The British View the War of 1812 Quite Differently Than Americans Do

The star-spangled war confirmed independence for the United States. But for Great Britain, it was a betrayal

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As we look forward to celebrating the bicentennial of the “Star-Spangled Banner” by Francis Scott Key, I have to admit, with deep shame and embarrassment, that until I left England and went to college in the U.S., I assumed the words referred to the War of Independence. In my

For people like me, who have got their flags and wars mixed up, I think it should be pointed out that there may have been only one War of 1812, but there are four distinct versions of it—the American, the British, the Canadian and the Native American. Moreover, among Americans, the chief actors in the drama, there are multiple variations of the versions, leading to widespread disagreement about the causes, the meaning and even the outcome of the war.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, American commentators painted the battles of 1812-15 as part of a glorious “second war for independence.” As the 19th century progressed, this view changed into a more general story about the “birth of American freedom” and the founding of the Union. But even this note could not be sustained, and by the end of the century, the historian Henry Adams was depicting the war as an aimless exercise in blunder, arrogance and human folly. During the 20th century, historians recast the war in national terms: as a precondition for the entrenchment of Southern slavery, the jumping-off point for the goal of Manifest Destiny and the opening salvos in the race for industrial-capitalist supremacy. The tragic consequences of 1812 for the native nations also began to receive proper attention. Whatever triumphs could be parsed from the war, it was now accepted that none reached the Indian Confederation under Tecumseh. In this postmodern narrative about American selfhood, the “enemy” in the war—Britain—almost disappeared entirely.

Not surprisingly, the Canadian history of the war began with a completely different set of heroes and villains. If the U.S. has its Paul Revere, Canada has Shawnee chief Tecumseh, who lost his life defending Upper Canada against the Americans, and Laura Secord, who struggled through almost 20 miles of swampland in 1813 to warn British and Canadian troops of an imminent attack. For Canadians, the war was, and remains, the cornerstone of nationhood, brought about by unbridled U.S. aggression. Although they acknowledge there were two theaters of war—at sea and on land—it is the successful repulse of the ten U.S. incursions between 1812 and 1814 that have received the most attention.

By contrast, the British historiography of the War of 1812 has generally consisted of short chapters squeezed between the grand sweeping narratives of the Napoleonic Wars. The justification for this begins with the numbers: Roughly 20,000 on all sides died fighting the War of 1812 compared with over 3.5 million in the Napoleonic. But the brevity with which the war has been treated has allowed a persistent myth to grow about British ignorance. In the 19th century, the Canadian historian William Kingsford was only half-joking when he commented, “The events of the War of 1812 have not been forgotten in England for they have never been known there.” In the 20th, another Canadian historian remarked that the War of 1812 is “an episode in history that makes everybody happy, because everybody interprets it differently...the English are happiest of all, because they don’t even know it happened.”

The truth is, the British were never happy. In fact, their feelings ranged from disbelief and betrayal at the beginning of the war to outright fury and resentment at the end. They regarded the U.S. protests against Royal Navy impressment of American seamen as exaggerated whining at best, and a transparent pretext for an attempt on Canada at worst. It was widely known that Thomas Jefferson coveted all of North America for the United States. When the war started, he wrote to a friend: “The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching, and will give us experience for the attack of Halifax the next, and the final expulsion of England from the American continent.” Moreover, British critics interpreted Washington’s willingness to go to war as proof that America only paid lip service to the ideals of freedom, civil rights and constitutional government. In short, the British dismissed the United States as a haven for blackguards and hypocrites.

The long years of fighting Napoleon’s ambitions for a world empire had hardened the British into an “us-against-them” mentality. All British accounts of the war—no matter how brief—concentrate on the perceived inequality of purpose between the conflict across the Atlantic and the one in Europe: with the former being about wounded feelings and inconvenience, and the latter about survival or annihilation.

To understand the British point of view, it is necessary to go back a few years, to 1806, when Napoleon ignited a global economic war by creating the Continental System, which closed every market in the French Empire to British goods. He persuaded Russia, Prussia and Austria to join in. But the British cabinet was buoyed by the fact that the Royal Navy still ruled the seas, and as long as it could maintain a tight blockade of France’s ports there was hope. That hope was turned into practice when London issued the retaliatory Orders in Council, which prohibited neutral ships from trading with Napoleonic Europe except under license. The Foreign Secretary George Canning wrote: “We have now, what we had once before and once only in 1800, a maritime war in our power—unfettered by any considerations of whom we may annoy or whom we may offend—And we have...determination to carry it through.”

Canning’s “whom” most definitely included the Americans. The British noted that the American merchant marine, as one of the few neutral parties left in the game, was doing rather well out of the war: Tonnage between 1802 and 1810 almost doubled from 558,000 to 981,000. Nor could the British understand why Jefferson and then Madison were prepared to accept Napoleon’s false assurances that he would refrain from using the Continental System against American shipping—but not accept Prime Minister Lord Liverpool’s genuine promises that wrongly impressed American sailors would be released. Writing home to England, a captain on one of the Royal Navy ships patrolling around Halifax complained: “I am really ashamed of the narrow, selfish light in which [the Americans] have regarded the last struggle for liberty and morality in Europe—but our cousin Jonathan has no romantic fits of energy and acts only upon cool, solid calculation of a good market for rice or tobacco!”

It was not until the beginning of 1812 that Britain belatedly acknowledged the strength of American grievances. Royal Navy ships near the American coastline were ordered “not to give any just cause of offence to the Government or the subjects of the United States.” Captains were also commanded to take extra care when they searched for British deserters on American ships. Parliament had just revoked the Orders in Council when the news arrived that President Madison had signed the Declaration of War on June 18. London was convinced that the administration would rescind the declaration once it heard that the stated cause—the Orders in Council—had been dropped. But when Madison then changed the cause to impressment of American sailors (which now numbered about 10,000), it dawned on the ministry that war was unavoidable.

News of Madison’s declaration coincided with momentous developments in Europe. Napoleon Bonaparte and his Grande Armée of 500,000 men—the largest pan-European force ever assembled to that date—invaded Russia on June 24 with the aim of forcing Czar Alexander I to recommit to the Continental System. Britain decided its only course of action was to concentrate on Europe and treat the American conflict as a side issue. Just two battalions and nine frigates were sent across the Atlantic. Command of the North American naval station was given to Adm. Sir John Borlase Warren, whose orders were to explore all reasonable avenues for negotiation.

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The first six months of the war produced a mixed bag of successes and failures for both sides. The larger U.S. warships easily trounced the inferior British frigates sent to the region, and in six single-ship encounters emerged victorious in every one. American privateers had an even better year, capturing over 150 British merchant ships worth $2 million. But the British took heart from the land war, which seemed to be going their way with very little effort expended. With the help of Shawnee war chief Tecumseh and the Indian Confederation he built up, the Michigan Territory actually fell back into British possession. In late November an American attempt to invade Upper Canada ended in fiasco. The holding pattern was enough to allow Henry, 3rd Earl of Bathurst, Secretary for War and the Colonies, to feel justified in having concentrated on Napoleon. “After the strong representations which I had received of the inadequacy of the force in those American settlements,” he wrote to the Duke of Wellington in Spain, “I know not how I should have withstood the attack against me for having sent reinforcements to Spain instead of sending them for the defense of British possessions.”

Yet the early signs in 1813 suggested that Earl Bathurst might still come to regret starving Canada of reinforcements. York (the future Toronto), the provincial capital of Upper Canada, was captured and burned by U.S. forces on April 27, 1813. Fortunately, in Europe, it was Napoleon who was on the defensive—bled dry by his abortive Russian campaign and proven vulnerable in Spain and Germany. What few Americans properly grasped was that in British eyes the real war was going to take place at sea. Although the death of Tecumseh in October 1813 was a severe blow to its Canadian defense strategy, Britain had already felt sufficiently confident to separate nine more ships from the Mediterranean Fleet and send them across the Atlantic. Admiral Warren was informed, “We do not intend this as a mere paper blockade, but as a complete stop to all Trade & intercourse by sea with those Ports, as far as the wind & weather, & the continual presence of a sufficing armed Force, will permit and ensure.”

New York City and Philadelphia were blockaded. The Royal Navy also bottled up the Chesapeake and the Delaware. To the British, these successes were considered payback for America’s unfair behavior. “However, we seem to be leading the Yankees a sad life upon their coasts,” wrote the British philanthropist William Ward, 1st Earl of Dudley, in July 1813. “I am glad of it with all my heart. When they declared war they thought it was pretty near over with us, and that their weight cast into the scale would decide our ruin. Luckily they were mistaken, and are likely to pay dear for their error.”

Dudley’s prediction came true. Despite the best efforts of American privateers to harass British shipping, it was the U.S. merchant marine that suffered most. In 1813 only a third of American merchant ships got out to sea. The following year the figure would drop to one-twelfth. Nantucket became so desperate that it offered itself up to the Royal Navy as a neutral trading post. America’s oceanic trade went from $40 million in 1811 to $2.6 million in 1814. Custom revenues—which made up 90 percent of federal income—fell by 80 percent, leaving the administration virtually bankrupt. By 1814 it could neither raise money at home nor borrow from abroad.

When Napoleon abdicated in April 1814, Britain expected that America would soon lose heart and surrender too. From then on, London’s chief aims were to bring a swift conclusion to the war, and capture as much territory as possible in order to gain the best advantage in the inevitable peace talks.

On July 25, 1814, the two foes fought their bloodiest-ever land engagement at the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, a mile west of Niagara Falls near the New York-Canada border. There were over 1,700 casualties, among them America’s dream of annexing Canada. A month later, on August 24, the British burned down the White House and several other government buildings. To Prime Minister Liverpool, the war had been won, bar the skirmishing to be done by the diplomatic negotiators taking place in Ghent, Belgium.

London was quite put out to discover that the administration in Washington failed to share its view. President Madison did not regard America as having been defeated. Only two weeks later, on September 11, 1814, U.S. troops soundly beat back a British attack on Lake Champlain near the New York-Canada border. The poet Francis Scott Key didn’t believe his country was defeated, either, after he saw “by the dawn’s early light” the American flag still flying above Fort McHenry outside Baltimore Harbor on September 14. Nor did Gen. Andrew Jackson, particularly after his resounding victory against British forces outside New Orleans on January 8, 1815—two weeks after the peace negotiations between the two countries had been concluded.

The late flurry of U.S. successes dashed British hopes of squeezing concessions at the Ghent talks. This led the negotiators to abandon the plan to insist on a buffer state for the defeated Native American tribes that had helped British troops. Prime Minister Liverpool gave up trying to teach the Americans a lesson: “We might certainly land in different parts of their coast, and destroy some of their towns, or put them under contribution; but in the present state of the public mind in America it would be in vain to expect any permanent good effects from operations of this nature.”

The British realized that simply getting the Americans to the negotiating table in Ghent was the best they were going to achieve. They also knew that Canada was too large and too sparsely populated to be properly defended. There was also the matter of general war-weariness. British families wanted their menfolk home. Lord Liverpool feared that time was going against them. After the negotiations were concluded on Christmas Eve 1814, he wrote: “I do not believe it would have been possible to have continued [wartime taxes] for the purpose of carrying on an American war....The question there was whether, under all these circumstances, it was not better to conclude the peace at the present moment, before the impatience of the country on the subject had been manifested at public meetings, or by motions in Parliament.”

Although nobody gained from the Treaty of Ghent, it is important to note that (with the exception of the later betrayals suffered by the Native American tribes) nothing was lost either. Moreover, both countries had new victories to savor. The U.S. found glory at the Battle of New Orleans, while six months later the British found theirs when the Duke of Wellington inflicted a crushing defeat over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. Both victories overshadowed everything that had taken place during the previous two years. For America, 1812 became the war in which it had finally gained its independence. For Britain, 1812 became the skirmish it had contained, while winning the real war against its greatest nemesis, Napoleon.