relations with the United States. In 1819, the Rush-Bagot Treaty reduced the naval forces on the Great Lakes to one ship each. However, to guard against further invasions, the British began fortifying the border with a series of installations at key locations the largest of which was Fort Henry at Kingston. During the 1820s, British engineers constructed the Rideau Canal which connected Montreal to Kingston allowing for the rapid movement of troops and supplies without relying on the St. Lawrence River. The forts were for naught, the United States never launched an invasion. (The post-civil war Fenian raids were not sponsored or condoned by the US government.)

TOK Link

The use of evidence: Mythmaking and the War of 1812

Why do accounts of the same historical event differ? Whose history do we study? Historian Margaret MacMillan contends that history is "not to ... make the present generation feel good but to remind us that human affairs are complicated."

Historians contend that the history is written by the victors. The War of 1812 provides historians with a unique challenge because both sides claimed a qualified victory.

The creation of national myths based on important events provide nations with a common sense of purpose, identity and value. As an example of this, consider these different perceptions on the War of 1812.

Thomas Bailey and David M. Kennedy in *The American Pageant* refer to the War of 1812 as "The Second War for Independence." This suggests that the United States had fought and defeated the British for a second time to gain and retain their freedom. Canadian historians would challenge this claim contending that Canada was the real victim and successfully defended itself from numerous US invasions paving the way for Canadian confederation. For Canadians it was the Battle of Queenston Heights (1812) and for Americans it was the Battle of New Orleans (1815).

Men make their own history ...
Karl Marx



US mythology: The Battle of New Orleans

The Facts: Andrew Jackson's army of 7,000 defeated a veteran British force of 15,000 at The Battle of New Orleans. The US lost less than a hundred men, the British suffered over 2,000 casualties.

Mythology: Freedom-loving frontiersmen volunteered to protect the new nation's liberty and fight the king's army whose ranks were filled with judicial conscripts; paupers, thieves and thugs. The Duke of Wellington called his men "scum" who fought or were hung. Liberty had again defeated Tyranny in this clash of ideology and saved the union for a second time.



The Battle of New Orleans, an engraving after the painting by William Momberger. It shows Andrew Jackson, sword in hand, surrounded by buckskin-clad frontiersmen.

Questions

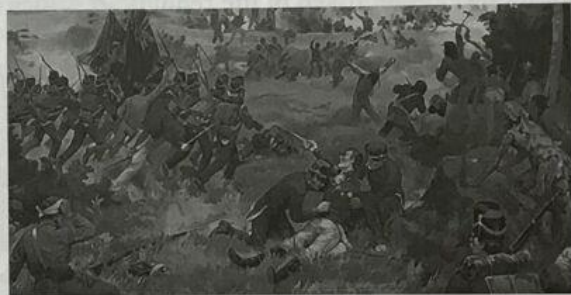
- 1 Research the Battles of New Orleans and Queenston Heights.
 - a Why did the respective sides win?
 - b What was the actual contribution to the battle's outcome of Jackson's frontiersmen and Brock's York volunteers?

Canadian mythology: The Battle of Queenston Heights

The Facts: In 1812, US forces crossed the Niagara River into Canada and met the British at Queenston Heights. The Canadian militia, volunteers loyal to the Crown, fought that day. The Americans were defeated and fled from Canadian soil. The Canadians were led by British General Sir Isaac Brock, who was mortally wounded in the fighting.

Myth: Brock's last words, "Push on brave York volunteers", rallied the troops and turned the tide. Brock became a national martyr. The stalwart Canadian militia put down their axe and picked up a musket and defeated the "Yankee" invaders. These brave fellows saved Canada from the nefarious embrace of "Cousin Jonathon" (Canadian slang for the United States). Canada would remain British, "God save the King".

The "militia myth" would remain a Canadian staple for decades



The Battle of Queenston Heights, painted by David Kelly in 1896. It shows Brock, wounded, sword raised as he utters his last words, "Push on brave York Volunteers".

- 2 Compare and contrast the myths, that is, what are the similarities and differences.
- 3 Speculate as to why these myths are important to the United States and Canada?
- 4 Why are national myths important to building a nation's identity? What are the dangers inherent in such myths?