

The War of 1812: An Overview

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Introduction

The War of 1812 is perhaps one of the least appreciated conflicts in United States history. While most Americans recognize the names of battles like Waterloo and Gettysburg, few have ever heard of Lundy's Lane or Chrysler's Farm. In part, this is because we remember the War of 1812 more often as a naval conflict. We recall the bombardment of Ft. McHenry, which inspired Francis Scott Key to write *The Star Spangled Banner*. We remember the names of great warships like the USS Constitution, and perhaps we recall from high school history that the war was a struggle against British impressment of American sailors.

In terms of land battles, we usually remember only Andrew Jackson's stunning victory at New Orleans. What Americans tend to forget, or never learn in the first place, is that for over two years tens of thousands of soldiers and Indian warriors fought a series of often brutal battles along much of border between Canada and the United States. Indeed, though it was not the prime objective of the war, for Americans the conquest of Canada was seen as vital in seeking both redress of grievances with Britain and an end to Native American power on what was then the western frontier. What Canadians remember and Americans forget is that the War of 1812 was in large part an American effort to invade and conquer Canada. This game is a treatment of many of the most important land battles of that war.

The Campaigns of 1812

British land forces suffered a disadvantage at the start of the War for two main reasons. Britain was deeply committed to fighting Napoleon in Europe and so her North American forces were on their own while that greater conflict dragged on. Additionally, communication and supply along the Canadian frontier from Montreal to Michigan depended upon the long navigable line formed by the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. This was an efficient system as long as the line was not broken. Not surprisingly, American strategy throughout the war concentrated on shattering that line. The plan in 1812 called for one force to drive in to Canada from Detroit, another from the Niagara River, and a final column to march on Montreal, thus severing the St. Lawrence lifeline in three places. Unfortunately for the United States, neither her military leaders nor her small army of regulars were up to the task of a coordinated three-prong invasion.

The Western Frontier: 1812

The aging Revolutionary War hero and governor of Michigan Territory, William Hull, led the invasion on the Detroit frontier. Just before war was declared Hull gathered a force of two thousand men in western Ohio, including a large contingent of newly organized militia, and began literally to cut a road to Detroit. In the time it took for Hull's army to accomplish this, the British commander General Isaac Brock arrived in the West with reinforcements and learned of Hull's plans. As Hull reached Fort Detroit and crossed into Canada to move on Fort Malden, some 200 of his Ohio militia refused to cross the border, reasoning that they had only volunteered to defend American soil. Hull then learned that the American garrison at Mackinac to the northwest had been captured on July 17th. Fearing Indian attacks on his line of supply and communication, Hull

withdrew from Canada back to Fort Detroit. Brock moved to besiege the fort and brilliantly bluffed the over-cautious Hull into a bloodless surrender on August 16th. Thus, instead of prosecuting the invasion or at least holding the line in the West, Hull opened it completely to the British, and to the Native American nations of the region that were increasingly flocking to Britain's standard.

The "Hero of Tippecanoe" and future President William Henry Harrison replaced Hull in the West before the end of the campaign season in 1812. Though he did not yet have an army large enough to recapture Detroit from the British, Harrison did stabilize the situation by relieving Fort Wayne from a British and Indian siege on September 12th. He then proceeded to build up his army and launch a series of raids on various hostile Indian villages in the region. This effort included the burning of several Miami villages on the Mississinewa River early that fall. On October 11th, a strong Miami force responded by attacking the marauding Americans as they camped. The desperate Battle of the Mississinewa ended in an American victory rivaling that of Tippecanoe a year earlier.

Though Harrison managed to hold the line against the various Indian nations in the West, he suffered one last defeat as he launched a winter campaign to take back the ground Hull had lost. Harrison's advance force, under General James Winchester, had moved as far as the rapids on the Maumee River. There, Winchester received a plea from pro-American settlers at British-occupied Frenchtown on the Raisin River to the north. Winchester and his commanders decided to move quickly to their aid but failed to inform Harrison promptly of their advance. Winchester took Frenchtown and occupied it but ignored warnings of, and failed to make any meaningful preparations to receive, an

impending counterattack. The British commander in the region, Colonel Henry Proctor, moved quickly to the offensive and attacked Frenchtown early on January 22nd 1813. Though Harrison approved of Winchester's advance, he did not learn of it in time to send reinforcements. Additionally, Winchester's lack of preparations doomed his otherwise able force to total defeat. After his victory, Proctor evacuated Frenchtown with his prisoners but left several American wounded behind with the Indians. The Indians, in retribution for their losses in battle, then murdered thirty of these men. Americans rallied on the cry "Remember the Raisin!" for the remainder of the war. For the moment at least, Harrison had to concede that he could not regain all that Hull had lost for the United States in the West.

The Niagara & St. Lawrence Frontiers: 1812

Poor leadership also doomed American efforts on the other two main Canadian fronts in 1812. Henry Dearborn, an aging veteran of the Revolutionary War, led a thrust across Lake Champlain against Montreal very late in the season but had to abandon it when, like Hull in the West, he was unable to persuade many of his militia units to follow him across the border. A similar but bloodier situation developed on the Niagara Frontier, where two incompetent American generals commanded a combined army of roughly 6,000 troops.

In October, Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer decided that his force and that of General Alexander Smyth should coordinate an attack across the Niagara River. While Van Rensselaer's regulars seized Queenston Heights, Smyth was to move on Ft. George immediately to the North. Smyth however flatly refused to cooperate. Still, Van Rensselaer's force was strong and, indeed, his regulars achieved their objective at

Queenston with an improvised flanking maneuver. For a while, the regulars held firm under the leadership of Lt. Col. Winfield Scott. Scott's men even succeeded in killing the British commander Brock, who had marched his forces back from the West in order to meet the threat on the Niagara Frontier. However, when Van Rensselaer ordered his militia across the river to reinforce Scott, they refused just as their comrades had done on the Western and St. Lawrence Frontiers. Without reinforcements Scott could not hold, and so Scott and nearly 1,000 Americans on the British side of the river were captured and any meaningful chance to prosecute the invasion of Canada in 1812 was lost.

Thus, because of poor leadership and reliance on undisciplined militia the United States in 1812 was unable even to meaningfully harass, much less break, the British lines of supply and communication on any of the three Canadian frontiers. The British on the other hand, who were presumably at a disadvantage in the land war, not only held the line on two fronts in Canada but had managed, with their Indian allies, to put the Americans on the defensive in the West. Unfortunately the war at sea, in which the British were presumed to have a great advantage, went as poorly for them as the land war did for the Americans. American privateers in particular made a substantial dent in British trade, but there were also a number of stunning victories over British warships. Though most of these naval battles greatly impacted the land forces in morale, they did not bear directly on land operations in 1812. This would change dramatically in 1813.

The Campaigns of 1813

American strategy in 1813 mirrored that of 1812 inasmuch as the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River still provided the only effective means of moving troops and supplies across the Canadian frontier, as the British did so effectively in 1812. However,

despite its early failures, the United States still felt that the conquest of Canada was a realistic war aim and in 1813 began a new and concerted effort to build warships on the Great Lakes. This new navy was to coordinate with the army, growing as it was in both numbers and experience, to gain control of those key waterways. Thus while the strategic ends for the United States remained the same, the operational means changed to include a much stronger naval component.

For the British, who found it hard to match American shipbuilding on the Canadian frontier, the news from Europe was nonetheless encouraging. By the end of 1812, Napoleon's great army saw total defeat and devastation in Russia. The brave defenders of the Canadian border thought, and rightly so, that they could soon expect veterans of the European wars as reinforcements in North America. Though Napoleon's ultimate demise at Waterloo had not yet come to pass, by 1813 Britain nonetheless was able to give a great deal more attention to the war in North America.

The Niagara Frontier: 1813

Control of Lake Ontario, which presumably would allow victory on the entire Niagara Frontier, was the objective of the first American offensive of 1813. Captain Isaac Chauncey took command of American naval forces on Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, and he moved quickly to develop a plan with Henry Dearborn for action. In late April, Chauncey's ships and 1,700 troops under General Zebulon Pike moved on the British naval base of York (Toronto). On April 27 with the support of Chauncey's guns, Pike's troops engaged and defeated General Sir Roger Sheaffe's force of 700 British and Indian defenders. Angered by the death of Pike and the loss of many of their number in the explosion of the garrison's magazine, the Americans brutally looted the town and burned

its government buildings. The British counterattacked the American naval base at Sackett's Harbor on May 29. Colonel Edward Baynes and his force of 750 troops met with initial success but ultimately suffered heavy losses and defeat at the hands of the 900 American defenders under the command of General Jacob Brown.

With Lake Ontario open for the moment, Chauncey and Dearborn took the opportunity to move on Ft. George, the northernmost fort on the British side of the Niagara River. Under the command of Winfield Scott, 4,500 of Dearborn's troops launched a well-coordinated amphibious attack with the support of Chauncey's naval forces on May 27. The British force under General John Vincent, numbering only 1,100 men, fought hard but retreated after taking heavy losses. Vincent ordered the evacuation of British positions along the entire Niagara Frontier but was quickly able to regroup unmolested at Burlington Heights (Hamilton). For their part, the Americans grew complacent in victory and began to strip the Niagara frontier of most of its troops to serve on the St. Lawrence Frontier to the east.

Late that spring, a belated American attempt to pursue Vincent by Generals William Winder and John Chandler gave the British the opportunity to counterattack and regain all that they had lost. After skirmishing with the advance guard of an American force of 3,000 men at Stoney Creek on June 5th, Vincent took 700 men and made a bold strike at the American camp before dawn on the next day. In the confusion both American generals were captured, but their forces were in fact victorious. However, inexperience and fear among the remaining American colonels pushed them into such a hasty withdrawal that they left their dead unburied on the field.

Vincent continued his advance and another American force under Lt. Colonel Charles G. Boerstler struck out to attack him, this time at Beaver Dams on June 24th. Because of the efforts of the courageous Laura Secord, who walked nineteen miles through the night, the British were warned of this advance. Though ambushed by Indian warriors, the Americans nevertheless managed to fight another winning battle. However, again poor leadership turned what would have been an important victory into a humiliating defeat for the Americans. Boerstler lay bleeding and frightened in a wagon when, incredibly, an audacious Irish officer came out under flag of truce and secured his surrender by convincing him that a superior force British regulars and hostile Indians surrounded the Americans.

Vincent continued to gain ground through July and ultimately Dearborn was relieved of command, only to be replaced by the less than stellar James Wilkinson. That fall, while Wilkinson half-heartedly obeyed his orders to move most of his troops east for operations on the St. Lawrence Frontier, Vincent moved his outposts closer to Fort George and commenced a series of raids along the Niagara River. By December 10th, Brigadier General George McClure was left by Wilkinson with a command of no more than 100 Americans and a small contingent of friendly Canadians at Fort George. Vincent's harassment along the frontier convinced McClure to withdraw across the river to Fort Niagara. In doing so he also chose to burn the nearby towns of Newark and Queenston in order, he claimed, to deprive the British of any possible shelter for the winter. McClure gave the civilians of the towns only two hours notice before turning them out into the bitter cold, and inasmuch as the action had little justifiable military purpose to begin with, the British were understandably outraged.

Immediately after the evacuation of Fort George, command of the British forces on the Niagara Frontier passed to Lt. General Sir Gordon Drummond and his subordinate Major General Phineas Riall. They determined to make the Americans pay for their brutality and on December 18th, their forces took Fort Niagara in a stealthy attack that completely overwhelmed its sleeping defenders. For the rest of December, the British laid waste to the American side of the river, which was essentially undefended. Thus, while the Campaign of 1813 on the Niagara Frontier started with substantial American victories, it ended in total American defeat. Indeed, Fort Niagara itself would remain in British hands for the rest of the war.

The St. Lawrence Frontier: 1813

After the battles of York and Fort George, the United States chose to move the majority of its forces from the Niagara Frontier so that they might bring their numbers to bear in operations on the St. Lawrence. Montreal was once again the objective, but solid plans for the campaign did not materialize until late in the season. This delay combined with lack of leadership on the front allowed the British to gain control of Lake Champlain. By late summer the United States had some 11,500 men on the frontier and so their leaders devised a strong two-prong overland attack on Montreal. One column led by Dearborn's successor James Wilkinson would attack from the west, and the other led by the cantankerous Wade Hampton would attack from the south. Neither man had ever proved himself a leader in battle and both were corrupt, but more importantly both hated one another and their five-year feud split many of their subordinate officers into hostile camps. They grudgingly launched their campaign in October, though neither man much believed in its possibilities for success.

Hampton's advance followed the Chateauguay River north towards Montreal. On October 26th, he discovered heavily fortified British positions near Spears. This strong point effectively blocked Hampton's way to Montreal but was manned by no more than 1,400 French Canadians and Indians commanded by Lt. Colonel Charles de Salaberry. Hampton's entire force of militia had refused to invade Canadian territory, but he still mustered over 3,000 men. However, when a proposed flank attack failed to materialize Hampton launched a spiritless frontal assault on the British abatis. De Salaberry's men managed to inflict a few casualties, but were more effective in their concerted effort to make such a racket that Hampton became convinced he faced a huge, well-entrenched army. He extricated his men and marched back to American soil for the winter.

Wilkinson fared little better in his push, which was plagued with disease and bad weather from the start. As he marched down the St. Lawrence, a British force of about 800 under Colonel Joseph Morrison nipped constantly at his column. Morrison decided to fully engage Wilkinson's rear guard protecting the rest of the army as it negotiated the Long Sault and Mille Roches rapids. On November 11th with a smaller force, Morrison attacked some 2,000 men under General John P. Boyd at Chrysler's Farm. Boyd's men counterattacked but failed to drive the British from their positions, and in turn Morrison handily drove the Americans from the field. Wilkinson, like Hampton, ended the campaign after this, his first defeat.

Thus, both American generals failed their men and their country. While the British and French Canadians fought bravely, they were few in number and their leaders were not particularly impressive. The massive American columns should have at least been able to land a telling blow on the St. Lawrence Frontier in 1813, even if they might

not realistically have hoped to take Montreal. Incompetent generals had once again cost the United States a sorely needed victory.

The Western Frontier: 1813

At no other time in the war would naval operations play so important a role in a land campaign than on the Western Frontier in 1813. Control of Lake Erie allowed the British to move and resupply their troops with ease, and this of course allowed them to keep Harrison and his army on the defensive. Captain Chauncey gave the task of securing Lake Erie for the Americans to his subordinate Commodore Oliver H. Perry. In the midst of a late-summer British and Indian land offensive, Perry moved to engage the British flotilla under Captain Robert H. Barclay. On September 10th, in the furious and costly Battle of Lake Erie, Perry bested Barclay's squadron and sent his memorable message to Harrison, "We have met the enemy and they are ours..." It was a stunning defeat from which the British would never recover.

The earlier British offensive began on the Maumee River on May 1st, with an assault on Fort Meigs by a combined force of over 2,000 men including General Henry Procter's regulars and militia, and the Shawnee leader Tecumseh's warriors, drawn from the various Indian nations in confederation against the Americans. Harrison's outnumbered defenders held the fort for several days against all British and Indian attacks, but a large American relief force of General Green Clay's Kentucky militia was roughly handled after some initial successes in their attack. Tecumseh was horrified to learn that Procter failed to prevent some of his Indians from murdering American prisoners. Legend has it that after Tecumseh ended the slaughter himself, he declared Procter unfit to command and remarked that he ought to go off and wear petticoats. For

his part, Procter was as impotent in continuing his attack on the fort as he was in preventing the slaughter of wounded Americans, and so he withdrew on the 9th.

Procter's own casualties were light and those of the Americans quite heavy, so he was not put off for good. He launched another offensive in July with a much larger combined force in the hopes that he could bluff the defenders at Fort Meigs out in the open for a decisive battle. After failing in this attempt, Procter moved his force on to attack Fort Stephenson, but there was defeated once again. Denied the use of Lake Erie by Perry's victory in September, Procter withdrew into Canada and any hope of a further British offensive in the West was dashed, much to the dismay of Tecumseh.

Harrison then moved to the offensive after strengthening his force and adapting Perry's fleet to transport his men. Procter moved up the Thames River, abandoning both Fort Detroit and Fort Malden. Harrison quickly occupied both and pushed on in pursuit of the British army. Procter took up positions near Moraviantown and prepared to meet Harrison's advance. On October 5th, Harrison opened the Battle of the Thames with a bold frontal cavalry charge on the thin British lines. The Kentucky cavalry shouted "Remember the Raisin!" as they pushed back the British flank. The assault was successful and the British lines crumbled under a withering crossfire. The Indian warriors put up a more determined fight, but when they heard that Tecumseh had been killed, they too routed. The American victory was total. The British were never able to regain the offensive on the Western Frontier and many of their Indian allies withdrew their support and were forced to deal with the Americans.

So, while a stalemate was the best that the Americans could achieve in the east, they made up for this in the west with total victory on land and sea. Victory in one

theater of operations however did not mean victory in the War. Though defeated on Lake Erie by Perry, overall the British Navy in 1813 fared much better against the Americans than it had in 1812. Though neutralized in the west, in 1814 the British would continue to fight hard on sea and on the other two Canadian fronts. Additionally in 1814, they struck a fiery blow in retribution for York and Newark on a new front, the Chesapeake Bay. The southern United States would also see its share of war in 1814 and 1815. And by the end of it all, there was no clear victor.

The Campaigns of 1814 & 1815

In April of 1814, Napoleon was forced into exile on Elba, and the British began to send their veterans in much larger numbers to North America. With this new manpower, they were determined to deal a crushing blow to the Americans once and for all. And though the United States had also expanded her increasingly well-trained army, and her military leaders were showing more promise, Americans nonetheless feared the wrath of a newly galvanized Britain. Survival in the face of increasingly poor odds became the order of the day for the Americans. Without any decisive victories besides that on the Western Frontier, the conquest of Canada began to look like an impossible task.

The Western Frontier: 1814

Though the British and Indians had been defeated on the Thames in 1813, there was still organized resistance to the Americans in the West in 1814. For their part, the Americans knew that they could not truly pacify the Indians in the region as long as the British were still operating there. General Harrison however, knowing that such mopping up was unlikely to give him much in the way of adventure or glory, resigned; accordingly, the war in the west was left to officers of lesser rank and importance.

The Americans scored a decisive victory in what was otherwise mostly a period of inconsequential skirmishing. At the Battle of Long Wood on April 5, an American force under the command of Captain A.H. Holmes repulsed a determined attack by British regulars, militia and Indians at Twenty Mile Creek, where it flows into the Thames. In addition, an American offensive in the upper west that met with mixed success nonetheless kept pressure on the British and Indian forces in the region. These actions kept the British from regaining any momentum in the west until the end of the war.

The Niagara Frontier: 1814

Fighting on the Niagara Frontier in 1814 was fierce, if indecisive. In early July, the Americans, led by Jacob Brown, once more crossed the Niagara River and invaded Canada. After securing Fort Erie, Brown's force pushed north to the Chippewa River. On the 5th, Brown's militia and a force of friendly Iroquois drove a small group of hostile Indians from a forest and then ran into British regulars. American regulars under Winfield Scott appeared to challenge the British force whose commander, General Phineas Riall, mistook the gray clad Americans for militia. By the time he shouted "Those are regulars, by God!", the Americans had moved to engage Riall's force. Ultimately Scott's men drove the British with the bayonet back across the river.

Brown pushed his army north and on July 25th met and engaged Riall's army at Lundy's Lane. Attacks and counterattacks rolled back and forth over the battlefield for five hours. The fighting was so fierce that it reportedly drowned out the roar of nearby Niagara Falls. Brown, Scott and Riall all suffered wounds. At the end of the day, both sides had lost over 800 men and Brown's army withdrew to the south and ultimately to

Fort Erie. The British followed and on August 15th attacked Fort Erie. After an initial surprise attack, they breached the wall but ultimately were repulsed with heavy losses. The British then set up heavy artillery and pounded the fort for weeks until Brown ordered an assault on September 17th. The Americans managed to spike several of the British cannon, but ultimately retired back across the Niagara after destroying the fort on November 8th. Thus ended the last indecisive and bloody campaign season on the Niagara Frontier.

The St. Lawrence Frontier: 1814

George Prevost, the Governor General of Canada, organized Britain's main offensive on the Canadian border in 1814. Prevost intended to move down Lake Champlain and take Plattsburg with the help of British naval forces on the lake. Prevost's army of 10,000 greatly outnumbered the American forces left in the region and met little resistance as it moved south through early September. General Alexander Macomb could field only about 3,500 inexperienced American soldiers, but he determined to resist the British at Plattsburg. While Prevost waited, the British fleet under Captain George Downie engaged the Americans, commanded by Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough, on September 11th at Plattsburg Bay. As Prevost moved to attack, the American fleet defeated Downie's force. Though he met with initial success against the green Americans, when Prevost learned of Downie's defeat he broke off his attack and retreated. This action ended major fighting on the St. Lawrence Frontier for the rest of the war. As on the Niagara River, stalemate was the best either side could accomplish after three bloody years.

The Chesapeake Campaign: 1814

With her powerful navy and her resources now freed from duty Europe, Britain determined to open new fronts against the Americans during 1814. Indeed, that summer British forces took eastern Maine and held it without much of a fight for the rest of the war. In tandem with this operation, Britain also proposed to drive up the Chesapeake Bay and attack Baltimore and Washington. After securing a base of operations in the bay and augmenting their forces with veterans from Europe, the British moved to action on land. Nearly 5,000 troops under General Robert Ross landed at Benedict, Maryland on August 19th and began a march towards Bladensburg and the American capital beyond. On the 24th, Ross attacked and routed a larger but inexperienced American force under the command of General William Winder. Though they inflicted a disproportional number of casualties on the British, Winder's army was routed completely from the field in what came to be known as the "Bladensburg Races." This defeat left Washington defenseless and, after dining at the abandoned White House, the British officers ordered it and several other government buildings burned. Ross then marched his army back to Benedict, and they sailed back to their base.

Ross continued the campaign with an attack on Baltimore in September. On the 12th, he landed his army at North Point and began a push towards the city. About seven miles from Baltimore, a large force of American militia confronted Ross and blocked his line of march. The British veterans easily swept the Americans aside, but before the battle ended Ross was felled by a sniper's bullet. The army continued its march and halted just outside of Baltimore to wait for the British navy to pound Ft. McHenry into submission, which prevented the fleet from moving into the harbor to rake the stout American defenses on the edge of the city. Seeing the American flag still flying over the

fort after a full day and night of shelling, the British fleet withdrew and the army soon followed suit. This victory of course inspired Francis Scott Key to write the Star Spangled Banner to the tune of a British drinking song. It also ended the Chesapeake Campaign and all major British operations on the bay for the rest of the war.

The Southern Frontier: 1813 – 1815

Operations in the southern United States never bore directly on the prosecution of the war in the North, but the British campaign along the Gulf Coast ultimately resulted in the battle Americans are most likely to remember from the War of 1812. And while the bloody Battle of New Orleans contributed nothing to the war effort, and in fact occurred after the signing of the peace treaty, American operations in the south beginning in 1813 were critically important with regards to the ultimate conquest of the Indians of the region. It is no coincidence that the American commander in the south and the hero of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson, was later as President responsible for the horrific Trail of Tears, a massive removal of Indians from their ancestral lands in the American south. “Old Hickory’s” reputation as a tough Indian fighter was greatly enhanced during the War of 1812.

The Creek War: 1813 - 1814

Tecumseh had visited the Creek nation in what is now Alabama in 1811, in an effort to organize the southern Indian nations to fight the Americans. His message resonated with a young group of warriors known as the Red Sticks, who went north in 1812 to see Tecumseh again. This group took part in the battle and massacre on the River Raisin and returned more determined than ever to push back American settlement

on the Southern Frontier. The older chiefs of the Creek nation wanted peace and ordered the capture and execution of the Red Sticks, which precipitated a civil war. On July 27, 1813 a group of Mississippi militia attacked a group of Redsticks returning from a trading venture in Florida. The Americans were defeated and the Battle of Burnt Corn became the first fight of the Creek War, thus turning the Creek civil war into part of the larger conflict in North America.

The Red Sticks and their allies responded to the American attack by destroying the garrison at Fort Mims, where they killed over 200 defenders, including women and children. This spurred Americans throughout the south to action, but they were unable to secure any decisive victories. In the fall, Andrew Jackson organized an expedition of 2,500 militia from Tennessee to attack the Creeks. At Tallushatchee and Talladega in November, Jackson's defeated the Indians handily. However, before he could follow up on those victories Jackson had to withdraw to his base at Fort Strother for the winter, though he did fight the Creek warriors to a draw at Emuckfau and Enotachopco Creek in January of 1814.

By the early spring of 1814, Jackson's army was reinforced, resupplied and in high spirits. Jackson discovered through his Indian informants that a large force of hostile Creeks was camped on the Tallapoosa River at the Horseshoe Bend. On March 27, he attacked their positions and broke their defenses in a brutal fight that lasted into the next morning. Jackson gave no quarter to the Creeks and by the end of the fight over 800 were dead. In August, he imposed the Treaty of Fort Jackson on all of the Creeks, including those who had fought for the Americans. This transferred over 20 million acres

of Creek land to the Americans and ended the Creek War, freeing Jackson up for other operations.

The Gulf Coast Campaign: 1814 - 1815

After the Chesapeake Campaign, the British could see the end of the war in sight and thus they tried to create opportunities to seize territory that they could use in bargaining at the peace talks. They decided that the sparsely defended American Gulf Coast, and the valuable trade city of New Orleans were perfect targets for such an operation. Accordingly, in August 1814 the British moved into the forts and harbor at Spanish controlled Pensacola, and then attacked Mobile on the Florida coast. Andrew Jackson organized the American counterattack and on November 7th took Pensacola without a fight from the Spanish. The British destroyed and abandoned the forts and moved their base to the Apalachicola River, and Jackson then marched to New Orleans.

Jackson was hailed as a hero when he arrived at the Crescent City on December 1st, and he immediately began to study the terrain and build defenses. Volunteers flocked to his army to offer their service in defense of the city. Indeed it was not only white Americans that joined up. Jackson readily accepted the services of a brave corps of free black men and a group of Choctow sharpshooters, and even reluctantly welcomed a group of Baratarian pirates under Jean Laffite into his army. The pirates in fact turned out to be high quality scouts and artillerymen, and Laffite himself got on very well with Jackson. By late December Jackson had around 5,000 men under arms to defend the city.

A British invasion force of about 10,000 men was organized at Jamaica and placed under the command of General Edward Pakenham, a solid officer. His troops began the drive towards New Orleans on December 14th with a victory over a small American force on Lake Borgne. Their advance column moved to within eight miles of the city where, on December 23rd at Villere's Plantation, Jackson attacked with land and naval forces. For the next few days, Jackson strengthened his defenses and had his ships keep up fire on the British lines. Pakenham assaulted the American lines on December 28th but withdrew quickly under heavy fire from land and sea.

Finally, Pakenham and his officers developed a plan for a decisive assault. One group would cross the river at night and attack the American artillery positions in order to capture the guns and turn them on the main American line. Pakenham would then attack with the main body in three large columns. On January 8th, 1815 the Battle of New Orleans proper began. The British force assigned to take the artillery positions met with initial success, but then stalled and could not take the guns. Pakenham went forward with the main assault, but his men were subjected to intense artillery, rifle and musket fire before they could come to grips with the main American line. The hardened British soldiers, mostly veterans from Europe, were easily put to disorder and rout. While Pakenham tried to rally them, he was killed by a cannon ball and his subordinate quickly called for retreat. The main engagement lasted less than an hour, but the British lost over 2,000 men including prisoners. Jackson's main force suffered only 13 casualties, and his entire army lost less than 100 men. This tragic defeat for the British was made all the more bitter by the fact that the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812, was

signed on Christmas Eve 1814. Word could not be gotten from Europe in time to halt the British assault.

Conclusion: The War of 1812 in Perspective

The war in 1814 had gone well for the Americans insofar as they managed to keep powerful British forces at bay on every front. However, there was no American victory in that year that pushed the British to negotiate a peace. As historian Donald Hickey posits, it is more reasonable to see British policy towards the United States in terms of their war with France. The issues of impressment and harassment of American trade, which helped to spark the war, were clearly outgrowths of Britain's overarching goal of defeating Napoleon in Europe. While his defeat meant that British resources could be shifted to fight the Americans, it also far outweighed any benefit Britain might have gained from victory in North America and it rendered moot any need for British manipulation of American trade. For their part, Canadians were defending their own territory against American aggression and had no designs on American land. Thus, by the end of 1814, with stalemate on every front and the burdensome economic and social strain for both sides of waging such a large conflict, all parties had more to gain from peace than from continuing the war.

Americans are proud of their martial history, and indeed their showing in the War of 1812 convinced Europeans to deal with the United States on a more equal footing than ever before. But it is fantasy for Americans to claim a victory in the war. The Treaty of Ghent simply returned British-American relations to their state before the war. And while the British did stop the odious practice of impressment, this again had more to do with defeating Napoleon than with fear of American reprisals. The Americans gained

only a small amount of land in Florida from the Spanish and kept nothing of British Canada. On the other hand, the Americans did gain a great victory over the Native Americans nations across the entire western frontier up to the Mississippi. Clearly, this was the only significant political gain made by any combatant in the war. The British no longer pursued military alliances with Native American nations against the Americans and the way was paved directly for the subsequent removal of the remaining Indian nations east of the Mississippi.

The defeat of the Indians however was just a link in the chain of the larger conflict between the Americans and indigenous peoples. Fighting the British was not a necessary part of that equation, and the British certainly shared nothing of the Indians' defeat. In that sense then, neither the Americans nor the British could claim anything in the way of victory in the War of 1812. Some might cite the Canadians as victors insofar as they managed to beat back the prolonged American attempt to conquer their homeland. Canadians gained nothing beyond national survival however, and that came at a high price. Truly, soldiers and civilians on all sides paid a very high price in the War of 1812. All sides exhibited brutality and all showed courage. In the end, victory, defeat or stalemate in the larger war does not speak to the honor of those on all sides who made the ultimate sacrifice for what they thought was right.

Bibliographic Notes

This introductory document is not meant to stand on its own in any academic sense. It is simply a tool to help players inform themselves. All details and interpretations regarding

army strengths and casualties, as well as all descriptions of battles and campaigns and interpretations of their importance come from the sources cited below.

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