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"THE SILLIEST DAMNED WAR"

A CURIOUS AFFAIR

Quite simply, the War of 1812 was a curious affair. Had the war been lost, it is possible Americans would have once again become British subjects. Had it been won, it is possible Canada would be part of the United States. But it ended in a costly and complicated tie.

At the time it was fought it was also disparagingly referred to as "Mr. Madison's War," a reference to President James Madison who, ironically enough, tried to avoid the war. President Harry S. Truman was even less charitable in his description of the conflict, deeming it, with characteristic bluntness, to be "the silliest damned war we ever had." It has even been hailed as America's "Second War for Independence." Interestingly, all three descriptions of the war are accurate. What is inaccurate is the title. It was a war that lasted two-and-one-half years but was named for only one of them. It can also be said that the War of 1812 is perhaps America's least well known war.[1]

America's "forgotten war" is one that should be remembered for several reasons. It was, simultaneously, one of the most unusual, one of the most unnecessary, and one of the most important wars in the country's history. As such, it was a war of great contradictions and ironies. At the highest levels of government and military leadership on both sides of the conflict, cowardice and incompetence undermined the sacrifices of the soldiers and sailors who did the fighting. Yet, the war produced several remarkable heroes and was the proving grounds for seven future American presidents. It also marked the only time that an invading enemy fought its way deep into American territory and even burned the building known today as the White House. Indeed, President Madison was within a battle or two of losing the United States. The War of 1812 was therefore America's most dangerous war.

It was a war fought by an inexperienced American army supplemented by undisciplined state militias. In addition to the destruction of forts and deaths of thousands of soldiers, the war's violence and mismanagement spilled over into civilian populations. Commercial ships were sunk, peaceful villages sacked, and unarmed locals harassed. On numerous occasions, marauding armies turned women, children, and the aged out of their homes in the middle of the night and dead of winter. On the frontier, surrendering soldiers were massacred in cold blood by Indian warriors allied with both sides. Even the capitals of both the United States and Upper Canada were put to the torch during the war. Such hostilities and tit-for-tat raids against civilian populations by both armies marred any glory from the fighting.

ESCALATING TENSIONS

The War of 1812 was a rematch of the war for American independence, pitting the new nation against her former colonial master. As was the case during the first conflict, the American and British people were divided in their views about the necessity of war. Most people living in Britain had suffered through shortages of food and other essential products on account of the Napoleonic wars in Europe at the dawn of the nineteenth century. By necessity, commerce and trade were restricted by the ongoing conflict and the prospect of another war in North America meant further sacrifices and additional restrictions. Therefore, even though relations between the two nations remained strained ever since the Revolutionary War and some military and political leaders in Britain longed to exact revenge on the former colonies (and others even wished to reclaim them), many Britons did not want war.

President Thomas Jefferson and his successor, James Madison, also sought to avoid war. But the matter of "impressment"—the act of Britain forcing American sailors into service with the Royal Navy—undermined any goodwill between the two nations. Because Britain viewed no country as neutral in their war with Napoleon, they believed they had the right to stop any ship on the seas and search it. This included American ships which were searched and seized for goods that might be traded with France and for British subjects who were sailing with American crews.

Having coastal ports and communities blockaded by the powerful British navy did little to quell the drumbeat for war. Yet, the blockade

was seen by the British as a necessary outgrowth of the policy to blockade France's ports from 1803 to 1807. In fact, after 1805, in what was known as the "Essex Decision," Britain unilaterally decreed that the United States could not trade with France. In 1807, a faction of conservative Tories came to power in Britain and imposed even tougher trade restrictions on France and neutral nations, all in an effort to starve opponents into submission.[2] At the same time, Napoleon's fleet was struggling with blockades of the French coast and British naval power on the open seas, so the emperor demanded that neutral nations boycott British goods and attempted to interfere with anyone who traded with Britain. The United States found itself caught in the middle of a growing "crisis in foreign affairs."[3]

Tensions between the two nations had also been escalating over British efforts to incite Indian raids on the American frontier. Attacks against white settlers on the frontier fueled anti-British sentiment across the land, just as the blockades and impressment angered villages up and down the eastern seaboard. America's eagerness to expand westward was threatened, while coastal communities dependent on shipping for their livelihood suffered mightily. Even so, war was avoidable.

Most American sailors hailed from New England. Yet, these states and their northern neighbors generally opposed going to war with Britain. The war's early rally cry of "Free trade and sailor's rights!" failed to move most northern citizens to arms. Only in the South and on the frontier—ironically, the regions least impacted by the trade restrictions and impressment—was there real passion for war. To be sure, it was British policies that caused the war, but the inflammatory rhetoric of Congressman Henry Clay of Kentucky and his coalition of frontier and southern "War Hawks," played into American fears and passions while undercutting the voices of reason and peace. Indeed, these warmongers demanded that President Madison punish Britain while also using the "British problem" as an excuse to invade Canada. Some politicians from the frontier-southern war coalition even advocated attacking and invading other countries.

Americans had many legitimate complaints about British policies—impressment of American sailors, seizing American commercial ships, and provoking Indian raids in the frontier. Any one of these may have constituted grounds for war, but there was, until the final moment, an opportunity to avoid a war the United States was ill-prepared to fight. But Henry Clay and his fellow hot-heads were in no mood for negotiation or peace. Said Henry Adams, the noted historian: "Many nations have gone to war

in pure gayety of heart, but perhaps the United States were first to force themselves into a war they dreaded, in the hope that the war itself might create the spirit they lacked."[4]

Indeed, neither nation desired war, but both foolishly "drifted" into it. In Britain, one misguided and heavy-handed decision followed another. In America, cooler heads nearly prevailed. But war came.[5]