THE WAR OF 1812: WHO WON THE WAR? THE DEBATE CONTINUES

Donald Cuccioletta is an historian and lecturer at the University of Quebec in the Outaouais: Director of Research at the Raoul-Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies-UQAM: Associate member of the Canadian Studies Association: media analyst-written and electronic- on American Politics, Canada and United States Relations and International Relations.

ABSTRACT

Within the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, there is always one question that is asked: Who won the war? While this debate, which still goes on till this day, remains foremost in the minds of Canadians and Americans, who are aware of this war, real questions regarding the impact on the future of both countries seems to be left aside. This article therefore humbly tries to confront these historical questions.

The celebrations in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 are well underway in Canada[1]. In the United States except for one documentary shown on the PBS (Public Broadcasting System)[2] stations out of Burlington Vermont and Plattsburgh New York, which depicts a general understanding of the war, and an annual reenactment of the Battle of Plattsburgh (1814) organized by the local association of pubic historians. Therefore it becomes self evident, that the importance of this war seems to have impacted the Canadian mindset more than the American mindset. But it has not stopped the United States from claiming to this day that they won this conflict between the US and the colonies of Great Britain to the north. By the importance that Canada has given to this war over the years and in particular in 2012, Canada has also laid claim to victory. The debate continues. So the question must be asked why both sides (Canada and the US) would lay claim to a victory in the War of 1812, and are there more important debates to be had as to the impact of war on the two nations of North America.

A LITTLE INTERPRETIVE HISTORY

Through the work of public historians, such as Pierre Burton[3], while professional historians circumvented the war for many years, the war of 1812 resonated in the minds of many Canadians as the starting point of our quest for a Canadian identity. As in 1776, the elites of Lower Canada had rejected joining the American Revolutionary army in ousting the British; once again, as many now claim, Canada rejected for the second time the United States invasion of our territory. However we must remember that Canada did not exist in 1812, but was a colony of Great Britain. In other words, the Canadian colonies were the remaining presence of Great Britain in North America after their loss of the 13 colonies, in what were to become the United States. Actually after the defeat of the French on the Plains of Abraham in the Seven Years War, the conquered colony to the north became Britain's 14th colony in North America.

The participation of Canadian militias alongside British regulars depicted in the public mindset and the public discourse this war as an "us" (Canada) versus "them" (the United States) struggle. But here again a little precision is needed to fully paint an accurate portrait. The Canadian militias were conscripted, not voluntary. Secondly the majority of settlers or colonists in Upper Canada were American. Some had left the US in disaccord with the American Revolution and became British Empire Loyalists. Others had left, for Upper Canada because of cheap and excellent agricultural land. Some of these colonists actually joined the American invasion army while other formed American militias (marauders) in Upper Canada.[4]

While in Lower Canada the French Canadians (they constituted the vast majority of the population) still envisaged themselves as a conquered people and still nurtured a hatred for the British crown, while the elites (Church and nobles) had thrown their lot with the British. Many in the French Canadian population (peasants, small farmers, artisans, workers etc.) had maintained an appreciative support, dating back to 1776, for the young American republic. This did not bode well in recruiting a strong militia. However, eventually a minority joined the militias, especially when they saw how the American farmers in the adjoining states of Vermont and New York were infringing on their land along the common border.

So we must consider that the general mindset that Canadians rose up to protect the homeland is not entirely accurate. However it is clear, and the historical evidence

does make the demonstration, the Canadian colonists in the British North American colonies, did stand by the British regulars and fought, not so much to save Canada, or what was to become Canada, but to save their farm, their homestead, which was on Canadian soil. Therefore it is quite understandable to forge a link between the defense of their livelihood and as some would have it, the defense of Canada.

Now what about our American friends, as they have become over time our friends and neighbors, what is their interpretive history on this war? They not only won the war but they repelled the British invasion, whose intent was to destroy the young American Republic True the British did board American vessels on the high seas and eventually placed an embargo on ships going to France from the United States along the Atlantic coast. The British burned down Washington in retaliation for the burning of York. The British attacked Fort Henry in Baltimore and tried a southern invasion via New Orleans, which procured for Jackson his iconic stature, later made famous in a popular song of the sixties-The Battle of New Orleans.

Most American historians, particularly those in the south believe to this day that the War of 1812 was the "Second War of Independence" and for the southern politicians a reason to dislodge the British once and for all from North America. The divisions that existed in the British colonies between, the colonists loyal to the British crown and some American farmers in Southern Ontario and similarly in Lower Canada between the majority of French Canadians and the British was also reflected in the United States. Southern and mid-western politicians, pushing for an expansion west of the Mississippi, lobbied hard for this war, while New England politicians and businessmen, because of a lucrative trade with England, were against it. So on both sides of the border this notion that there was a total unity of the population, was erroneous.

The southern and mid-western politicians in the United States were not the only ones were wished for western expansion. The British for years, especially after losing in the War of Independence, wished to control the Great Lakes which geographically were the gate way to the west, irrespective of the mythological border with the United States. Westward expansion with a total control of the resources was the underlying reason for this war, at least on this side of the Atlantic. The young republic wished to fulfill its Manifest destiny, while the British were still interested in not only consolidating their empire but expanding it with their own manifest destiny.

VICTORY OR THE SUBSEQUENT LESSONS OF THE WAR

So who did win the war? While the debate continues with no foreseeable victorious outcome for both sides, the real lessons of the War of 1812, for both countries are forgotten, rarely referenced and taught. Unfortunately, strident nationalism throughout the years on both sides of the border has masked the subsequent importance of the war and has sidetracked the fundamental lessons of this war for both countries.

For the United States, though divided, this war nevertheless brought together the new unity of the young Republic. For the first time in their history they began to call themselves Americans. Up to this point in history most of the population referred to themselves as Virginians, Vermonters etc as their identity and their attachment. Now they claimed their national identity as Americans and thusly the process of rooting this identity began.

It also gave them the recognition of their national symbol-The Stars and Stripes, coupled with their national anthem, written by Francis Scott Keys after the battle of Fort Henry in the Baltimore harbor. It also began the contradiction over westward expansion and slavery between the Northern states and the Southern states. With the invention of the cotton gin (a cotton trashing machine) the Southern politicians and slave holders eyed the idea of western expansion for the cotton industry, which also meant the expansion of slavery into the West. The Northern states, also wanted westward expansion, but opposed the extension of slavery. As we know this became one of the reasons for the American Civil war. As we can surmise, with the end of the war against the British, the contradictions within the young republic came home to roost.

The War of 1812 also meant the consolidation of the office the Presidency as the War of 1812, was the first for the young Republic against what was now a foreign power. A war that was popular for some, yet unpopular for others, nevertheless forced the President[5] to take action and thereby solidified his position, according to the Constitution, as the Commander in Chief. The border between the then British colonies of Canada and the US, which was constantly in flux, was established, thereby consolidating the territorial boundary that was to become the future Canada. For years Northern Vermont and at times Northern New York State had claimed land that was part of Lower Canada. This attempt of incursion was now settled and created the basis on which to continue the border across Canada.

For Canadian colonists, still under British rule, the War of 1812, provided for some, the first experience in the defense of their homeland, against an invading army. This physical and psychological experience of war, created in the participants of the Canadian militia a sense of belonging, never experienced before. The process of building a Canadian identity had begun for the people of Upper Canada.

In Lower Canada, this identity of being "Canayen", had long taken hold, since the beginning of New France and was consolidated in the Seven Years war, for the French

Canadian population. But the war nevertheless further rooted this sense of being different from their southern neighbor but also from their British occupiers. Even Louis Joseph Papineau, founder of the Patriot party and leader of the 1837-38 rebellion in Lower Canada, fought as a young lieutenant in the Battle of Chateauguay.

Within the Canadian militia of Upper Canada, there was a black regiment, under the leadership of Richard Pierpont[6], an escaped black slave, who had found safe haven in Upper Canada. This black regiment fought side by side with the white militia and the British regulars to repel the all white American invasion army. Upper Canada had become a safe haven for escaped slaves from the slave holding south early into the 19th century. But when the news, throughout the war, reached slave populations to the south that a black regiment free, from slavery (not racism) was fighting to defend and maintain their freedom, the notion that Canada was a safe haven against southern slavery took hold.[7] Subsequent to the end of the war, was put in place the first stepping-stones of the Underground Railroad, to southern Upper Canada and eventually through the Adirondacks in New York State to Phillipsburg in Lower Canada.[8]

Another important consequence of the War of 1812 for Canada was the emergence of republican liberal ideas. When the Canadian Militias fought alongside the British regulars, frequently we read that they did this to defend British interests that were their own. Yes some did, but others saw they were defending their own interests, and eventually Canadian interests. Therefore the notion of nationhood, constitutional democracy, liberal economy, began to be debated among the Canadian colonists.

In other words, though the American were seen as an invading army and therefore the enemy, the notion of America republicanism had already penetrated certain members of the rural communities of Upper Canada[9] and since the American Revolution in Lower Canada. The war of 1812 consolidated the debate around these ideas. The control of the British Empire over the Canadian and Cannayen colonists found support among the old elites of Upper and Lower Canada. However after the War of 1812, the idea of republican democracy, which began to spread all over Europe and was present in the young Republic to the south, were making their way North, among the new elites of the colonies, many of whom had fought in the war.

After the war there were many other factors that led these liberal elites to eventually ask for reform of the political system and fight for Republican democracy during the 1837-38 rebellions, in Upper and Lower Canada. The war of 1812, fought against the invading American army, highlighted the eventual debates that took hold of the new young elites in the British North American colonies. The rebellions were unsuccessful and brutally put down, especially in Lower Canada, because the British now saw the spirit of 1776 coming north which questioned their control of their last colonies in British North America. The War of 1812, rather than solidify British control as some would have it, nevertheless began the process of liberal democracy in Canada, eventually free of British rule.

CONCLUSION

So who won the war remains in this author's view, an unnecessary debate, which even to this day, is fueled by a nationalist attitude on both sides of the border. As the public discourse goes, the weak nation (British Colonies) defeated the strong republic to the south. In actual fact, the British colonies, part of the British Empire, which controlled the world at that time, was much stronger that this young upstart republic to the south, who had limited resources, no national standing army to speak of and was still in the early stages of the process in nation building. Therefore the important debate and one that opens an area of research that is fundamental to both nations, is the direct and indirect impact of the War of 1812 on the future of both nations and North America in general.

NOTES

[1] The War Museum in Ottawa has an exhibit on 1812, the Canadian mint has produced commemorative coins of the war, many colloquiums are being held across Canada on the war, and articles are being published, plus teaching guides etc.

[2] "The War of 1812, a Forgotten War", PBS, WGBH Boston, 2011, 90 minutes.

[3] Please see, Pierre Burton, *The Invasion of Canada*, 1812-1813, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1980 and *Flames Across the Border, 1813-1814*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1981.

[4] Please see, *The National Film Board of Canada*, "The War of 1812", 60 minutes, 1960.

[5] The president of the United States at that time was James Madison, who tried to balance his position between the southern politicians, the "Hawks" and the New England politicians thee "Doves". Eventually Madison took the decision to go to war against Britain and sided with the "Hawks".

[6] Please see, "Richard Pierpont and the Black Militia", *www.freedomtrail.ca.*

[7] Please see the novel by Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, 1990.

[8] Please see, "The Underground Railroad in Upper New York State", *SUNY-Plattsburgh*, SUNY-Press, 1990.

[9] Please see the autobiographical novel by Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1980 edition.