

The Causes of the War of 1812

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FootNotes

[Paul J. Springer](#)

Paul J. Springer, a Senior Fellow in the FPRI Program on National Security, is a Professor of Comparative Military History at the Air Command and Staff College, located at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. [Read More](#)



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As the foremost theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, once noted, “Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult.”^[1] For the historian, the same can be said regarding any effort to determine the primary causes of any major conflict. For the first declared war in U.S. history, this concept is certainly accurate although a host of contributing factors quickly emerge upon any examination of the subject. In particular, U.S. efforts at expansionism; ongoing conflicts with the Native American populations in the Northwest Territory and beyond; and a deep desire to protect American trading prerogatives with all European nations undoubtedly created major pressure for American political leaders to seek a declaration of war upon the British Empire and to pursue the relatively limited war aims with vigor. In essence, the United States looked to use the distraction of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, which required the full focus of the British Empire, as an opportunity to seize territory in Canada. American political leaders used the public’s outrage regarding attacks upon U.S. shipping as a lever to move the country to war and then pursued their war strategies based upon the false assumption that the British would not offer much resistance and that the Canadians would flock to the U.S. banner.



USS President fires on and disables the British sloop HMS Little Belt on May 16, 1811.

Assumptions about Warfare

Modern American assumptions about the nature of war, particularly any conflicts which the United States is likely to join, include the presumption that all fighting will occur “elsewhere,” meaning anywhere but the United States itself. In fact, the War of 1812 is the last conflict in which the United States faced a significant threat of external invasion. Although the Civil War included much larger battles (and higher casualty lists), at no time were the Union and Confederate forces struggling over the future of the nation ever considered truly “foreign.” In 1812, on the other hand, the United States confronted a foe that possessed the largest navy on earth, and hence the ability to project military power to any point on the globe. Further, Canada was a part of the Empire and offered a border hundreds of

miles long which included dozens of potential invasion routes. Thus, a reliance upon geographic protection (some might say isolationism) which assisted in the defense of the United States against most foreign aggression provided far less protection against a British enemy.

American political leaders largely assumed that any conflict would potentially result in the annexation of Canada, almost certainly with the willing acquiescence, and possibly active assistance, of the Canadian citizenry. They tended to project American revolutionary feelings of mistreatment and discontent, which had contributed to the American independence movement, upon their Canadian neighbors. In reality, the Canadians were relatively happy with the Empire and their place within it and had shown little or no interest in throwing off the yoke of British control. Rather, most Canadians recognized the enormous benefits of retaining their position within the Empire and assumed that their imperial overlords largely served to save them from a far less pleasant domination by the Americans to the south. Thus, the presumption that Canadians would rally to the American flag and abandon their British ties at the first opportunity proved completely false, and if anything, the Canadians fought all the harder in support of the Empire to prevent becoming an American vassal.



The American Context

In the period between the Treaty of Paris (1783) and the War of 1812, the United States experienced a massive population boom. The ready availability of additional unclaimed territory to the west, coupled with a drive to expand the effective borders of the nation, led to a major push into undeveloped regions. In particular, the Northwest Territory, comprising modern Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana, beckoned with rich farmland across its vast expanse, although the local inhabitants certainly did not welcome the idea. Although the British agreed to evacuate all forces from the region according to the newly-drawn borders of 1783, more than a decade later, the British continued to garrison fortifications along the Great Lakes region and showed no signs of withdrawal. This was in part to press demands to fulfill pre-revolutionary debts to British merchants, and in part to serve as a buffer between the United States and Canada. It also allowed the British to maintain contact with Native American allies who had assisted them during the Revolutionary War, and who they preferred not to abandon when they left the region. Americans saw the failure to withdraw as a failure to acknowledge U.S. sovereignty and actually used the garrisons as an excuse not to pay the debts in dispute.^[2]

Native American tribes living on the periphery of lands occupied by European-descended citizens saw little reason to withdraw from the regions in question. To do so would almost certainly provoke a conflict with other native groups further west and would require them to abandon their ancestral homelands to an uncertain future. Yet, the U.S. appetite for new lands and settlements was rapacious, and there was little the natives could do to resist, through either military or legal means. On a number of occasions in the 1790s and early 1800s, the budding conflict came to blows—and in most cases, while the Native Americans inflicted more casualties than they suffered, they were still forced to withdraw due to the overwhelming numbers of whites moving into the area.

The British Context

In Europe, the continent roiled from the effects of the French Revolution, which commenced in 1789. Not only was the Bourbon monarchy overthrown (and later executed), the entire social order was upended in the pursuit of “Fraternity, Equality, and Liberty.” Although the French had provided enormous assistance to the United States in its struggle for independence, in the decade after the Treaty of Paris, the United States developed (or reestablished)

major economic and social ties to England—and began to move away from the French orbit. When the French objected, and in fact, began to engage in economic warfare at sea against American shipping in the West Indies, the United States quickly realized that it had little capability to project power or even defend its ships against foreign provocations. Diplomatic efforts to address the situation were rebuffed due to an American unwillingness to pay a bribe to the French Foreign Minister. As a result, the United States commenced mobilization efforts, building up not only its army on land, but also unleashing hundreds of privateers at sea to target French shipping. Although the naval struggle did not rise to the level of a declared war, it did result in a major increase in the cost of merchant shipping in the region, and only the ascension of Napoleon Bonaparte brought the conflict to an end.

Napoleon's wars of conquest in Europe came with an enormous cost, and to finance his army, he turned toward unconventional funding sources, such as selling French overseas possessions that he could not hope to defend against the British, or to rule effectively without any sea communications. In particular, when American negotiators approached the French in an attempt to purchase New Orleans for \$10 million, Napoleon countered with an offer to sell the entire Louisiana Territory for only \$5 million more. Such a deal, while possibly unconstitutional, simply could not be passed up—and when the purchase was concluded, it brought an enormous amount of unexplored territory to the United States. In return, Napoleon received a massive cash infusion that facilitated his campaigns of 1805 against Austria, Prussia, and Russia, all in exchange for territory well beyond his control.[3]

For almost two decades, the British resisted the expansion of France and its ideological precepts. From a military standpoint, this resistance included a major blockade of European ports under French domination. Napoleon retaliated by announcing the Continental System, a plan to essentially conduct a land-based blockade of Britain by prohibiting trade with the British Isles. To enforce this system, French privateers and armed merchants began to seize ships headed to Britain with anything that might constitute contraband. The British retaliated by intercepting merchant ships heading to ports participating in the Continental System. The United States, which was neutral in the conflict but hoped to trade with both sides, found itself caught in the middle of the conflict, and in the period 1806-1807, more than 900 American merchant ships were seized by British and French vessels. Some were returned to American control, but many were held as prizes, with their crews subject to imprisonment or impressment into service.[4]

In 1805, a British fleet under Admiral Horatio Nelson destroyed the combined Franco-Spanish Fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar. Two years later, fearing that Denmark was about to ally with France, the British Royal Navy sailed into Copenhagen and attacked the Danish fleet at anchor, destroying or capturing virtually all of its ships. This attack demonstrated a British fear, possibly unfounded, that the French would launch an invasion of Britain at the first opportunity, if they could only contrive a means to bypass, distract, or destroy the Royal Navy. This unwillingness to tolerate even a remote threat might have translated to British relations with the United States, if the Americans had maintained anything even remotely respectable within the U.S.

Navy. However, the Republican administration of Thomas Jefferson, in a major cost-cutting move, had eliminated virtually all warship construction, preferring instead to focus upon building and deploying an enormous fleet of tiny gunboats. These small ships, which required almost constant maintenance to remain afloat, were stationed near American ports and harbors to work in concert with land fortifications. Naval planners assumed they could swarm



Battle of Trafalgar

attacking enemy vessels from multiple directions, darting in to fire their single cannons and remaining safe from enemy action by adopting awkward angles or remaining in very shallow waters. The concept was horribly flawed, and later assessments have demonstrated that not only would it have failed to deter even a third-rate naval enemy, it was also more costly to build and maintain than a small fleet of capital warships.

The Impressment Controversy

One of the key provocations of British behavior prior to the War of 1812 was the continual habit of impressing sailors to serve in the Royal Navy. Facing a war of national survival, the Admiralty hardly cared about the sensitivities of its own citizens, much less the complaints of American sailors who might be swept into the ranks. According to English Common Law, even citizens who had emigrated to other nations had no right to forego their British citizenship, and hence their susceptibility for being impressed in times of war. Of course, service on a Royal Navy vessel came with strict discipline, poor food, and the inherent dangers of fighting in a naval conflict. American merchant vessels, on the other hand, offered the benefits of life at sea without the dangers of being attacked, with a higher pay rate for sailors, less discipline, and generally more comfortable conditions on board. Not surprisingly, tens of thousands of British sailors chose to serve on American vessels whenever presented the opportunity. Donald Hickey places the number at 30 percent of the American merchant shipping personnel; other authors have offered even higher numbers. When the British learned of possible desertions from the Royal Navy serving on American ships, they attempted to recover personnel, if only to punish them for desertion as a warning against other potential deserters. However, proving the identity of a deserter was always a difficult proposition, especially when the United States began issuing citizenship papers with a rudimentary description that could easily be applied to British sailors.

In June 1807, British officers aboard the *HMS Leopard* were told that there were several deserters of Irish heritage who had taken service aboard the *USS Chesapeake*. The *Leopard* waited several miles off the American coast, and hailed the *Chesapeake* with a request to exchange dispatches. One of the British officers accompanied the dispatch boat and spoke with several sailors. Upon his return to the *Leopard*, he reported that he had overheard several sailors with Irish accents, and the captain of the *Leopard*, Salisbury Humphreys, demanded the right to board and search the *Chesapeake*. Captain James Barron refused the demand, citing that a warship was sovereign territory and not subject to search and seizure by the ships of a different nation. Feeling provoked, Humphreys ordered his ship to open fire, and the *Leopard* launched three broadsides at point blank range. Three



USS Chesapeake

American sailors were killed with sixteen more wounded, and the damage was so great that the U.S. vessel did not manage to fire a single shot in its own defense before striking its colors. The British boarded, seized four sailors, and departed, perfectly satisfied with the events of the day.^[5]

The U.S. Navy obtained a measure of revenge four years later, when the *USS President*, cruising along the coast to deter the seizure of American vessels, encountered the *HMS Little Belt*. Although the question of who fired first remains unresolved, the 54-gun *President* made short work of the 20-gun *Little Belt*, killing 9 sailors in the

process.[6] In Britain, it was portrayed as an unmitigated act of aggression, while in the United States, it was largely reported as a perfectly justifiable bit of retaliation, four years removed.

Economic Warfare and Embargo

President Thomas Jefferson, fearing the escalation of naval seizures to full-scale warfare, endeavored to embargo the import and export of goods to both the British and the French on the assumption that such an embargo was the only means to protect American ships. While this policy did all but eliminate the capture of American vessels by European navies and privateers, it had a terrible effect upon the U.S. economy with almost no effect in the targeted European states. When the embargo was declared, it was immediately unpopular with American merchants, particularly in the northeast, who considered it an unfair restriction of U.S. trade. Later legislation eventually reopened trade, with the proviso that it would be cancelled once more with either Britain or France, if either of them suspended their own restrictions upon shipping, American vessels would restrict themselves to that belligerent. While the embargo might have been a principled stand against European aggression, it was a ruinous endeavor for American trade. It had a certain galvanizing effect upon American industrial development, as it forced the United States to build its own production capacity rather than relying upon imports, but it also triggered a major economic crisis that left the U.S. government deeply in debt prior to the commencement of the war.[7]

Conflict with Native Americans

The British felt a certain paternalism toward many Native American tribes, particularly those along the northwestern frontier. Many of those tribes had allied themselves with the British during the Revolutionary War, and when the British withdrew from the region, they left those tribes to face retaliatory actions from the young U.S. government. Many in the United States believed that the British were actively encouraging tribes to launch attacks upon American citizens, although there is little to suggest that the British pushed the issue quite so far. However, the British were certainly providing supplies to the tribes, including gunpowder and firearms, which allowed the Native American groups to more effectively resist American incursions. The British also used diplomatic pressure to attempt to constrain American relations with the tribes, with little success. American negotiators used every tactic possible to convince or coerce tribes to sign away their land claims and remove themselves. In the Northwest Territory, the Treaty of Fort Wayne ceded lands from the Shawnee to the U.S. government. One young Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, sought to reverse the situation by demanding a repudiation of the treaty by William Henry Harrison, the territorial governor. When Harrison refused, Tecumseh began building a coalition to resist further American incursions.

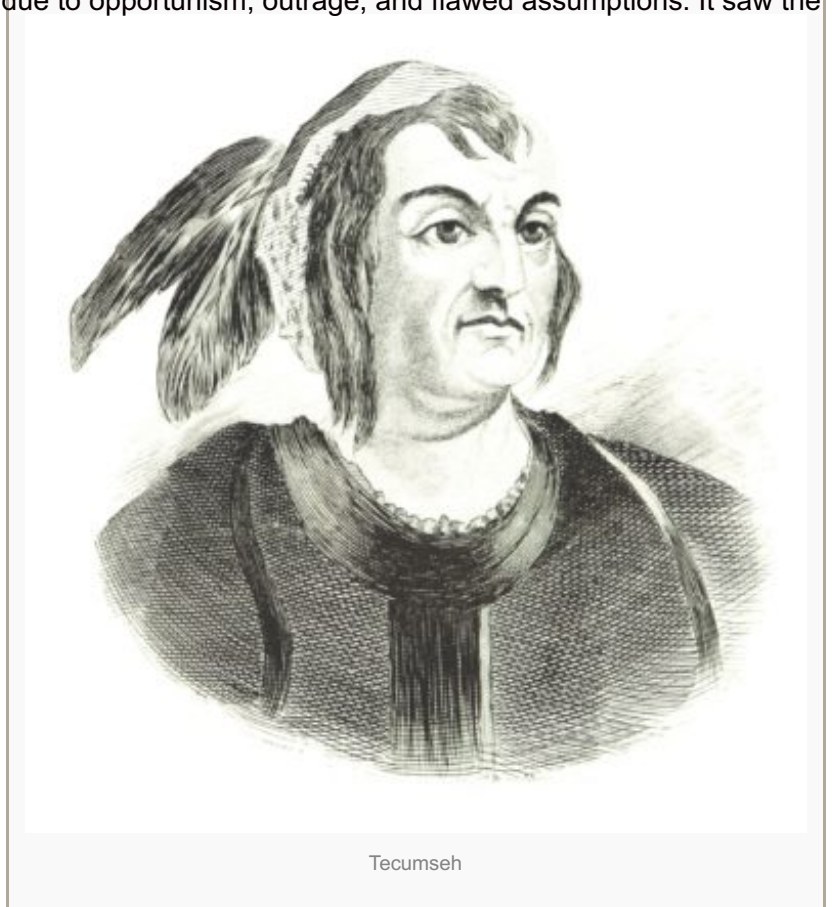
Tecumseh believed that all of the Native American tribes would have to band together if they hoped to halt American expansionism. He sent emissaries to tribes throughout the young nation and began to rally forces to his banner. His brother, Tenskwatawa, who had developed significant reputation as a prophet, served as the spiritual leader of the movement, while Tecumseh was its military commander. In late 1811, Tecumseh went on a recruiting trip to the American southeast, hoping to rally members of the Five Civilized Tribes to his banner. Most refused, although the Red Stick Creeks chose to join the growing Shawnee Confederation.[8] While Tecumseh was gone from the region, Harrison chose to deliberately provoke a fight by moving an armed band into the heart of Shawnee territory, marching toward Prophetstown on the confluence of the Tippecanoe and Wabash Rivers. On November 7, 1811, Harrison's forces clashed with warriors from several tribes, and despite losing twice as many troops as the enemy, managed to push their way into the town, which they soon burned.[9] Although he had paid a heavy tactical price, it proved to be a strategic victory, as it demonstrated that the Shawnee Confederacy could not protect its de facto capital and hence might not hold spiritual favor. Tecumseh and his followers retreated in the face of Harrison's advance, moving across the Canadian border and seeking sanctuary behind British fortifications. When the British prevented Harrison's troops from following, it was seen as further evidence that the British actively supported Native American forces engaged in conflict against American citizens.

The War Hawks in Congress

In the 1810 elections, the question of war with Britain was a major issue. A number of young representatives and senators were sent to Washington, with many calling themselves the “War Hawks.” Their most vocal and prominent leader, Henry Clay of Kentucky, was elected Speaker of the House at the age of 34. He immediately began moving toward expanding the American military establishment and improving preparedness for a potential war. In 1812, the U.S. Army received an authorization to expand from approximately 5,000 to 10,000 troops. A further 25,000 regulars were authorized for a year’s service, to be augmented by up to 50,000 volunteers and 100,000 militia. In short, the active force available for a war with Britain grew from 5,000 to 185,000 troops.[10] The Navy began construction of significant warships, while Army engineers expanded coastal fortifications and commenced construction at new locations. It quickly became evident that the United States was gearing up for war. In June 1812, President Madison formally requested a declaration of war against Britain, a measure that passed the Senate by a 19-13 vote. In the House, it passed by a 79-49 margin. As such, it is the least-supported declaration of war, at 61 percent of legislators voting in favor, in the history of the United States. Support for the war was highly regional—almost all of the pro votes came from the South and West. It was also the only straight-line party vote for war in American history—note one member of the Federalists voted in favor of the measure.[11]

Implications of the War of 1812

In the end, the United States largely went to war due to opportunism, outrage, and flawed assumptions. It saw the opportunity to peel away the Canadian territories from British control. The country felt the need to extract revenge for mistreatment of American citizens, particularly at sea. And it demanded that the warring European states accede to the idea that American traders had the right to call at any port, at any time, without interference, despite having no ability to enforce such a concept. The war itself managed to bankrupt the United States, both economically and ideologically, and three years of fighting effectively resulted in a return to the international status quo. It is difficult to assign a victor in the war—but it is extremely easy to point to the loser in the conflict. Although neither the United States nor Great Britain obtained any significant possessions out of the fighting, the Native Americans who participated certainly sustained major geographic losses. Not only did the remnants of the Shawnee Confederation essentially get pushed out of the Northwest Territory, the conflict also convinced future President Andrew Jackson of the need to create a permanent barrier between the Native American and white populations of the United States. When he assumed office, he soon moved to transfer the Five Civilized Tribes (which had almost entirely refused to participate in the war) west of the Mississippi River.



Tecumseh

The War of 1812, the first declared war of the United States, was one of the stranger conflicts in American history. Its poorly-defined objectives, lack of cohesive political support, and terrible execution have all contributed to help it fade into obscurity in American History. Later, larger conflicts, many with clear-cut victory at the end rather than an effective draw, have long overshadowed the War of 1812—and yet, the decision to go to war created many of the follow-on precedents that framed future decisions to declare a state of war.

Suggested Additional Reading

- Bickham, Troy O. *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
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- Watson, Robert P. *America's First Crisis: The War of 1812*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.
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[1] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 7, "Friction in War."

[2] Troy Bickam, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41-46.

[3] George Herring. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 99-102.

[4] Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989, reprint 2012), 9-13.

[5] Of the four, three were eventually returned to the United States. The Admiralty determined that they were U.S. citizens wrongly impressed into British service, and had only deserted to escape their illegally forced service. The fourth truly was a deserter, and was summarily hanged. In 1811, the Admiralty finally agreed to pay reparations to the United States for killing its personnel and damaging its warship, by which time the case had long since influenced American decision making regarding the question of declaring war. See Walter R. Borneman, *1812: The War That Forged a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 23; Robert P. Watson, *America's First Crisis: The War of 1812* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 12-24.

[6] Borneman, 25; Hickey, 22.

[7] For an excellent analysis of the embargo and its effects, see Albert Z. Carr, *The Coming of War: An Account of the Remarkable Events Leading to the War of 1812* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 249-263.

[8] J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 179-202; Watson, 37-53.

[9] Hickey, 22-25.

[10] Hickey, 28-32.

[11] Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 110-116.