A Perspective on the War of 1812

by Andrew Lambert

The War of 1812 has been referred to as a victorious “Second War for Independence,” and used to define Canadian identity, but the British only remember 1812 as the year Napoleon marched to Moscow. This is not surprising. In British eyes, the conflict with America was an annoying sideshow. The Americans had stabbed them in the back while they, the British, were busy fighting a total war against the French Empire, directed by their most inveterate enemy. For a nation fighting Napoleon Bonaparte, James Madison was an annoying irrelevance. Consequently the American war would be fought with whatever money, manpower and naval force that could be spared, no more than seven percent of the total British military effort.

Orders in Council

War with America was a direct consequence of the Napoleonic conflict. Britain relied on a maritime economic blockade to defeat France. When American merchants tried to exploit their neutral status to breach this blockade, the British introduced new laws, the ‘Orders in Council’, to block this trading. In the same spirit, when British warships stopped American merchant ships, they forcibly impressed any British sailors they found into the Royal Navy. While some of these men were Americans, most were British. Some had deserted from the Royal Navy, a hanging offence. Britain was in a total war with France. There would be no place for neutral traders, no amnesty for deserters. Although American statesmen complained in public, in private they admitted that fully half of the sailors on American merchant ships were British subjects.

Some in Britain thought the Orders in Council could be relaxed, and in fact, the Orders were suspended in June of 1812. But no one doubted Britain’s right to impress her sailors, and all blamed the Americans for employing British seamen when the Royal Navy needed them. A decade of American complaints and economic restrictions only served to convince the British that Jefferson and Madison were pro-French, and violently anti-British. Consequently, when America finally declared war, she had very few friends in Britain. Many remembered the War of Independence, some had lost fathers or brothers in the fighting; others were the sons of Loyalists driven from their homes.

Britain’s Response to the American Declaration of War

The British had no interest in fighting this war, and once it began, they had one clear goal: keep the United States from taking any part of Canada. At the outset, they hoped that, by pointing out that the Orders in Council had been revoked, the U.S. would suspend hostilities. Instead, President Madison demanded an end to impressment, well aware that Britain would not make such a concession in wartime. And so Britain went to war, with no troops to spare to reinforce Canada; it would be defended by a handful of British regulars, Native Americans and Canadian militia.

The British imposed the same devastating economic blockade that had crippled France, carefully targeting states like Virginia that had voted for war. By autumn 1814 the American economy had collapsed. British followed up with amphibious forces raiding around Chesapeake Bay, raising regiments of former slaves as they went. In August, 1814 four thousand British troops captured and burnt Washington, D.C.
The War at Sea

While these military successes were welcome, British views of the American war were dominated by what happened on the ocean. In 1812, American super frigates captured smaller, less powerful British opponents in three single ship actions. Despite the marked inequality between the combatants, these actions were profoundly shocking for the heirs of Nelson. To make matters worse American privateers took a heavy toll of British merchant ships. The public blamed the Government for these losses, and the ministers responded by reinforcing the fleet before the 1813 campaign.

The enlarged fleet imposed an effective convoy system, cutting the supply of prizes and capturing a steady stream of privateers. The next three frigate battles reversed the pattern of 1812. On June 1, 1813 HMS Shannon captured the USS Chesapeake off Boston in only eleven minutes, perhaps the most brilliant single ship action ever fought, making Captain Philip Broke the British hero of the war. On February 28th, 1814 HMS Phoebe took the USS Essex at Valparaiso, Chile in a similarly one-sided action. Finally, on January 14th 1815 the American flagship, the big 44 gun frigate USS President commanded by Stephen Decatur, was hunted down and defeated off Sandy Hook by HMS Endymion. The American flagship became HMS President, a name that still graces the list of Her Majesty’s Fleet. The war at sea had turned against America, the U.S. Navy had been defeated, privateers curbed, ports closed and trade at a standstill.

The End of the Napoleonic Conflict

The decisive event of the war was the abdication of Napoleon in April, 1814. This gave the British the option of increasing their military effort to secure a decisive victory. But the Duke of Wellington’s army remained in Europe, sending a few regiments to facilitate the capture of Washington. The British focus on Europe remained absolute from 1803 to 1815: securing a peaceful, stable and durable settlement on the continent was far more important than the Canadian frontier.

Even when the British agreed to negotiate with the U.S., the discussions at Ghent remained entirely subordinate to the main diplomatic gathering at Vienna. Eventually the British offered a status quo ante bellum peace, without concession by either side: the Treaty of Ghent ignored the Orders in Council, the belligerent rights and impressment. By accepting these terms the Americans acknowledged the complete failure of the war to achieve any of their strategic or political aims. Once the treaty had been signed, on Christmas Eve 1814, the British returned the focus to Europe.

The wisdom of their decision soon became obvious: Napoleon returned to power in 1815, only to meet his Waterloo at the hands of Wellington. Had the U.S. stayed in the war, the army that defeated Napoleon might have been sent to America. Anglo-American relations remained difficult for the next fifty years, but when crises erupted over frontiers and maritime rights, British statesmen subtly reminded the Americans who had won the War of 1812, and how they had won it. In case any doubt remains the results were written in stone all along the American coast. Between 1815 and 1890, American defence expenditure was dominated by the construction of coastal fortifications on the Atlantic seaboard.

Andrew Lambert is the author of War at Sea in the Age of Sail.
A Perspective on the War of 1812

by Victor Suthren

When the American declaration of war fell upon the disparate colonies of British North America, it produced reactions as different as the character of each colony. But the people of the Canadian colonies were united in the belief that this was an unwanted war, governed more by the distant preoccupations of London or Washington than the needs and wishes of the King’s subjects in North America.

The Perspective in Lower and Upper Canada

In Lower Canada, what is now the Province of Quebec, the French-speaking majority had little love for the British colonial overlords, who had governed them since the conquest of New France, fifty years earlier. As with the American War of Independence, they viewed this new war as another fratricidal struggle between Anglo-Saxons, in which the people of Quebec had little interest. The British government, however, had guaranteed their freedom of language and religion, and it was not clear that the Americans would do the same if they were to control Canada. Picking the lesser of two evils, French Canadians served willingly in regular British regiments and militia formations, and fought well in the successful repulse of American forces.

In Upper Canada, which would later form the basis of the Province of Ontario, the British administration was far less sure the population would fight in defense of the colony. There was a hardy, well-settled core of American Loyalists who had trekked north to Canada after the Revolution. They nurtured a bitter enmity toward their former countrymen who had dispossessed them of all they had and driven them out. But they were lost in the ranks of other American settlers who had come north seeking land after the Revolution, and who now outnumbered the Loyalists. The small and overworked British administration, and its inadequate garrison of regular troops, governed an essentially American colony of uncertain loyalty.

It was this reality, as well as the weakness of the British defenses -- the militia of Kentucky alone could outmatch the total armed force available for the defense of “the Canadas” -- that led Thomas Jefferson to suggest that the conquest of Canada would be a “mere matter of marching.” The American settlers in Canada wanted to protect their homes and farms, more particularly so after the first American troops incursions demonstrated that an American origin would be no protection against burning and pillaging. But these transplanted Americans would not commit to a fight unless the British administration demonstrated it would defend the Canadas. When the British did show they meant to fight, the largely American “Canadian” militia turned out in defense of their new communities against the armies of their former countrymen.

The sufferings of Canadian civilians at the hands of American troops, and the legacy of burnt and looted communities along the frontier gave the people of Upper Canada a strong sense, not so much of who they were, but certainly who they were not. And it had been American bayonets and torches that had brought that realization. Nonetheless, when the passions of the war faded, Upper Canadians soon returned to a more natural relationship with the American communities across the border, and re-knit ties of kinship, trade and friendship that the war had, in most eyes, needlessly sundered.

The Canadian Maritime Perspective

In the colonies of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, opposition to the war was immediate. In
this, they shared the feelings of the New Englanders, to whom they were intimately tied by marriage, trade, friendship and natural inclination. During the war, citizens on both sides sought to minimize the war’s impact.

For Nova Scotians, there was an economic benefit, the principal British naval and military base at Halifax bustled with activity during the war, injecting energy into the colonial economy. Privateer vessels from all three colonies preyed successfully on American shipping during the war, establishing some lasting fortunes, including that of Samuel Cunard. Nonetheless, the war’s end brought a sigh of relief, and a quick return to friendly relations and business as usual between New England and the maritime provinces.

First Nations of Canada
For the North American Indian First Nation warriors, their courageous and desperate struggle against the Americans ultimately failed. The Shawnee war chief Tecumseh died in battle near Moraviatown, and the disparate tribes that had fought with the British lost not only their leader, but also their political position in the resolution of the war. The refusal of the British government to press redress of First Nations grievances with the Americans, who were in no mood to discuss it, ended all hopes of First Nation security. Having been instrumental in the successful defense of Canada, the warriors and their families lost their dream of an Indian homeland, and continued their decline into marginalization and poverty. Theirs is the most tragic story of all in the War of 1812.

The end of the war brought a return to normalcy in terms of trade, and the renewing of ties of friendship and family. The end also brought out, in often poignant terms, the tragedy that such a conflict could have arisen between peoples so closely bound. But some things were different. Great Britain, preoccupied with its European and world concerns after the defeat of Napoleon, had learned a new respect for the United States. For its part, there would be no more talk of a “mere matter of marching” to conquer Canada in Washington’s corridors; the tough and dogged defense that had blunted American invasion efforts ensured that. And for the British North American colonies, the blurred lines that had marked the border with the United States had now become clear. The war ensured that there would be a different society to the north, following its own lights, and having fought for its existence -- as had its neighbour thirty years earlier. Out of that would grow mutual respect and an enduring friendship.

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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 to 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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A Perspective on the War of 1812

By Donald Fixico

The War of 1812 was an important conflict with broad and lasting consequences, particularly for the native inhabitants of North America. During the pivotal years before the war, the United States wanted to expand its territories, a desire that fueled the invasion of native homelands throughout the interior of the continent. Tribal nations of the lower Great Lakes, including the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Ojibwa, and others saw their lands at risk. The same was true for the Muscogee Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, Cherokee and Chickasaw in the south.

The Native leaders who emerged in response to this expansion shared a single concern, that of protecting tribal lands. There were Indians who sided with the Americans -- Red Jacket and Farmer’s Brother led a Seneca faction to help the Americans at the Battles of Fort George and Chippewa. But most Indian nations sided with the British against the U.S, believing that a British victory might mean an end to expansion. In all, more than two dozen native nations participated in the war. In addition to the Lower Great Lakes Indians, led by Tecumseh, and Southern Indians, the Mohawks fought under Chief John Norton to hold onto their lands in southern Quebec and eastern Ontario.

The Indian Confederation under Tecumseh

The Shawnee war chief, Tecumseh, and his brother the Prophet, also known as Tenskatawa, played crucial roles in leading the Indians in the war. By 1811, Tecumseh had built a confederation of more than two dozen Indian nations, all of whom hoped to stop the American settler encroachment on their lands. One might ask why would they be concerned? The answer is clear. Tecumseh and his followers had observed eastern coast and upper Great Lakes Indians being removed from their lands by settler expansion, and they had seen a domino effect as one removed nation encroached on another’s land. The residential order of more than one hundred eastern Indian nations had been permanently disrupted. Furthermore, both the French and Indian War, called the Seven Year’s War in Canada (1756 to 1763) and the American Revolution (1775 to 1783) cost many native nations lives and land. The Indians in Tecumseh’s confederation had every reason to be concerned about the future.

It’s important to ask not only about the native leaders methods for dealing with the situation, but also to ask about their decisions, their influences and their vision for future relations with the United States and Britain. Tecumseh is a good case in point, since it was his decision, as a leader, to try to build a strong system of many alliances with other native nations. At the time, each native nation consisted of a few to several communities, each speaking a different language. Tecumseh realized that he had to depend on interpreters to translate his conversations and speeches to each Indian nation that he came into contact with. He also knew that he would have to raise a massive but focused army, drawing from these diverse Indian nations, a daunting task. Imagine trying to get all of Europe, with its different cultures and languages, to fight as a single army. Finally, Tecumseh’s decision to forge an alliance with the British shows him to be a leader wise in the ways of statecraft. The daily challenges of managing an Indian confederation and an alliance with the British would be daunting for any individual.

Tecumseh’s and the other Indians’ decision-making process went well beyond politics. He and his fellow leaders knew that the British and American linear minds moved from claiming the land, to colonization and exploitation of natural resources. They knew their own process was one of native logic and inclusiveness -- involving the flora
and fauna and native communal values and relationships. Thus, the Indians were acting on a different system than either the U.S. or the British. Choosing the British as an ally was difficult at best, but the future of native North American hung in the balance.

Tecumseh preached his confederation and alliance point-of-view to various tribes, arguing that, in the big picture, an Indian confederation held the hope of stopping U.S. westward expansion. He gained respect in almost every case, and many followers, although the Choctaws stood firmly for neutrality. Pushmataha, the noted Choctaw leader, opposed Tecumseh’s grand alliance.

**Tippecanoe and the Aftermath**

In 1811, when Tecumseh was in the South, a group of natives led by Tenskwatawa, attacked U.S. army forces in the Battle of Tippecanoe. The battle was a draw, but the U.S. General William Henry Harrison declared victory and then had his troops sack and burn Prophetstown, Tecumseh’s home base in the Indiana territory. Following the Tippecanoe defeat, Tecumseh realized even more how important it was for a British alliance.

During the war, the Indian nations fought more than forty battles and skirmishes against the U.S. In southern Canada, pro-British and pro-U.S. Iroquois found themselves fighting each other, but in most engagements, the native forces fought alongside the British. They were key to the British success at both Detroit and Queenston; at the Battle of Beaver dams native warriors, with no help from their British counterparts, defeated the Americans, taking 500 prisoners of war. Although the Creek War of 1813-1814 is not normally viewed as a part of the War of 1812, Creek resistance to the U.S. Army in the south led to a series of battles that eventually crushed Indian military power in that region.

**The Loss of a Leader**

Perhaps the most significant battle took place in 1813 in Canada. Tecumseh and his warriors, deserted by the British forces, faced a pursuing army of Americans led by William Henry Harrison at the Battle of the Thames. As this confrontation became certain, Tecumseh promised his warriors that there would be no retreat. This battle, he felt, must be won in order to stop American westward expansion in all areas. But Tecumseh was mortally wounded, and his death and defeat marked the end of the native campaign to drive back white settlers. On a larger scale, the American victory cleared the way for the U.S. claim to the native interior of North America with more treaty negotiations following, resulting in numerous removals of most of the eastern woodland Indian communities to the west.

After the War of 1812, the U.S. negotiated over two hundred Indian treaties that involved the ceding of Indian lands and 99 of these agreements resulted in the creation of reservations west of the Mississippi River. Other native resistance movements sprang up, including the Black Hawk War of 1832 and the Second Seminole War (1835 to 1842), but neither affected so many different Indian nations as did the War of 1812.

Both the war and the treaty that ended it proved to be devastating to all of the eastern Indian nations. The Ghent agreement halted U.S. expansion into Iroquois land in Canada, and some native communities of the Great Lakes managed to remain in their original home areas, but their small numbers posed no threat to the existence or the expansion of the United States.

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