

The War of 1812

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Some Americans, most notably Federalists, looked eastward toward Great Britain as a model for the nation's development. Others, including Thomas Jefferson, looked to the western frontier as the future for an "empire of liberty." The origins of the War of 1812, one of the strangest and most misunderstood conflicts in American history, lay in both directions.

This tutorial examines the causes and consequences of the War of 1812, which is sometimes referred to as the "Second War of American Independence."

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Challenges from the West

Native Americans resisted encroachment by White settlers as the United States expanded westward, which presented important challenges.

Federal policy toward Native Americans took shape soon after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution and the creation of the federal government. Such a policy brought with it at least token recognition of Native American sovereignty on western lands.

Henry Knox, who was President Washington's Secretary of War, admitted that Native American tribes had a right to the territory they occupied and that such territory could not be taken away without their consent. Knox, along with many others in Washington's administration, also recognized that prolonged warfare against Native Americans for land would be an expensive endeavor.

As a result, early federal policy treated each native tribe as a foreign nation. The federal government assumed the responsibility of acquiring additional land from western territories and negotiating treaties with tribes. Such treaties compensated Native Americans for any lands they relinquished to the United States, and offered them protection on lands they still retained. These treaties also contained significant civilizing components.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In exchange for native lands, federal treaties with tribes often included provisions that allowed Native Americans to receive instruction in Christianity, English, and farming methods.

Assumptions of cultural and political superiority on the part of the United States were behind every treaty with native peoples. By including provisions that included instruction in Christianity and English, the framers of federal policy assumed that they could convince Native Americans to give up their traditions and embrace traditional American culture. The treaties also made clear that Native Americans were not supposed to

impede upon the development of the United States.

The Treaty of Greenville, signed in 1795 after an American force defeated a tribal coalition at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, required indigenous people of the Northwest Territory to relinquish all claims to territory in southern and eastern Ohio. In addition, the treaty stipulated that native peoples in the Northwest Territory should be dependent upon no other foreign power besides the United States, which they were supposed to refer to as “our father.”



DID YOU KNOW

By 1800, approximately 400,000 Americans lived west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Most Native Americans had no desire to become citizens of the American Republic. Some were even determined to resist American cultural influences and encroachment on native lands. Two Shawnee brothers, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, were among the most militant of these individuals.

Tecumseh was a chief who had refused to sign the Treaty of Greenville. During the first decade of the 19th century, he traveled the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys in the hopes of recreating a tribal coalition to the scale that Pontiac had established in the wake of the French and Indian War. By 1810, Tecumseh met with the American governor of Indiana, **William Henry Harrison**, and warned him of war if Americans continued to encroach upon native lands:

Tecumseh, Shawnee Chief

“The way, and the only way to check and stop this evil [of American encroachment], is, for all the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be yet; for it never was divided, but belongs to all, for the use of each. That no part has a right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers; those who want all, and will not do with less. The White people have no right to take the land from the Indians, because they had it first; it is theirs.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does Tecumseh’s statement reflect the differences between Native American and American notions of land ownership?
2. How does Tecumseh’s statement reflect growing distrust between Native Americans and the United States?



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Tecumseh

Leader of a Native American coalition the Ohio River Valley who refused to sign the Treaty of Greenville and resisted American claims to the area.

William Henry Harrison

American governor who defeated Tecumseh and his coalition at the Battle of Tippecanoe.

Tenskwatawa (also known as the Prophet) preached for a revival of Native American cultures and advocated for complete separation from White American culture. He argued for the abandonment of American and European manufactured goods, clothing, food, and alcohol. A number of his followers gathered at a site along the Wabash River in Indiana known as Prophetstown.

In 1811, after Tecumseh called for attacks on American frontier settlements, Governor Harrison destroyed Prophetstown in the Battle of Tippecanoe. There, Harrison discovered ample evidence that the British had supplied Tecumseh's coalition with weapons, despite the stipulations of earlier treaties. Elsewhere, the frontier erupted in violence as native groups attacked American settlements.

Western Americans, especially a group of western politicians known as **War Hawks**, were convinced that such attacks were part of a British-led conspiracy to challenge the United States' western claims. They spoke of the need to subjugate Native Americans on the frontier. They also insisted upon stopping British meddling entirely by arguing that the United States should invade Canada.



TERM TO KNOW

War Hawks

A group of western congressmen who called for war with Great Britain in order to subjugate American Indian tribes and acquire additional territory, most notably Canada.

2. Challenges from the East

Relations between the United States and Great Britain were also deteriorating on the Atlantic Ocean. During its wars with France (also known as the Napoleonic Wars), Great Britain seized a number of American ships on the high seas and instituted the policy of **impressment**.



TERM TO KNOW

Impressment

The kidnapping of sailors, including many American citizens who had emigrated from Great Britain, to serve in the British navy.

The issue of impressment came to a head as early as 1807, when a British ship fired on an American ship, the *Chesapeake*, off the coast of Maryland. The British then boarded the ship and took four sailors.

By the end of 1807, the British had seized more than 6,000 American sailors, claiming that they were British citizens or that they had deserted the Royal Navy.



DID YOU KNOW

The controversy over impressment stemmed in large part from different understandings of citizenship. The British insisted that one's birthplace determined citizenship, whereas the United States argued that residency in a country for a specified number of years (a process commonly known as *naturalization*) was sufficient for citizenship.

In response, President Thomas Jefferson persuaded Congress to enact the **Embargo Act of 1807**.



TERM TO KNOW

Embargo Act of 1807

Banned all American ships from sailing to any foreign port, in an attempt to convince the British and French to stop seizing American sailors and ships.

Jefferson's logic behind the Embargo Act was similar to that of revolutionaries who signed non-importation pacts during the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s. Jefferson hoped that cutting off all trade would so

severely hurt Britain and France that the seizures of ships and men at sea would end. Unfortunately, Britain and France paid little notice to the Embargo and it had disastrous consequences for the American economy.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Under the Embargo Act, American business activity declined by 75 percent from 1808 to 1809.

In addition, enforcement of the Embargo Act took place on a scale that had not been seen since the Intolerable Acts of 1774. The U.S. Navy sealed off American ports and seized goods without warrants. A number of smugglers were also arrested.



DID YOU KNOW

At the very end of his term, Jefferson signed the Non-Intercourse Act of 1808, which lifted the unpopular embargoes on trade except with Britain and France.



In this political cartoon from 1807, a snapping turtle (holding a shipping license) grabs a smuggler in the act of sneaking a barrel of sugar to a British ship. The smuggler cries, “Oh, this cursed Ograbme!” (“Ograbme” is “embargo” spelled backwards.)

3. The War of 1812

In the election of 1808, American voters elected another Democratic-Republican, James Madison, as President. Madison inherited Jefferson’s foreign policy challenges, especially those that pertained to Great Britain.

By the spring of 1812, with France and Great Britain still at war, American ships and sailors remained subject to search and seizure in the Atlantic. This, combined with the British support of Native American resistance on western lands, led to strident calls for war against Great Britain. For a number of Americans, including the War Hawks in Congress, it seemed as if the actions of Great Britain were infringing upon the very honor and independence of the United States. This was a point that Madison highlighted when he asked Congress to declare war on Great Britain.

With the nation facing threats on the frontier and the high seas, it appeared that American independence was at stake. According to Madison, the question was whether the United States would remain independent or become “colonists and vassals” of Great Britain. After a narrow vote, Congress authorized President Madison to declare war against Britain in June 1812. This war became known as the War of 1812. It was the first time that the United States declared war on another country.

In hindsight, it was incredibly unwise for the United States to declare war on Great Britain, and the young nation was perhaps lucky that Great Britain was preoccupied with Europe for much of the conflict. Still, Great Britain was able to impose a blockade that brought the American economy to a standstill and, with assistance from native allies (including Tecumseh), repelled two American invasions of Canada. In 1814, after having defeated Napoleon in Europe, Great Britain sent 4,500 troops to invade the United States. In July 1814, they captured Washington, D.C. and burned it to the ground.



DID YOU KNOW

Tecumseh was killed in 1813 during the Battle of the Thames in Ontario, during which an American force led by William Henry Harrison defeated a combined force of British soldiers and their Native American allies.

Nevertheless, U.S. forces did score several notable victories during the War of 1812, as seen in the table below.

Notable U.S. Victories During the War of 1812	
September 1813	Captain Oliver Hazard Perry and his naval force defeated the British on Lake Erie.
1814	<p>After the British captured Washington, D.C., American forces successfully defended an attack on Baltimore's Fort McHenry.</p> <p>During this time Francis Scott Key was inspired to write "In Defense of Fort McHenry," a poem that later provided inspiration for the American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."</p>
January 1815	A force under Andrew Jackson defeated a British invading force at the Battle of New Orleans.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Francis Scott Key

Author of the Star Spangled Banner, which he wrote while witnessing the British attack on Fort McHenry during the War of 1812.

Yet the Battle of New Orleans should never have been fought because, one month earlier, the United States and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war. Despite the signing of the treaty, neither side made significant gains. The boundaries between the United States and British Canada remained as they were before the war. Nor did the treaty address the issue of impressment and shipping because, with the war in Europe over, Great Britain no longer had a need to seize American ships and sailors.

At war's end, many Americans referred to the conflict as a "Second War of Independence," and they did so for good reason. The war secured American claims to the areas east of the Mississippi River originally bestowed to them under the Treaty of Paris (1783). The British no longer posed a threat in the region and, with the death of Tecumseh, the war broke much of the remaining resistance in the Northwest Territory.

A number of Americans also felt tremendous pride in the fact that their government, based on republican principles, had stood up to Great Britain once again. Many commentators remarked that the nation became more united in the process, overcoming the partisan divides that had heretofore dominated American politics.

Such remarks were not entirely true, because the war was unpopular among Federalists in the Northeast. In December 1814, at the same time that the Treaty of Ghent was signed, a group of 26 Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut to express their opposition to the war, which had damaged the Northeast's maritime economy. Some members of this group went so far as to issue calls for New England to secede from the United States.

Nonetheless, one could find evidence of a surge in national pride and optimism throughout the United States. Consider the examples below.

First, take a look at the last verse of Francis Scott Key's famous poem, "In Defense of Fort McHenry:"

Francis Scott Key, "In Defense of Fort McHenry"

"O, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand, Between their loved home and the war's desolation! Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n-rescued land Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation! Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just, And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust' And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!"



THINK ABOUT IT

What images does Key use to convey American national pride?

Second, examine the painting by John Archibald Woodside titled "We Owe Allegiance to No Crown," which was completed during the War of 1812. An American sailor stands at the center of the image, holding the American flag, while a depiction of lady liberty looks over him:



THINK ABOUT IT

What symbols of American freedom do you see in the image?



BRAINSTORM

Compare the verse of Francis Scott Key's poem with the above image.

1. Based on the evidence provided, what seems to have been the cause of the War of 1812?
2. What evidence do you see that Americans considered the War of 1812 as a "Second War for Independence?"



SUMMARY

The origins of the War of 1812, often called the Second War of American Independence, lay in unresolved issues between the United States and Great Britain. On the frontier, the United States confronted challenges from Native Americans, who resisted White encroachment and relied on assistance from Great Britain to do so. The other major cause was the British practice of seizing American ships and sailors. Although the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812, did not address the challenges that the United States faced on the Atlantic, it generated tremendous national pride and secured American western land claims. The United States was unequivocally separate from Britain and could now turn as never before toward development and expansion.

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REFERENCES

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- ["We Owe Allegiance to No Crown" \(1814\)](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Embargo Act of 1807

Banned all American ships from sailing to any foreign port, in an attempt to convince the British and French to stop seizing American sailors and ships.

Impressment

The kidnapping of sailors, including many American citizens who had emigrated from Great Britain, to serve in the British navy.

War Hawks

A group of western congressmen who called for war with Great Britain in order to subjugate American Indian tribes and acquire additional territory, most notably Canada.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Francis Scott Key

Author of the Star Spangled Banner, which he wrote while witnessing the British attack on Fort McHenry during the War of 1812.

Tecumseh

Leader of a Native American coalition the Ohio River Valley who refused to sign the Treaty of Greenville and resisted American claims to the area.

William Henry Harrison

American governor who defeated Tecumseh and his coalition at the Battle of Tippecanoe.



DATES TO KNOW

1795

The Treaty of Greenville asserts American control of Ohio.

1807

Britain fires on the *Chesapeake*; Congress enacts the Embargo Act.

1808

Congress enacts the Non-Intercourse Act; James Madison is elected president.

1810

Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa resist American settlers' presence in the Midwest.

1811

Tecumseh calls for attacks on frontier settlements; Prophetstown is destroyed in the Battle of Tippecanoe; William Henry Harrison discovers evidence of British support for the Native Americans.

1812

James Madison declares wars against Britain.

1814

The Treaty of Ghent ends the War of 1812.

1815

A British invading force is defeated at the Battle of New Orleans.