THE WAR OF 1812 IN THE STRUGGLE FOR EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

Setting the War of 1812 in its international context, Jeremy Black brings out a dimension usually underplayed due to a focus solely on North America.

RÉSUMÉ

En situant la guerre de 1812 dans son contexte international, Jeremy Black apporte une dimension souvent sous-estimée étant donné l'accent habituel sur l'Amérique du Nord.

The War of 1812, the Anglo-American conflict of 1812-15, played a key role in the struggle to define empire in North America, even if outside the history of North America it is generally ignored. Indeed, the War of 1812 appears indecisive, at least militarily, as far as the Western world is concerned. There were no great battles to compare with Trafalgar or Waterloo and no decisive siege comparable to Yorktown. American independence was already established, American expansion to the Pacific was settled in the 1840s, and the fate of that country was fought out in the 1860s. Furthermore, the war scarcely determined the survival of Britain.

Yet the conflict was important politically. It helped settle the relationship between the two Anglophone empires. Despite repeated attempts to invade Canada, America was not able to end the partition of British North America that had occurred in 1775-1783. Nor were the Americans strong enough at sea to support effective and sustained transoceanic power projection. American warships could inflict considerable damage, but there was not going to be an amphibious force attacking Bermuda or Jamaica, let alone Ireland. More particularly, the Americans could not provide the maritime power able to support pressure on Canada. There was no blockade of the St Lawrence, no amphibious attacks on the Maritimes, and no ability to support a presence on the Pacific littoral in the face of British power.

In contrast, the British could mount amphibious attacks, even if their success varied. More significantly for the shape of the British empire, it proved impossible for Britain to sustain effective cooperation with Native Americans and the defeat of the latter in the Old Northwest and the Southeast transformed the balance of power east of the Mississippi, altered the strategic position of Canada, and ensured that Britain's future options were restricted, and notably so on land. Thus, at one level, the War of 1812 was part of a sequence, beginning in 1775 with the American revolution and the subsequent invasion of Canada, a sequence in which the shaping of Anglophone North America occurred. This sequence closed in 1859-71 with war panics between Britain and America, before, during and after the American Civil War, with the American purchase of Alaska, Canadian Confederation, and the settlement of Anglo-American differences in 1871. While each attempt was distinctive, both politically and militarily, there were also common elements that are instructive.

This approach is instructive, but also illustrates the problems with pattern-building. The British intention in 1812-15 was very different, for example, from British policy

in 1775-1783. Despite American rhetoric to the contrary, there was no attempt to end American independence, and, indeed, the British government neither wanted the war nor declared it. Indeed, the government took steps to try to assuage American anger, although they proved too late. Moreover, Britain had a more serious opponent to fight, in the shape of Napoleonic France, and, faced with an unprecedented national debt, the government wanted to cut its costs, not least in order to end the wartime expedient of income tax.

The conflict showed the difficulties of fighting a successful "detached" limited war, and Britain did not enjoy the victories it gained in the 1810s over Kandy (Sri Lanka), the Marathas (India), Nepal, and France. In 1815, in the aftermath of Napoleon's return to power, Guadeloupe and Martinique fell to British amphibious attacks, but New Orleans had not fallen earlier in the year.

At the same time, this contrast illustrates the difficulties of judging military potential and of assessing relative capability. More generally, the War of 1812 is instructive for military historians if the earlier established analysis of military history is supplemented by a greater understanding of the significance of the variety of military developments. For a long time, military history involved an analysis of the development of modern total war capacity, with a Whiggish teleology accordingly. Thus, the American Civil War supposedly looked toward the First World War, decisiveness was a key means and end, and major battles were a central element. The War of 1812, therefore, seemed irrelevant militarily as well as inconsequential politically.

This approach, however, appears much less relevant if the teleology is abandoned and the variety of military and political circumstances, developments and potential developments appreciated. From that perspective, the War of 1812 is instructive because of the number and difference of participants (including the Native Americans), the combination of land and sea conflict, the problems of pursuing limited goals and of a major power confronting a number of challenges, and in a context of difficult finances and only partial domestic support. Thus, paradoxically, although the War of 1812 plays an important (once much more important) role in the American public myth, notably with frigate victories, the battle of Lake Erie, the defense of Fort McHenry (celebrated in the national anthem) and triumph outside New Orleans, it is more instructive for the perspective of modern America in terms of the problems facing British power. The difficulties of limited war are instructive, but also the extent to which it provided opportunities. Both America and Britain were able to advance their interests by military steps in a context in which it was not possible to inflict serious losses on the other, or, rather, serious losses except on a particular front. Thus the British defeat outside New Orleans did not end the capacity for amphibious attacks, and British forces pressed on to attack Mobile and to prepare for operations against Savannah and Charleston. Failure in the British advance along Lake Champlain in 1814 did not mean that more pressure could not have been mounted in 1815.

The key element of politics also emerges clearly. The potential of British operations was linked to divisions within America, not least the strength of Federalist opinion in New England. Moreover, these divisions contrasted with a more coherent situation in Canada. Quebecois proved more willing to support the Crown than in 1775-6. There was a parallel with the strength of Irish support for the Crown in the last decade of the Napoleonic War.

Aside from the impact of American opinion on the willingness of the militia to operate across state lines, there was, as in the War of Independence, a sense that the purpose of British operations was to change opinion within America. The same was true of the enforcement of the naval blockade. To a certain extent, this policy succeeded with war weariness increasing in America, a war weariness that the government sought to ignore by calls for more men and money. Both Britain and America were affected by such weariness, but, due to an absence of force projection, the Americans lacked an ability to calibrate military and political elements, whereas the British could seek to do so. In part, this contrast reflected the way in which the war played a role in American politics that was totally different from the situation in Britain, where it was insignificant in party, governmental, parliamentary, and public politics. This element was to be more generally true of much, but, crucially, not all, expeditionary warfare over the following two centuries, and remains the case today. In Canada, in contrast, the war was far more central, not least in subsequent memorialisation.

Indeed, in the long sweep of global military history, the War of 1812 established an instructive precedent, that of expeditionary warfare against an independent state where there was no intention to extend colonial control. Put differently, the War of 1812 can be seen as the first of the modern wars of informal empire, although with the important caveat that conflict was not begun by the major power. From the perspective of the Native Americans, and of the Spanish colonial authorities in Florida, the War of 1812 can also be seen as a conflict between clashing empires, rather like the Anglo-French struggle in North America the mid-18th century.

In 1812, American opportunities were greatest because of the element of surprise and because Britain was fully engaged against Napoleon. The latter underlined another element of military history, the need to choose not only between opportunities and fronts, but also between

opponents. Indeed, American opportunities were strongest in mid-1812 precisely because Napoleon at that point was at the apex of his power. The Americans thus became an informal member of the most important alliance in the West, only to discover, as French ambition was brought low in the snows of Russia, that they had backed the losing side. This strategic misjudgment was crucial as it left the initiative to Britain. The British could decide whether, when, and where to attack. The Americans could defeat attacks but not stop the attacking. This situation helped guarantee Canada. Even had American forces been successful in invading it, British pressure elsewhere would have led to a status quo ante bellum settlement that would have assured its return. Thus, one reason for the Chesapeake operations in 1814 was to reduce American pressure on Canada. Alongside the efforts of those who became Canadians, the power of empire helped secure the integrity of Canada and, in ensuring the continued division of the North American anglosphere, made a major contribution to the future character of the West in world history.

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