

# War of 1812

## Major causes of the war

The tensions that caused the War of 1812 arose from the French revolutionary (1792–99) and Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815). During this nearly constant conflict between France and Britain, American interests were injured by each of the two countries' endeavours to block the United States from trading with the other.

American shipping initially prospered from trade with the French and Spanish empires, although the British countered the U.S. claim that “free ships make free goods” with the belated enforcement of the so-called Rule of 1756 (trade not permitted in peacetime would not be allowed in wartime). The Royal Navy did enforce the act from 1793 to 1794, especially in the Caribbean Sea, before the signing of the Jay Treaty (November 19, 1794). Under the primary terms of the treaty, American maritime commerce was given trading privileges in England and the British East Indies, Britain agreed to evacuate forts still held in the Northwest Territory by June 1, 1796, and the Mississippi River was declared freely open to both countries. Although the treaty was ratified by both countries, it was highly unpopular in the United States and was one of the rallying points used by the pro-French Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, in wresting power from the pro-British Federalists, led by George Washington and John Adams.

After Jefferson became president in 1801, relations with Britain slowly deteriorated, and systematic enforcement of the Rule of 1756 resumed after 1805. Compounding this troubling development, the decisive British naval victory at the Battle of Trafalgar (October 21, 1805) and efforts by the British to blockade French ports prompted the French emperor, Napoleon, to cut off Britain from European and American trade. The Berlin Decree (November 21, 1806) established Napoleon's Continental System, which impinged on U.S. neutral rights by

designating ships that visited British ports as enemy vessels. The British responded with Orders in Council (November 11, 1807) that required neutral ships to obtain licenses at English ports before trading with France or French colonies. In turn, France announced the Milan Decree (December 17, 1807), which strengthened the Berlin Decree by authorizing the capture of any neutral vessel that had submitted to search by the British. Consequently, American ships that obeyed Britain faced capture by the French in European ports, and if they complied with Napoleon's Continental System, they could fall prey to the Royal Navy.

The Royal Navy's use of impressment to keep its ships fully crewed also provoked Americans. The British accosted American merchant ships to seize alleged Royal Navy deserters, carrying off thousands of U.S. citizens into the British navy. In 1807 the frigate H.M.S. *Leopard* fired on the U.S. Navy frigate *Chesapeake* and seized four sailors, three of them U.S. citizens. London eventually apologized for this incident, but it came close to causing war at the time. Jefferson, however, chose to exert economic pressure against Britain and France by pushing Congress in December 1807 to pass the Embargo Act, which forbade all export shipping from U.S. ports and most imports from Britain.

The Embargo Act hurt Americans more than the British or French, however, causing many Americans to defy it. Just before Jefferson left office in 1809, Congress replaced the Embargo Act with the Non-Intercourse Act, which exclusively forbade trade with Great Britain and France. This measure also proved ineffective, and it was replaced by Macon's Bill No. 2 (May 1, 1810) that resumed trade with all nations but stipulated that if either Britain or France dropped commercial restrictions, the United States would revive nonintercourse against the other. In August, Napoleon insinuated that he would exempt American shipping from the Berlin and Milan decrees. Although the British demonstrated that French restrictions continued, U.S. Pres. James Madison reinstated nonintercourse against Britain in November 1810,

thereby moving one step closer to war.

Britain's refusal to yield on neutral rights derived from more than the emergency of the European war. British manufacturing and shipping interests demanded that the Royal Navy promote and sustain British trade against Yankee competitors. The policy born of that attitude convinced many Americans that they were being consigned to a de facto colonial status. Britons, on the other hand, denounced American actions that effectively made the United States a participant in Napoleon's Continental System.



Tecumseh

Events on the U.S. northwestern frontier fostered additional friction. Indian fears over American encroachment coincidentally became conspicuous as Anglo-American tensions grew. Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa (The Prophet) attracted followers arising from

this discontent and attempted to form an Indian confederation to counteract American expansion. Although Maj. Gen. Isaac Brock, the British commander of Upper Canada (modern Ontario), had orders to avoid worsening American frontier problems, American settlers blamed British intrigue for heightened tensions with Indians in the Northwest Territory. As war loomed, Brock sought to augment his meagre regular and Canadian militia forces with Indian allies, which was enough to confirm the worst fears of American settlers. Brock's efforts were aided in the fall of 1811, when Indiana territorial governor William Henry Harrison fought the Battle of Tippecanoe and destroyed the Indian settlement at Prophet's Town (near modern Battle Ground, Indiana). Harrison's foray convinced most Indians in the Northwest Territory that their only hope of stemming further encroachments by American settlers lay with the British. American settlers, in turn, believed that Britain's removal from Canada would end their Indian problems. Meanwhile, Canadians suspected that American expansionists were

using Indian unrest as an excuse for a war of conquest.

Under increasing pressure, Madison summoned the U.S. Congress into session in November 1811. Pro-war western and southern Republicans (War Hawks) assumed a vocal role, especially after Kentucky War Hawk Henry Clay was elected speaker of the House of Representatives. Madison sent a war message to the U.S. Congress on June 1, 1812, and signed the declaration of war on June 18, 1812. The vote seriously divided the House (79–49) and was gravely close in the Senate (19–13). Because seafaring New Englanders opposed the war, while westerners and southerners supported it, Federalists accused war advocates of expansionism under the ruse of protecting American maritime rights. Expansionism, however, was not as much a motive as was the desire to defend American honour. The United States attacked Canada because it was British, but no widespread aspiration existed to incorporate the region. The prospect of taking East and West Florida from Spain encouraged southern support for the war, but southerners, like westerners, were sensitive about the United States's reputation in the world. Furthermore, British commercial restrictions hurt American farmers by barring their produce from Europe. Regions seemingly removed from maritime concerns held a material interest in protecting neutral shipping. "Free trade and sailors' rights" was not an empty phrase for those Americans.

The onset of war both surprised and chagrined the British government, especially because it was preoccupied with the fight against France. In addition, political changes in Britain had already moved the government to assume a conciliatory posture toward the United States. Prime Minister Spencer Perceval's assassination on May 11, 1812, brought to power a more moderate Tory government under Lord Liverpool. British West Indies planters had been complaining for years about the interdiction of U.S. trade, and their growing influence, along with a deepening recession in Great Britain, convinced the Liverpool ministry that the Orders in Council were averse to British interests. On June 16,

two days before the United States declared war, the Orders were suspended.

Some have viewed the timing of this concession as a lost opportunity for peace because slow transatlantic communication meant a month's delay in delivering the news to Washington. Yet, because Britain's impressment policy remained in place and frontier Indian wars continued, in all likelihood the repeal of the Orders alone would not have prevented war.

## **War**

Neither the British in Canada nor the United States were prepared for war. Americans were inordinately optimistic in 1812. William Eustis, the U.S. secretary of war, stated, "We can take the Canadas without soldiers, we have only to send officers into the province and the people...will rally round our standard." Henry Clay said that "the militia of Kentucky are alone competent to place Montreal and Upper Canada at your feet." And Thomas Jefferson famously wrote

The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching, and will give us experience for the attack of Halifax the next, and the final expulsion of England from the American continent.

The British government, preoccupied with the European conflict, saw American hostilities as a bothersome distraction, resulting in a paucity of resources in men, supplies, and naval presence until late in the event. As the British in Canada conducted operations under the shadow of scarcity, their only consolation was an American military malaise. Michigan territorial governor William Hull led U.S. forces into Canada from Detroit, but Isaac Brock and Tecumseh's warriors chased Hull back across the border and frightened him into surrendering Detroit on August 16, 1812, without firing a shot—behaviour that Americans and even Brock's officers found disgraceful. The Northwest subsequently

fell prey to Indian raids and British incursions led by Maj. Gen. Henry Procter. Hull's replacement, William Henry Harrison, could barely defend a few scattered outposts. On the northeastern border, U.S. Brig. Gen. Henry Dearborn could not attack Montreal because of uncooperative New England militias. U.S. forces under Stephen van Rensselaer crossed the Niagara River to attack Queenston on October 13, 1812, but ultimately were defeated by a stiff British defense organized by Brock, who was killed during the fight. U.S. Gen. Alexander Smyth's subsequent invasion attempts on the Niagara were abortive fiascoes.



Battle of the Thames

U.S. troops battling the British and their Indian allies along the Thames River in what is now Ontario, Canada, during the War of 1812.



Johnson, Col. Richard;  
Tecumseh

Artist's re-creation of the death of Shawnee Chief Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames, Oct. 5, 1813, lithograph 1833.

In 1813, Madison replaced Dearborn with Maj. Gens. James Wilkinson and Wade Hampton, an awkward arrangement made worse by a complicated invasion plan against Montreal. The generals refused to coordinate their efforts, and neither came close to Montreal. To the west, however, American Oliver Hazard Perry's Lake Erie squadron won a great victory off Put-in-Bay on September 10, 1813, against Capt. Robert Barclay. The battle opened the way for Harrison to retake Detroit and defeat Procter's British and Indian forces at the Battle of the Thames (October 5).

Tecumseh was killed during the battle, shattering his confederation and the Anglo-Indian alliance. Indian anger continued elsewhere, however, especially in the southeast where the Creek War erupted in 1813 between Creek Indian nationalists (known as Red Sticks) and U.S.

forces. The war also took an ugly turn late in the year, when U.S. forces

evacuating the Niagara Peninsula razed the Canadian village of Newark, prompting the British commander, Gordon Drummond, to retaliate along the New York frontier, leaving communities such as Buffalo in smoldering ruins.



*United States*

U.S. frigate *United States*  
capturing the British frigate  
*Macedonian*, October 25, 1812.  
Colour lithograph by Currier &  
Ives.

Early in the war, the small U.S. navy boosted sagging American morale as officers such as Isaac Hull, Stephen Decatur, and William Bainbridge commanded heavy frigates in impressive single-ship actions. The British Admiralty responded by instructing captains to avoid individual contests with Americans, and within a year the Royal Navy had blockaded important American ports, bottling up U.S. frigates. British Adm.

George Cockburn also conducted raids on the shores of Chesapeake Bay. In 1814, Britain extended its blockade from New England to Georgia, and forces under John Sherbrooke occupied parts of Maine.

By 1814, capable American officers, such as Jacob Brown, Winfield Scott, and Andrew Jackson, had replaced ineffective veterans from the American Revolution. On March 27, 1814, Jackson defeated the Red Stick Creeks at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in Alabama, ending the Creek War. That spring, after Brown crossed the Niagara River and took Fort Erie, Brig. Gen. Phineas Riall advanced to challenge the American invasion, but American regulars commanded by Scott repulsed him at the Battle of Chippewa (July 5, 1814). In turn, Brown retreated when Commodore Isaac Chauncey's Lake Ontario squadron failed to rendezvous with the army, and during this retrograde the war's costliest engagement occurred at the Battle of Lundy's Lane (July 25). Riall, reinforced by Drummond, fought the Americans to a bloody stalemate in which each side suffered more than 800 casualties before Brown's army withdrew to Fort Erie.



Battle of Plattsburgh Bay, Sept. 11, 1814, in which a British squadron under George Downie was turned back by American forces led by Thomas Macdonough.



War of 1812: Executive Mansion on fire

The Executive Mansion (White House) in Washington, D.C., after being set on fire by British troops during the War of 1812.



G. Thompson's wood engraving of "The Burning of the City of Washington" during the War of 1812. At about 8

PM

on the evening of Aug. 24, 1814, British troops under the command of Gen. Robert Ross marched into

In 1814, Napoleon's defeat allowed sizable British forces to come to America. That summer, veterans under Canadian governor-general George Prevost marched south along the shores of Lake Champlain into New York, but they returned to Canada after Thomas Macdonough defeated a British squadron under Capt. George Downie at the Battle of Plattsburgh Bay (*see* Plattsburgh), New York (September 11, 1814). British raids in Chesapeake Bay directed by Adm. Alexander Cochrane were more successful. British Gen. Robert Ross captured Washington (August 24) and burned government buildings, including the United States Capitol and the Executive Mansion (now known as the White House). The British justified this action as retaliation for the American destruction of York (modern Toronto), the capital of Upper Canada, the previous year. The British assault on Baltimore (September 12-14) foundered when Americans fended off an attack at Northpoint and withstood the naval bombardment of Fort McHenry, an action that inspired Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner." Ross was killed at Baltimore, and the British left Chesapeake Bay to plan an offensive against New Orleans.

Washington, D.C., after routing hastily assembled American forces at Bladensburg, Md., earlier in the day. Encountering neither resistance nor any U.S. government officials—President Madison and his cabinet had fled to safety—the British quickly torched government buildings, including the Capitol and the Executive Mansion (now known as the White House).

Meanwhile, New England Federalists, angry about the war's effect on commerce, gathered at Hartford, Connecticut, to propose ways of redressing their grievances. Convening from December 15, 1814 to January 5, 1815, the Hartford Convention adopted moderate resolutions, but its mere existence prompted other parts of the country to question New England's patriotism and Federalist loyalty, spelling eventual doom to the

party.

## **Final stages of the war and the aftermath**

Immediately after the war started, the tsar of Russia offered to mediate. London refused, but early British efforts for an armistice revealed a willingness to negotiate so that Britain could turn its full attention to Napoleon. Talks began at Ghent (in modern Belgium) in August 1814, but, with France defeated, the British stalled while waiting for news of a decisive victory in America. Most Britons were angry that the United States had become an unwitting ally of Napoleon, but even that sentiment was half-hearted among a people who had been at war in Europe for more than 20 years. Consequently, after learning of Plattsburgh and Baltimore and upon the advice of the Duke of Wellington, commander of the British army at the Battle of Waterloo, the British government moved to make peace. Americans abandoned demands about ending impressment (the end of the European war meant its cessation anyway), and the British dropped attempts to change the Canadian boundary and establish an Indian barrier state in the Northwest. The commissioners signed a treaty on December 24, 1814. Based on the status quo antebellum (the situation before the war), the Treaty of Ghent did not resolve the issues that had caused the war, but at that point Britain was too weary to win it, and the U.S.

government deemed not losing it a tolerable substitute for victory. Nevertheless, many Americans became convinced that they had won the contest.



New Orleans, Battle of  
Battle of New Orleans, 1815.

Unaware of the treaty, British forces under Edward Pakenham assaulted New Orleans on January 8, 1815, and were soundly defeated by Andrew Jackson's ragtag army, an event that contributed to the notion of a U.S. triumph. The unanimous ratification by the U.S. Senate of the Treaty of Ghent and the celebrations that

followed cloaked the fact that the United States had achieved none of its objectives.

Contention in the United States had hobbled the war effort, and domestic disaffection had menaced the Union, but after the war a surge of patriotism inspired Americans to pursue national goals. Contrary to American expectations, Canada remained British and eventually developed its own national identity, partly from pride over repulsing U.S. invasions. Meanwhile, Britain's influence among the northwestern Indians was forever ended, and American expansion in that region proceeded unchecked. In the South, the Creek War opened a large part of that region for settlement and led to the events that persuaded Spain to cede Florida to the United States in 1821.

The most enduring international consequence of the war was in the arbitration clauses of Ghent, perhaps the treaty's most important feature. Its arrangements to settle outstanding disagreements established methods that could adapt to changing U.S. administrations, British ministries, and world events. There lay the seeds of an Anglo-American comity that would weather future disagreements to sustain the longest unfortified border in the world.

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