

The War of 1812 Basics: Causes and Consequences

By Colin Murphy

©2020

The Forgotten War?

A generation after the American War of Independence founded the nation, and less than fifty years prior to the cataclysmic and defining Civil War, the War of 1812 has often been considered a “forgotten war.” This is frequently disputed by historians who cite multitudes of works documenting the war and point to the many important outcomes that are attributed to the War of 1812. A small war by the standard of today and of its own time, the War of 1812 was just over two and a half years long and resulted in an ambiguous peace treaty that seemed to solve none of the issues for which it was fought. So, while maybe not forgotten, surely, the War of 1812 can better be considered a misunderstood or mis-remembered war. The reasons for this lie directly in the failure to understand the causes and consequences of the war.

Causes of the War of 1812

In 1812 Britain had long been at war with France. During that drawn out, titanic struggle the fledgling United States was left the world’s largest, neutral maritime nation and traded with both sides.

The combatants hoped to stop the United States from trading with their enemy while trying to maintain the fruits of trade for themselves. For years the United States had tried “Peaceable Coercion,” non-violent, counter measures, but all proved faulty, even, as in the case of the Embargo Act of 1807, catastrophic for the American economy far beyond what the others’ practices had done. While both sides imposed restrictions, Britain’s restrictions, due to its superior naval power, hurt the United States’ commerce greater.

Along with being the more economically damaging of the warring factions Britain was also continuing the long practiced use of impressment. Impressment, the forceful seizing of men to serve in the military, was imperative to maintain the manpower needed to man the expansive British Royal Navy after so many years of conflict on the oceans and seas of the world. In those years, casualties and terms of service left most ships undermanned. While those were unavoidable there were also attempts to avoid service or, most repugnant, desertion from the service of the Crown. Many of these men happily found employment in the high paying, healthier living, American merchant fleet. This made American ships, already targets of the Royal Navy in its enforcement of trade restriction, hearty targets for Royal Navy Captains seeking men for their ships through impressment. In the fifteen years leading up to 1812, historian estimate that as many as 9,000 men were taken from American ships. While many of these men were certainly British subject or deserters, unscrupulous or needy or mistaken British Naval officers often impressed American sailors and forced them into the King’s service. To

most Americans the seizing of free American sailors and forcing them to serve a foreign power was an insult and injury that had to be responded to.

While interference in ocean trade and seizing of sailors were major concerns of the ocean bound states there was another issue that angered and caused fear among the people of the younger, interior states and territories; hostile Native Americans. There was a widespread belief that the ever present threat, which had been growing in recent years under the leadership of the Shawnee brothers, Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh, was being enflamed by British agents. The deep animosity between Americans and the Native Americans was now tied to the growing national anger focused on the old foe, Britain.

After years trying to avoid war, James Madison, pushed by members of his Anglophobic Republican Party and against fervent opposition of the Federalist Party, sent his “War Message” to Congress on June 1, 1812. On the 18th of that month, The United States declared war in the closest vote for war in the nation’s history.

The United States’ Goals in the War of 1812

When the United States declared war in June of 1812 the ultimate goal was for the U.S. Army to march northward, seize Canada and to hold it for ransom to force Britain to end the interference in trade, acts of impressment and end support for Native Americans. While the official policy was for an exchange of Canada for the end of Britain's policies there were a significant amount of politicians and a large portion of the nation at large that envisioned annexing Canada as a part of the United States.

The events, scope and sequence of the War of 1812 can be found on a large number of websites, in large number of books and articles. Though it was a “small” war in comparison to so many others, any attempt to evenly cover the war in its most basic form would mean dozens, if not hundreds of pages. If any reader wishes to research the War of 1812 in any detail beyond what is provide here, the author will gladly assist. A couple of books are suggested at the end of this piece.

Consequences of the War of 1812 for the United States

When news of the Treaty of Ghent arrived in New York City on February 11, 1815 the city broke into jubilation. Riders were sent in all directions to deliver the news to other towns and cities. The war was over and soon a false sense of accomplishment swept the nation. News of a lopsided victory at New Orleans had only recently been realized in the east with some willful suspension of reasoning, many conflated the two events which had nothing to do with the other but that was to worry about at another time.

The results of the treaty are best summed up as *status quo, ante bellum*: same situation as before the war. All prisoners were to be exchanged. All captured territory returned to the pre-

June 18, 1812 owner. Britain agreed to return slaves who had sought liberation with the British but this never came to fruition and 1826 Britain agreed to pay a monetary reparation instead.

In the end the United States had failed in its military objectives. Many cities and towns, including the nation's capital were charred ruins, the economy was nearly destroyed and there was internal strife and, while there were some signal accomplishments of the United States military, there were just as many shortcomings. All that did not matter now. Now was a time to celebrate and begin to build a national narrative of accomplishment.

From the War of 1812 would grow a new sense of American nationalism and a growing, if begrudged, new respect for the United States on the international scene. Politically the war's end was the beginning of the end for the opposing Federalist Party. Openly and vocally antiwar from the start there were sincere questions of loyalty in the Federalist stronghold of New England. By the fall of 1814 that opposition to the war approached revolt in which New England Federalists considered secession from the country. Meeting in Hartford, Connecticut, these leaders debated and produced a document which did not promote any dissolving of the union but called for multiple alteration in the Constitution that dealt with items such as new state admission and the restriction of any President to succeed a president from the same state. After two years of military misfortune and the destruction of Washington it was not implausible that these Federalists were in a position to gain power and force the Madison administration and its Republican allies to acquiesce to their demands. However, with peace at hand and a perception of triumph among the populous the Federalists now looked like fools, if not traitors, to many. The election of 1816 was the last time a Federalist would run for President and by 1820, even in the local strongholds, the party was dead.

Also politically, the war produced a new set of leaders that would move forward with the United States as the "Founding Generation" succumbed to time. Men such as Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun would become Congressional giants in the coming years. Other members of congress, many governors and leading politicians arose in states across the union. Two President including, perhaps, one of the most significant in the first half of the existence of the United States rose to national prominence based on their service during the war. General Andrew Jackson would ride his fame as the Hero of New Orleans into the White House and preside over monumental times in American history. The other, General William Henry Harrison, used his hero status, soon follow Jackson to the post of the chief executive. This generation would lead America through some of the most significant changes and challenges of the Nineteenth Century and, ultimately and sadly, into the calamity of sectional conflict.

New sense of American nationalism and a new generation of national leaders were certainly important results of the War of 1812 but, perhaps, the most important result for the United States came in the realm of economics. The war was an economic wake up call for the United States. The party in power, the Republican Party, the successors of Thomas Jefferson, had longed for a virtuous, agrarian nation of family farms and localized government. It was

certainly idealistic but the war with a world power laid bare the fact that the United States was lagging far behind other western nations. In 1811 the charter of the Bank of the United States, a bank that, though controversial, had maintained a stable money supply, was not renewed. Without a centralized banking system, the economy was thrown into monetary chaos a year before the United States declared war for the first time. Madison, one of the original detractors of the bank twenty years earlier, soon saw the necessity of reestablish the bank and in 1816 the Second Bank of the United States was formed.

Another issue that was long resisted by Republicans was the national government's responsibility to upgrade the nation's infrastructure. Roads, bridges and canals were left up to private corporations, municipalities, counties or states. This meant wide ranging standards of construction and upkeep which often meant no standards at all. With war requiring men, animals and material to move throughout the nation and further the poor or nonexistent infrastructure were exceptional impediments. This realization began to change minds and soon there was movement, even among the Republican Party, towards greater investment in these internal improvements.

The cause economic disaster that the war created can be principally blamed on the Royal Navy's blockade of the American coastline. Even this nation of farmers needed to send surplus produce onto the world market while also seeking the finished goods that the nations of Europe were producing in their fledgling industrial cities. The blockade brought that exchange to a halt. Businessmen in the United States realized the opportunity and proceeded to fill the void as much as possible. The war forced America to grow up economically and enter into the Industrial Revolution. The United States could not rely upon others to produce the goods they need, especially the items need to supply the American military. By the 1830s the United States, and New England in particular, was the most industrialized nation on the planet.

Lastly, it is widely discussed about how a war which ended with a treaty that established status quo antebellum is a war without a victor or vanquished. However, though the war ended with the United States and Britain satisfied with their North American boundaries and trade agreements the war did have an ultimate losing party; Native Americans. To a great extent the Native American nations and tribes threw in with the British. They hoped that aa British victory would curb American westward expansion. At one time there was a hope for an Indian Confederacy with established boundaries that would halt American acquisition of more of their land. With the death of Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames in October 1813 and the destruction of much of the Creek Nation in Alabama and Mississippi Territories strong, wide spread Native American resistance, East of the Mississippi River, came to an end. Though this was a defeat of these Native American hopes it was the opening of a new dream of American destiny; a Manifest Destiny to spread far and wide westward across the continent.