
THE WAR OF 1812: THE “FORGOTTEN WAR”

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The War of 1812 is sometimes called the “forgotten war.” Indeed, military historian, professor of history, and author Donald R. Hickey, in his book, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, called the War of 1812 “probably our most obscure war.”¹ However, the War of 1812 had a great impact on the development of the fledgling United States. Pulitzer-prize winning historian Gordon S. Wood, in his book, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, called the war “one of the most important wars in American history.”² The War of 1812 impacted the nation in numerous ways, including improving the nation’s national spirit and international reputation, as well as its transportation, manufacturing, and military capabilities. The war also pushed military heroes into the political spotlight and meant doom for many American Indians. The War of 1812 was vital in pushing America towards becoming a powerful, continental country.

For Americans at the time, the War of 1812 was a significant event. For many, it was a final break with Great Britain, and as Wood stated, “The Americans’ emotional connection with Britain was at last broken, and they had acquired a new sense of their own national character.”³ Some even thought of the war as a continuation of the Revolutionary War—a “second struggle for independence.”⁴ Americans at the end of the war who were forty years of age or older and born in America had been born subjects of King George III or of his predecessor Hanoverian monarchs; Americans younger than forty (eighty five percent of the population) were born American citizens. Most Americans came out of this war with a generally negative attitude towards Great Britain. Indeed, shortly after the war, editor and publisher Hezekiah Niles wrote, “In the general prosperity, we behold the downfall of that faction which would have made a common interest with the British, during the late war . . . they are despised by the people they would have given soul and body to serve; . . . they are laughed at by all who consider them too contemptible for serious rebuke.”⁵ Americans also developed more pride in the American nation and its political system.

The War of 1812 unified the country and instilled pride and confidence in the United States. The country had been unsure of itself and the war showed that the United States could stand up to a major power. Many Americans had doubted the country's place in the world. However, the war helped. A September 1815 editorial in the *Niles' Weekly Register* reported, "A high and honorable feeling generally prevails . . . and the people begin to assume, more and more, a NATIONAL CHARACTER."⁶ The war gave Americans this feeling, and a new nationalism grew among the population. Albert Gallatin, America's Minister to France, said that "the war renewed and reinstated the National Feelings and character which the Revolution had given, and were daily lessened."⁷ The war also reinforced the American idea of republican government.

The War of 1812 reassured Americans, who had seemed unsure as to how strong their country was, and if their new form of government could survive long. "The War of 1812 did finally establish for Americans the independence and nationhood of the United States that so many had doubted."⁸ Historian Norman Risjord, in his book *Jefferson's America*, said "the experiment in republican government—a source of concern to both Washington and Jefferson in their inaugural addresses—had been made to work."⁹ Thomas Jefferson confirmed that the government was solid. He said, "Our government is now so firmly put on its republican tack, that it will not be easily monarchised by forms."¹⁰ The war increased America's citizens' faith in the United States as a nation and in its political system. People also took pride in standing up to a powerful Great Britain.

The results of the war reinforced the nation's feelings as a strong, sovereign nation. America was confident that it could now assert its authority. Benson Lossing said that the war resulted in "the positive and permanent independence of the United States," and that the nation would not "tolerate an insult, nor suffer its sovereignty to be questioned." Americans were "truly free" to begin "on a grand career of prosperity, with marvelous resources, developed and undeveloped – known and unknown."¹¹ Hickey postulated, "[T]he heady nationalism and expansionism that characterized American foreign policy throughout the nineteenth century was at least partly a result of the War of 1812."¹² Although the nation suffered many defeats and really gained nothing in fighting Great Britain to a standstill, many Americans felt they had won. In a special letter to Congress, President James Madison said, "While performing this act I congratulate you and our constituents upon an event which is highly honorable to

the nation, and terminates with peculiar felicity a campaign signaled by the most brilliant successes.”¹³ Although brilliant success was not what everyone thought, the United States did gain international respect from the war.

Once again, the United States had fought one of the most powerful nations in the world and survived. This increased the nation’s international standing. Albert Gallatin wrote, “The character of America stands now as high as ever on the European continent, and higher than it ever did in Great Britain.”¹⁴ John Quincy Adams was a bit reluctant about it all and thought Americans went a bit too far, saying “my country men . . . look too intently to their Triumphs & turn their eyes too lightly away from their disasters . . . rather more proud than they have reason for the War.”¹⁵ However, he still said that the war “was more beneficial than injurious to our Country,” and it “raised our national character in the eyes of all Europe.”¹⁶ Some political groups did not reap success from the war. Although the nation’s mood was positive after the war, during the war, Hickey noted that the War of 1812 was “America’s most unpopular foreign war.”¹⁷ Politically, the Federalist and Republican parties were deeply divided and the Federalists did not support the war, almost always voting in a bloc against it. They wanted peace with Great Britain and were in favor of accepting early peace offerings with terms that most Americans thought unacceptable. New England states believed that they bore too much of the brunt of the war and worried about their protection—their maritime industry also had suffered. This opposition led to the Hartford Convention. This convention of New England states proposed seven amendments to the Constitution, including one to end the three-fifths law (to lessen southern influence) and one to insist requiring a two-thirds majority Congressional vote to go to war, among others. They also proposed establishment of a New England Confederation “for their own defence.”¹⁸ An extremist group of Federalists (not those at the convention) even talked of secession. This could have had major implications for the country’s political future but fortunately for the United States, the war ended before it got that far. Even though secession was not the position of most, the Federalist Party was destroyed as party. It never overcame the stigma of being considered disloyal during the war. Rufus King ran against James Monroe in 1816 as the party’s last presidential candidate. The controversy ended America’s first two-party system, and the Republican Party dominated politics for the next decade. Still, the United States’ new nationalism and international respect allowed it to look inward and develop its capabilities.

America was forced to develop business and manufacturing by the war. The embargo and Non-intercourse Acts before the war and the war itself meant imported manufactured goods from Britain were in short supply. Additionally, the war had interrupted maritime trade and fishing; “American commerce was driven from the seas.”²⁰ This forced American investors to look at other avenues. They looked towards manufacturing.

The short supply of manufactured goods resulted in greater demand and higher prices. This led to “a sudden increase in the number of patents and also to an inducement for more and more investors to shift their capital out of overseas shipping into domestic manufacturing.”²¹ Before 1808 there were only fifteen cotton mills in the United States; by 1814, 243 cotton mills were operating in fifteen states. Americans started to change their minds about manufacturing. Even Thomas Jefferson, who had been hostile to manufacturing, conceded, “that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort,” and “[o]ur manufacturers are now very nearly on a footing with those of England. She has not a single improvement which we do not possess, and many of them better adapted by ourselves to our ordinary use.” He also said in a letter that “He, therefore, who is now against domestic manufacture, must be for reducing us either to dependence on that foreign nation, or to be clothed in skins, and to live like wild beasts in dens and caverns.”²² This was a strong turnaround from his earlier position supporting a rural farming culture. The country was ripe for the spread of capitalism.

Because of the war America saw increased governmental expenditure, extensive military mobilization, expanded banking and credit, and growth of domestic manufacturing. These resulted in “hallmarks of capitalism” such as “a heightened sense of individuality, the increasing importance of the consumption of material goods, and extensive geographical and social mobility . . . a decisive moment in the emergence of the United States as a modern capitalist society.”²³ People who had previously seen capitalism and consumption of material goods as evil were changing their tune. Americans also began to focus on the West.

The War of 1812 removed many obstacles to American expansion. The British had always tried to bottle up this urge to expand. For a long time, they had used Indians to prevent American expansion. The British believed that American expansion would “produce Indian war, menace the British fur trade, and even endanger the safety of Canada.”²⁴ However, Americans were now free to move

into the Ohio and Mississippi valley regions. According to Jesse Buel, editor of the *Albany Argus*, Americans were eager. "What a field for splendid contemplation does our western country unfold! . . . When we consider that nature has strewn her gifts with a bountiful hand over this vast wilderness, and take into view the benign influence of our government and the enterprise of our population, the mind is lost in the magnitude of the objects which seem rising in futurity."²⁵ Hickey said that "the war encouraged the heady expansionism that lay at the heart of American foreign policy for the rest of the century."²⁶ British observers noticed American expansionism and commented on it. William Hamilton, the Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1809 to 1822, noted in December 1815, "Seeds of unlimited expansion . . . have taken root in that country."²⁷ Florida was one of the first to feel the urge for expansion.

There had been periodic conflict between Spanish Florida and America for quite some time. After the War of 1812, the Spanish had little hope of retaining Florida. The British had attacked America through these territories and because the Spanish were an ally of Britain, the British had often protected them in disputes. However, Spanish West Florida became the only permanent land acquisition the United States made during the War of 1812. By 1819, Spain had abandoned Florida, as well as a large part of its claims in the Pacific Northwest. This helped make the United States a true continental power. However, transportation through any areas opened up by the war was difficult.²⁸

The War of 1812, and the expansion brought on afterwards, spotlighted how weak the nation's transportation systems were. The war itself had pushed the nation towards developing other transportation options for military reasons. Since transportation by way of the Atlantic Ocean was made hazardous by the strong British Navy, the United States was forced to use internal roads for transportation. The poor condition of these roads "greatly hampered the war effort."²⁹ Additionally, Americans travelling west found horrible roads. The need to improve travel and trade in the West, along with military considerations, resulted in renewed calls for the state and national governments to "finance internal improvements, or at least to invest in the stock of various road companies."³⁰ The nation "pursued with new vigor" the National Road from Cumberland Maryland to the Ohio River and several states approved canal projects.³¹ The war showcased not only military transportation issues, however; the military itself had serious issues.

During the war, the United States military had many problems. Many of the country's military leaders were incompetent and the country had problems getting enough enlistments. The militia was largely ineffective. In fact, they proved to be "costly and inefficient and repeatedly refused to cross into Canada or to hold their positions under enemy fire." Militarily, the United States did not achieve any of the goals it had attempted to achieve. It could not conquer Canada or achieve its maritime goals—these issues were not even mentioned in the Treaty of Ghent. Even the acquisition of West Florida came against a neutral power—not from its enemy.³² However, there were some positive results.

The country realized it needed to make efforts to deal with its military weaknesses exposed during the war. It was obvious the United States could no longer rely upon the militia to defend the country. Americans were also wary of future wars, especially with England, so they continued greater military and naval expenditure after the war. America no longer saw it as beneficial to "rely on the Jeffersonian panaceas of the 1800s."³³ Madison said, "Experience has taught us that a certain degree of preparation for war is not only indispensable to avert disasters in the onset, but affords also the best security for the continuance of peace."³⁴ The United States established the army at ten thousand men—the largest standing army ever for the country. John C. Calhoun led the reform of the armed forces during his tenure in the War Department (1817-1825). The war had proved the excellence of military training at West Point and Calhoun recognized the importance of professional training for its officers. After 1815 "an education at West Point became an essential requirement for most men who sought a military career."³⁵ Henry Adams pointed out that West Point had also developed scientific engineering, and that "none of the works constructed by a graduate of West Point was captured by the enemy . . . perhaps without exaggeration the West Point Academy might be said to have decided, next to the navy, the result of the war." After the war, Adams noted that improvements "introduced a new and scientific character into American life."³⁶ Staff organizations also expanded during Calhoun's watch. This was especially true with the Corps of Engineers, which embarked on a program to systematically improve coastal fortifications and also to establish arms depots. The navy was also expanded.

American naval power made great strides in the war. Although fighting against one of the premier navies of the world, the American navy showed its worth. They "instantly made improvements that gave them superiority."³⁸ The

naval capability of the United States began to elicit respect internationally. Indeed, Gallatin said that the United States was “generally respected and considered as the nation designed to check the naval despotism of England.”³⁹ Realizing the power of a strong navy, the Naval Expansion Act of 1816 led to a marked increase in the size of the navy.⁴⁰ The war also enhanced the political careers of many.

The War of 1812 was crucial in the political careers of many American leaders. The war propelled Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison towards the presidency—and three men into the vice-presidency—Daniel D. Tompkins, John C. Calhoun, and Richard M. Johnson. Andrew Jackson gained much political capital from the Battle of New Orleans which caused pride and nationalism; “Congress voted him the thanks of the nation, and ordered a commemorative gold medal to be given him.”⁴¹ William Henry Harrison ran for office as “Old Tippecanoe,” and slogans such as “Tippecanoe and Tyler too” touted his status as a war hero. Many others used war records to justify their elections. The Battle of Thames alone produced one president and one vice president, and in the state of Kentucky alone, “three governors, three lieutenant governors, four U.S. senators, and a score of congressmen.”⁴² However, not everyone benefited from the war.

The American Indians were the biggest losers in the aftermath of the War of 1812. During the war the American Indians had “made their last great effort to retain at least a portion of the land between the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers.”⁴³ It was often difficult for them to decide who to side with, but in the end, it did not matter. The American government did not differentiate much between enemies, and allies after the war and American Indian power was soon destroyed east of the Mississippi. The war was “a decisive defeat with lasting consequences . . . for centuries the tribes had been able to retain much autonomy—economic, political, and military—by playing off the British, French, Spanish, and Americans against each other.” Now they could not. The defeat and death of Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames and the destruction of the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend “marked the end of the serious military power of the American Indians in the Northwest and Southeast respectively.”⁴⁴ The peace treaty between the British and Americans did not help.

The Treaty of Ghent left the door wide open for American expansion. The events after the war showed that “neither accommodation to nor resistance

against American encroachments would suffice to preserve their cultural and political autonomy.”⁴⁵ The Treaty of Ghent promised that both countries would “make peace with the Indians and to restore to such tribes . . . all the possessions, rights, and privileges which they may have enjoyed, or been entitled to, in one thousand eight hundred and eleven previous to such hostilities.”⁴⁶ However, the treaty did not include a permanent reservation for the Indians. This left them at the mercy of a more nationalistic and self-reliant America, “an expansive people determined to engross lands up to and even beyond the Mississippi River.”⁴⁷ Soon the United States “felt free to resume the negotiation of cessions of tribal lands.”⁴⁸ The American Indians were doomed. Even those who had sided with America suffered.

Even tribes that fought as allies of the United States were dealt with severely and often underhandedly. The Choctaw lost their land under treaties of 1816 and 1830. The Cherokee allies suffered much the same fate. Andrew Jackson “extorted a fraudulent treaty with unauthorized Cherokees” in 1816, and the Senate ratified it, unwilling to “defy his popularity with southwestern voters.”⁴⁹ Through a series of treaties, Jackson obtained “vast lands . . . three quarters of Alabama and Florida, one-third of Tennessee, one-fifth of Georgia and Mississippi, and smaller portions of Kentucky and South Carolina.”⁵⁰ American Indian power east of the Mississippi River was irretrievably broken. In fact, Secretary of War Calhoun said they “have, in great measure, ceased to be an object of terror, and have become that of commiseration.”⁵¹

In conclusion, although the War of 1812 is often seen as the “forgotten war,” it was an influential war, impacting the nation in numerous ways. The war resulted in a surge in nationalism. Few still clung to Great Britain. Americans enjoyed increased optimism about the United States and its political system. The war also showed that the United States would be a force to be reckoned with internationally. After surviving another war against an international powerhouse, the United States’ prestige throughout Europe was never higher. Forced to turn from maritime interests during the war, the United States began manufacturing more of its own goods. Leaders soon realized that the country’s transportation and communication systems were inadequate, and began diligently working on improvements. All of this resulted in the country looking inward to capitalize on its own internal resources. Capitalism thrived and the country was eager to expand. The War of 1812 also made the nation realize its military was weak. No

longer able to rely on militia to fight its wars, the United States created a standing army that built on its successes like West Point and enlarged the navy, which had proven so vital during the war; America began to be recognized as a naval power. The war also pushed military heroes into the political spotlight; some used this spotlight to catapult themselves into the running for the highest political offices. Unfortunately, the War of 1812 was devastating for many American Indians. In hindsight, it is not difficult to say that Gordon S. Wood was right—the War of 1812 was essential in driving changes that set the stage for the United States of America to become a continental and international power. The nation was primed to chase its (manifest) destiny.

Notes

1. Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 1.

2. Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 659.

3. *Ibid.*, 701.

4. Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812: Or Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the Last War for American Independence* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1868), accessed 13 Jan 2013, <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wcarrr1/Lossing2/Chap02.html>.

5. H. Niles, ed. *Niles' Weekly Register. Vol XII September 1814-March 1815*, accessed 12 Jan 2013, <http://ia700406.us.archive.org/6/items/nilesweeklyregis12balt/nilesweeklyregis12balt.pdf>.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Albert Gallatin, *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, ed. Henry Adams (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1879), accessed 12 Jan 2013, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1953/122312>.

8. Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 699.

9. Norman K. Risjord, *Jefferson's America: 1760-1815*, 3d Ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1990), 406-407.

10. Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 289.

11. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812*.

12. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 304.

13. James Madison, *Special Message to Congress on the Treaty of Ghent (February 18, 1815)*, accessed 12 Jan 2013, http://www.constitution.org/jm/18150218_peace.txt.
14. Gallatin, *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, n.p.
15. John Quincy Adams, *The Writings of John Quincy Adams: Vol. VI 1816-1819*, edited by Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916), 38.
16. John Quincy Adams, "Letters of John Quincy Adams to Alexander Hamilton Everett, 1811-1837," *The American Historical Review* 11, no. 1 (October 1905): 103.
17. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 255.
18. Henry Adams, *The War of 1812*, ed. Major Harvey A. DeWeerd, with an introduction by Colonel John R. Elting (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 275.
19. John Quincy Adams, "Letters;" Henry Adams, *The War of 1812*, ed. Major Harvey A. DeWeerd, with an introduction by Colonel John R. Elting (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), 275; Jeremy Black, *Fighting for America: The Struggle for Mastery in North America 1519-1871*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 173; Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 277; Risjord, *Jefferson's America: 1760-1815*, 36; Edward C. Skeen, *1816: America Rising*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 18-19.
20. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 132.
21. Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 702.
22. Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to General Thaddeus Kosciuszko, January 9 1816," accessed 6 January 2013, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl238.php>; Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Benjamin Austin, January 9 1816," accessed 6 January 2013, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl238.php>.
23. J. C. A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.
24. Philip P. Mason, ed., *After Tippecanoe: Some Aspects of the War of 1812* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 60.
25. Skeen, *1816: America Rising*, 18.
26. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 3.
27. Black, *Fighting for America*, 174.
28. Stagg, *The War of 1812*, 166.
29. Skeen, *1816: America Rising*, 32.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.

32. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 301, 303.
33. Black, *Fighting for America*, 174.
34. Madison, *Special Message to Congress*.
35. Stagg, *The War of 1812*, 174.
36. Adams, *The War of 1812*, 361.
37. Black, *Fighting for America*, 173.
38. Henry, Adams, *The War of 1812*, 357.
39. Gallatin, *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, n.p.
40. Black, *Fighting for America*, 173.
41. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* n.p.
42. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 2; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 573; Stagg, *The War of 1812*, 3.
43. Mason, *After Tippecanoe*, 60.
44. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 74.
45. Stagg, *The War of 1812*, 156.
46. Treaty of Ghent, "Yale Law School Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy," accessed 16 February 2016, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/ghent.asp.
47. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 296, 303.
48. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 76.
49. Ibid.
50. Black, *Fighting for America*, 176; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 76.
51. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 314.

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