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# Remembering the War of 1812

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*This year, the Canadian government has decided to commemorate the War of 1812 bicentennial by recognizing key battles and heroes in re-enactments and other events, restoring various heritage sites pertinent to the war, and honouring a number of military regiments with connections to the militias of the war era. This article looks at the history of the War and how it has been perceived by the various parties who participated.*

Two hundred years ago, an anxious American president reluctantly signed a declaration of war on Great Britain. Indeed, on the face of it, James Madison was sensible to be concerned. His new nation was in a state of political and financial disarray. Its army and navy was miniscule in comparison to the British war machine, which was in high gear fighting against Napoleon and the French. But in the nearly thirty years since the conclusion of the American War of Independence, British authorities had never fully reconciled themselves to the loss of thirteen of their colonies in North America and had been pursuing policies that angered raw, youthful American sensitivities.

American frontiersmen alleged that the British were sending agents into the Ohio country to stir up the Indians against American expansion. American politicians and merchant-shipping men complained that the British were stopping American ships on the open seas and unlawfully removing American citizens under the pretence that these men were still British subjects because of their place of birth. And a growing population of Irish immigrants, scarred by the experiences of the 1798 Irish rebellion, fanned the flames of anti-British sentiment. The time had come, the chorus sang, to force the British to recognize the sovereign nationhood of the United States of America once and for all.

But how could that be done with a professional navy of only five frigates, ill-equipped either to challenge the formidable Royal Navy with its thousand warships,

or to interfere with any reasonable expectation of success against British commercial shipping? Or with a professional army of only about 10,000 men, a mere handful on any European battlefield? Instead the War Hawks suggested they could humble Britain by conquering her colony of Canada. Here the odds were much more clearly in the Americans' favour.

Canada, consisting of two provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, was thinly settled, poorly defended, and economically weak. Above all, the majority of settlers in the western districts were of American origins and undoubtedly would be only too pleased to welcome an American army as liberators from the shackles of British rule. A "holiday campaign" said one; a "mere matter of marching" claimed Thomas Jefferson. Of course, the Americans had tried and failed to conquer Canada in 1775, and in twenty years of war against the French in Europe, the British army was now three times the size it had been then. That sober assessment was lost, however, in the enthusiasms of Republican propaganda. The Republicans carried the day in Congress and on June 18, 1812, Federalist president Madison signed his country into war.

The American strategy was to focus on three main fronts: they would cross the Niagara River and take the British fortifications and defences along that river; they would occupy the Detroit hinterland and invade the southwest to eliminate the Indian "menace"; and they would revive the Revolutionary War strategy of invading Lower Canada via the Lake Champlain route, first taking Montreal, then Quebec, the only real military stronghold of the British in Canada. It would be primarily a land war, but to facilitate supply lines (and to prevent the British from supplying their own troops) a small fleet of lake vessels would be required to take control of lakes Erie and Ontario.

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As it turned out, the trajectories of war followed somewhat different directions. The British sent their navy to cut off American shipping and supplies at eastern seaboard ports, resulting in a series of skirmishes along the Atlantic coast involving both professional navies and “privateers”. A northern frontier opened when the British took control of Fort Michilimackinac, an American outpost at a strategic point overlooking the outlet of Lake Michigan into Lake Huron. A southern front was opened late in the war when, for strategic reasons, the British sent troops to take control of Louisiana (which the Americans had recently purchased from the French). In the east, the British took control of about 160 kilometres of coastline in what was then called Massachusetts, now a part of Maine, occupying the territory (apparently to the satisfaction of its residents) for a good part of the last year of the war. And of course, the conquest of Canada turned out to be more than a “mere matter of marching”.

The real impact of the war was felt most directly and personally in Upper Canada. American troops made periodic forays across the border in the Niagara region and through Detroit, engaging forces consisting of British regulars (professional soldiers), Indian warriors, and some Canadian militiamen who were required by law to serve. Key battles were fought at places such as Queenston Heights (1812); Stoney Creek, Moraviantown on the Thames, and Crysler’s Farm (1813); and Lundy’s Lane (1814).

The Americans seized the capital of York twice; when they looted and burned it in the spring of 1813, the British retaliated by marching into Washington and burning key public buildings there, including the residence thereafter increasingly referred to as the White House. Through the autumn of 1814, the inhabitants of the Thames Valley could only watch in horror and despair as raids on their homes and farms destroyed their pioneer building efforts and their livelihoods. Nevertheless, the Americans never held any British territory for any length of time. It was too difficult to supply armies so far from home and the ravages of disease made camp life hell. Instead, the pattern of the war became a series of American forays into British North America followed by a series of marches back into the republic.

The population of Upper Canada was less than enthusiastic about participating in the war, but there was rather more support for the effort in Lower Canada. Leaders of the church and the professional classes were eager to show their allegiance to the British and took an active part in encouraging men to join

militia units. Army officer Charles de Salaberry was given command of a light infantry troop (“*voltigeurs*”) that distinguished itself at the Battle of Châteauguay in the autumn of 1813, putting an end to the American attempt to invade through the Lake Champlain/Richelieu River route.

So much local legend, popular myth, and armchair wisdom has evolved over the years among both Canadians and Americans about the War of 1812 that most contemporary professional historical writing addresses the myths as much as the realities. Special interest groups on both sides of the border have promoted their own particular ideas about the war in order to promote patriotism of various stripes. In Canada, the Family Compact began to disseminate its version of events soon after the war. Later in the nineteenth century, local historical societies in Ontario encouraged a vision of the war that emphasized loyalty to the British Empire, while a group of women’s rights activists celebrated the role of women in the war. In the United States, commemorations of the War of 1812 were a useful device to unify the nation after the devastation of the Civil War. History was written, rewritten, and massaged to suit the needs and purposes of the day.

The war gave both sides heroes and heroines. The Americans have naval officers James Lawrence (“Don’t give up the ship”) and Oliver Perry (the Battle of Lake Erie), Andrew Jackson (the Battle of New Orleans), and Dolley Madison. Canadians have British General Isaac Brock, French-Canadian army officer Charles de Salaberry, and Laura Secord. Both sides celebrate the Shawnee leader Tecumseh. Uncle Sam and “The Star Spangled Banner” are important legacies for Americans. And both sides attribute the victories of the war to ordinary citizens fighting as militiamen. Of course, both sides also claim victory: the Americans because they ultimately did succeed in forcing British recognition of their nationhood, and the Canadians because they prevented an American conquest.

More sober contemporary historians point out that the Canadian militia played a relatively minor role in the war and the untrained and ill-equipped American volunteers were often more trouble than help to the professionals. Poor generalship and flawed strategies hampered both sides. The Maritime colonies and a few individuals in Upper Canada reaped substantial financial benefits from the war, while settlers in the western districts of Upper Canada paid a terrible price as their homes and crops were destroyed to prevent food supplies from reaching armies on both sides. Upper Canadians in particular were torn by divided loyalties; some fought actively for the American cause.

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Perhaps it was the Aboriginal peoples who paid the most terrible price of the war. For years preceding the War of 1812, the nations west of the Appalachians had been fighting to stop American expansion into their homelands. Dubious treaties and land surrenders had been obtained and the collapse of Aboriginal economies and societies was beginning. Into this dire situation came the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, one a politician and warrior, the other a visionary and religious leader. They proposed a grand confederacy of the indigenous nations to strengthen their position against the Americans. With the American war clouds gathering, Tecumseh met with Lieutenant Governor Francis Gore and General Isaac Brock and decided that his people's interests could best be served through an alliance with the British who promised to recognize their territorial claims when the war was won. Tecumseh's warriors made major contributions to the war effort in its early phases. Tragically, Tecumseh was killed at the Battle of Moraviantown (the Thames) on October 5, 1813 and the remaining members of the confederacy ultimately failed to maintain his dream.

The other major Aboriginal contribution to the war came to the British courtesy of John Norton, a former British soldier of Scots-Cherokee ancestry who had been selected by Joseph Brant of the Six Nations at Grand River as his successor. Brant, who had been instrumental in allying a number of warriors from New York with the British in the American Revolutionary War, had died in 1807. Norton carried on his policies of supporting the British in return for their support for various Six Nations' interests. Norton rallied a formidable fighting force of Six Nations warriors who played a key role at important battles such as Queenston Heights and Lundy's Lane. Another group of warriors from Kahnawake and other Quebec villages also supported the British in return for promises to meet their needs.

While the Treaty of Ghent (ratified by the Americans on February 16, 1815) essentially recognized the *status quo ante bellum*, it would be unfair to conclude that

the war changed nothing. The British negotiators abandoned their initial demands that the Americans recognize an Indian territory in the Ohio country; after the war, the Americans simply continued their program of Indian removals and territorial expansion. Upper Canadians who had suffered under the American campaigns of burning and looting would never again feel sympathetic towards the perpetrators; a new mental boundary had been drawn. Eventually, of course, new physical boundaries were also drawn with the extension of the line along the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel.

In its plans to celebrate the war's bicentennial, the Canadian government tells us that the war was a key moment in the formation of the Canadian nation and the beginning of a "proud military tradition." Clearly, the government's program, like all of the other past attempts to celebrate the war, is an exercise in generating patriotic fervour. The unique features this time around are the attempts to make the story of the war more regionally, ethnically, and culturally inclusive. We are to celebrate the modern military as much as the brave deeds of brave ancestors. And the bicentennial promoters must attempt to balance the old anti-American sentiments against the pro-American interests of contemporary politics and commerce. It will be a tall order, but then, the story of the War of 1812 has proven infinitely elastic.

As the celebrated Canadian military historian C.P. Stacey wrote in 1958 the War of 1812 is one of those episodes in history that makes everybody happy, because everybody interprets it in his own way:

The Americans think of it primarily as a naval war in which the pride of the Mistress of the Seas was humbled... Canadians think of it equally pridefully as a war of defence in which their brave fathers, side by side, turned back the massed might of the United States and saved the country from conquest. And the English are the happiest of all, because they don't even know it happened.