



## The Causes of the War of 1812

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#### Introduction

The causes of the War of 1812 were essentially trade and commerce related. The British were continually stopping American ships at sea, inspecting cargoes, and impressing American sailors into the Royal Navy on the pretense that the sailors were British subjects.

#### British Warships Kidnapped American Sailors

Typically, a British warship would waylay an American merchant ship, send an armed boarding party and line up the crew. Any sailor who looked or

sounded British would simply be taken away for service in the Royal Navy. (The British did not recognize "naturalized" American citizens. Once a British subject, always a British subject.)

### **The Young United States Wasn't Ready**

Historically, the War of 1812 was one of the strangest wars our country ever waged. President Madison led a divided, ill-prepared country into a war against a major military and naval power. Our own military was less than 7,000 with a navy of about 20 ships. We had a Congress that completely distrusted taxation and the need for a standing army, and an entire sector of our country (the northeast) that truly loved Great Britain.

### **U.S. Designs on Absorbing Canada**

Compounding the preposterous notion of taking on Great Britain, which had 85 war ships and professional army troops in Canada, was the fact that U.S. war aims were to invade and absorb Canada. Canadians back then (population about 500,000) were a hodgepodge of British loyalists who fled the U.S. during the Revolution along with French Canadians, who had no love for the British, but didn't like Americans much either.

So during the War of 1812, America's forays into Canada failed dismally. One Canadian adventure, as discussed later, would result in the destruction of Washington, DC.

### **British Had Other Fish to Fry**

To the British, the war with their former colony must have seemed nothing much more than an irritant. At the time the British were struggling with Napoleon, so they were somewhat distracted and didn't really "take the

gloves off” until Napoleon was subdued. Before that, however, the British handled U.S. militia invasions of Canada, rather easily. However, when the British finally decided to get serious, they did so with a vengeance.

### **After Napoleon Was Defeated, the British Got Serious**

The British decided to win the war with an attack from Canada, a campaign along the Chesapeake Bay, and finally an invasion of New Orleans to close the Mississippi River.

The Canadian attack was thwarted with the American victory at Lake Champlain. Defeat of the British prevented the insertion of an army of professional British soldiers into New York, which would have restored New England to British rule.

### **British Burned Washington, DC**

The Chesapeake campaign and the land invasion of British troops, who set fire to Washington, D.C., was actually in revenge for the American sacking and burning of York (present day Toronto) in Canada.

When the British moved up river to attack Fort Henry near Baltimore, a detainee and newspaper reporter named Francis Scott Key wrote his famous poem “The Star Spangled Banner.”

This invasion lost momentum in Maryland as the British general leading the troops was shot and killed. The expedition commander afloat rightly gauged the temperament and anger of the Americans resulting from the burning of the capital and decided to withdraw.

## **Battle of New Orleans Was After the Peace Treaty Was Signed**

Finally, the Battle of New Orleans was the single major defeat of the British during the war. British troops fresh from defeating Napoleon swarmed ashore and marched in battle order, only to be mowed down by Kentucky riflemen long before British muskets could be brought to bear. The British lost 2,000 men including their commanding general; the Americans less than 80. Ironically, the battle occurred two months after the peace treaty between both sides was signed.

## **American Sea Power Surprised Great Britain**

It was on the naval front that the most American successes occurred. Those successes were one-on-one engagements between American frigates and their powerful British counterparts. In single engagements, American ships met and bested the Royal Navy, to the shock and mortification of the British government. (American frigates typically carried more guns than their British counterparts.)

## **Native Americans Chose the Wrong Side**

The biggest losers of the War of 1812 were the Native Americans, who either sided with the British, or fought against the Americans in the south. The War of 1812 was the beginning of the end for the famous chief Tecumseh, who sought to unite the tribes against further settlement. Fighting alongside the British, Tecumseh was killed in the fighting around Michigan.

Farther south, the Creek met defeat at the hands of Andrew Jackson and his Kentucky and Tennessee militiamen. The battle with and defeat of the Creek would poison Jackson's attitude towards Native Americans and

would, 20 years later, result in the forcible removal of Native Americans with its legacy of the “trail of tears.”

### **New Englanders Wanted to Secede**

Lastly, the strangest aspect of the war of 1812 was its first “anti-war” movement and a secessionist sentiment that grew from New England anglophiles. Aside from smuggling and violating trade embargoes, New England Federalists actively helped the British with intelligence. The famous Hartford Convention in 1814 was a meeting of New England Federalists where secession was actually discussed. The convention’s opposition to the war was overtaken by events as peace broke out.

### **The End of the Federalists As a Political Force**

As word got out over the Federalist’s seemingly disloyal views, the Federalists were discredited and never recovered politically. The real irony was that the Federalists were originally the party that advocated a strong, central government.

### **In Summary...**

The War of 1812 was a war fought for a reason that became moot. America’s greatest victories were at sea, where the British should not have lost, and on land in New Orleans after the war was officially over. The big losers were Native Americans, who gained nothing from American Independence 30 years before, and once again sided with a losing cause in an unhappy continuance of a precedent that would drive them from their lands as Americans pushed relentlessly west.