

{essays in history}

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Dubious Victories: Refighting the War of 1812



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Reviewed Work(s)

Bickham, Troy. *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, The British Empire, and the War of 1812*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Lambert, Andrew. *The Challenge: America, Britain, and the War of 1812*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2012.

It has been said that everyone emerged happy from the War of 1812. Americans celebrated the war because they thought they won, Canadians celebrated because they knew they won, and Britons could be happiest of all since they promptly forgot the whole thing.[1] With the possible exception of the Canadians, whose victory seems universally accepted, historians have strongly contested this interpretation.[2] While British historians have shown a tendency to ignore the conflict, it is unfair to say they have forgotten the war altogether. Several British scholars have indeed studied their country's second clash with the United States, and concluded that it was a triumphant one for John Bull. American historians, however, take umbrage at the suggestion that they "think" they won; the war, these scholars contend, can indeed be regarded as an American victory, at least in a limited sense. The explosion of literature for the war's bicentennial has only exacerbated these trends, and two of the most recent works offer excellent examples of the ongoing fight over who can claim victory in the War of 1812.

Buoyed by Andrew Jackson's stunning defeat of the British at New Orleans, Americans began claiming the war as a heroic victory almost as soon as the belligerents ratified the Treaty of Ghent. The nature of that victory was a bit murky, however. Clearly, it did not mean seizing Canada, nor did it involve any tangible concessions from their former colonial masters. Rather, Americans then and later claimed a victory for their reputation. The United States, a young and untested nation, completed the work of the American Revolution by humbling Britain, earning respect from the rest of Europe, and deterring future aggression. The war, many believed, represented a culmination of the American Revolution, a Second War for Independence in that the United States finally emerged from the shadow of its colonial past and established itself as a sovereign nation.[3]

Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, the first biographer of many of his country's naval heroes, certainly regarded the war in this way, contrasting the haughty attitudes of many British officers with the stirring victories of Stephen Decatur and Oliver Hazard Perry.[4] Benson

Lossing articulated the idea of a “Second American Revolution” much more explicitly in his nearly 1,100-page tome *The Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812*. For Lossing, the United States in the aftermath of the Revolution was “free, but not *independent*,” because it was not a nation powerful enough to command respect, and the British, sensing this weakness, treated it with disdain. The War of 1812 changed all of that, with the United States proving that a republican nation could not only survive, but also thrive.[5]

Subsequent historians have dropped the nationalist tone and rhetoric, but in many cases accepted this argument. James Fenimore Cooper, in his famous history of the birth of the American navy, dwelt heavily on American triumphs against the Royal Navy, then the most powerful fleet on the seas. By the end of the conflict, British officers who had once looked on the United States with disdain and seized its seamen were now forced to accord American naval officers a grudging respect, having so often been bested by them.[6] Likewise, Theodore Roosevelt emphasized the repeated victories of the tiny American Navy against overwhelming odds. While acknowledging that earlier American claims were somewhat inflated, Roosevelt still refuted William James’ claim that the U.S. Navy was crushed, arguing that Americans can indeed recall the war with pride.[7]

The image of the War of 1812 as a victory for American honor and reputation continues in historical scholarship. Although sharply critical of Madison as a wartime President, George Daughan still concluded that America emerged from the conflict with a newfound respect from European powers.[8] In his monumental work, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, Donald Hickey conceded the point that the Madison administration failed to accomplish its objectives, but still concluded that the U.S. “enhanced its reputation in Europe” and “earned the respect of Europe,” through the conflict.[9] Alan Taylor was more emphatic. The United States secured its hold on North America, he argued, and was free to expand across the continent without British interference: “The Americans forced the British to choose between alliance with the Indians and peace with the republic.” This was the true key to victory in the war, for in choosing the latter “the British accepted the Americans’ continental power.”[10]

Although more interested in their recent triumph over the Napoleonic Empire, British writers still began challenging what they regarded as inflated American claims soon after the war ended. Fittingly, it was in defense of its beloved Navy that Britain first attacked American boasting. The generation of Americans that fought the war took particular delight in a series of single-ship victories with the vaunted Royal Navy, and bragged about their engagements to any British travelers who found themselves in the United States once the two nations were at peace. One of these travelers, William James, grew so disgusted by American pretensions to victory that he began what he hoped would be an impartial history of the conflict in 1817. He vehemently argued that the war had been an indisputable British triumph. The American ships that had won victories were all significantly larger than their British counterparts and, he argued, mostly manned by British deserters anyway. Furthermore, they failed to weaken the massive British Navy in any appreciable sense.^[11]

Subsequent British historians have questioned James' objectivity, but generally agree with his conclusions. Jon Latimer, in his recent work *1812: War with America* argues that Americans cannot really claim any sort of victory since they failed to achieve any of their prewar objectives.^[12] Meanwhile, Brian Arthur makes his argument abundantly clear in the provocative title of his recent book *How Britain Won the War of 1812*.^[13] Arthur's contention is that it was the British blockade of the American coast that played the decisive role, strangling American commerce and restricting the American navy's ability to strike back after the first few months of the conflict.

Even some American historians have conceded that the war was not a triumph for the United States. J.C.A. Stagg concluded, "the United States had done little more than survive some of the most dangerous threats that had yet been posed to its existence as a nation." Surviving, of course, is better than destruction, but he reminded readers that "mere survival, whatever its psychological satisfactions for Americans at the time, was far less than what the United States had hoped to accomplish in the months after June 1812." The claims to victory that later generations of Americans boasted were "inflated." He notes that the pre-war objectives of ending impressment and improving the standing of neutral shipping in wartime both failed, and dwells on Madison's ineffective leadership and

difficulties, somewhat but by no means entirely of his own making, in mobilizing national resources for war.^[14]

Two of the most recent monographs on the conflict build strong arguments for unambiguous victory, but disagree as to which side can claim that victory. Troy Bickham, a historian of the British Empire at Texas A&M, reappraises British and American ambitions and perceptions of the war in *The Weight of Vengeance*. Andrew Lambert, one of the most celebrated scholars of British military and naval history, studies varied explanations for Congress's declaration of war and the British efforts to balance their American conflict with the ongoing Napoleonic Wars in his newest book, *The Challenge*. Together, the two works display the ability of historians looking at the same set of events to reach markedly different conclusions. Bickham views the war as an outgrowth of Britain's lingering bitterness over the American Revolution and a failed attempt at global hegemony, while Lambert argues that it was a land-grab by the Americans that was crushed by Britain's superior sea power and leadership.

Their differing views stem in part from the disparate sources the authors employ. Bickham, an authority on public opinion whose most recent work studied British newspaper responses to the American Revolution, likewise emphasizes public perceptions here.^[15] He makes extensive use of newspapers in *Weight of Vengeance*, spending a considerable part of the book on civilian perceptions of and reactions to the war in both countries. He thus dwells on the American population's ecstasy over frigate victories and Andrew Jackson's trouncing of the British at New Orleans, and also a British public distraught at signs of vulnerability in their seemingly unstoppable navy. This point lends credibility to his argument that the United States, while not victorious in any traditional sense of the term, won a measure of respect and autonomy from the war. Lambert, a celebrated naval historian, is primarily interested in the war at sea, where the British unquestionably did enjoy tremendous success. By focusing on the fact that the Royal Navy also won as many decisive single ship engagements as the Americans, as well as placing a strangling blockade all the American coast and crippling privateering, he paints a picture of a triumphant Britain and a United States that, though clearly beaten, managed to paint the war as a victory through rather tortured logic.

Ostensibly, the United States declared war over British maritime practices, specifically the impressment of American seamen into the British Navy and Britain's crackdown on neutral trade. Neither author believes these issues were truly the most important in causing the war. Bickham contends that American grievances extended far beyond Britain seizing a few sailors or interfering with trade revenue. Rather, American frustration stemmed from the fact that the British continued to view the United States as quasi-colonies, and Madison and his cabinet sought to establish equality with Great Britain in the international community through war. He argues that Britain also saw the war as about more significant issues than just the rights of neutrals. It was an opportunity to stunt American ambitions of becoming a global power and economic competitor, while tying the American economy permanently to Britain. Although "Britain had no intention of reabsorbing the United States formally into the Empire, keeping the former colonies as a client was a real possibility."^[16] From this perspective, Bickham gives credence to the rhetoric of the war as a "Second War for Independence" or "Second American Revolution," since it completed the work of separating the United States from its former mother country economically, and established it as a nation worthy of respect.

Lambert takes a much harsher view. He contends that American maritime grievances were only the thinnest excuse to grab Canada while Britain was occupied in Europe, and that the war was driven primarily by Westerners hungry for more territory. He provides evidence for this conclusion by emphasizing that Madison and Congress, and even the staunchest War Hawks, did nothing to prepare the U.S. Navy for an ostensibly maritime war. Instead, all preparations for war focused on the Army, and even these were lacking. The fact was that Madison, and most Americans, assumed that the war would be fought through the conquest of Canada, and that this conquest would be a fairly quick and simple matter. They were, of course, horribly wrong about the length of the war and difficulties of invading Canada. War for national honor requires a military force capable of performing respectably, and Lambert sees a disconnect between supposed ideals that Americans fought for and the paltry efforts the Madison administration made to prepare for the conflict. Furthermore, the very people who would have been expected to push the hardest for a war fought over impressment and maritime

seizures, New England merchants, became the strongest opponents of the war. Coastal New Englanders whose income was dependent on shipping openly calling for accommodation with Britain and even trading with the enemy, further undermining the claim that the war was about maritime rights.

Both books explore the war in light of Britain's ongoing clash with Napoleonic France. Lambert stresses this point a bit more, and notes the difficulties the British government had diverting resources from what they considered the much more important conflict in Europe to a sideshow in North America. Bickham acknowledges that the War of 1812 stemmed from the Napoleonic Wars, which spawned a host of smaller conflicts across the globe. But the Anglo-American conflict was also distinct, and occupies a strange middle ground as an outgrowth of the wars in Europe, but also separated from them. Although the war itself was inseparable from the ongoing conflict in Europe, both the United States and Great Britain had specific objectives in North America that were distinct from events in in the Old World.

Lambert's study is heavily devoted to the war at sea, while Bickham gives actual combat only two chapters. Arguing that Britain won, Lambert is keen to note American failures, but Bickham has more opportunities to describe American ineptitude by describing its disasters on both land and sea. The invasion of Canada failed miserably. Bickham wholeheartedly concurs with Lambert that the United States was woefully unprepared for war, and that Madison and Congress must bear the blame for failing to provide the necessary training, funds, and strong leadership essential in order to wage war against a global power. He stresses the uneasy alliance between Britain and North American Indians, a relationship formed from mutual need but tainted with strong mistrust—which, in the Indians' case, was validated by Britain's actions at peace negotiations. Lambert, despite his maritime focus, is also aware of Britain's Indian alliances, noting that they deserved better than the total abandonment they received at the Treaty of Ghent.

Americans took consolation from disasters on land in a series of shocking victories at sea, as the U.S. Navy captured five Royal Navy vessels in single-ship actions. These victories produced a tremendous boost in morale, but Lambert argues that their impact on the war should not be exaggerated. Britain had an abundance of frigates, and could

easily replace a handful taken by the Americans. He undersells the level of dismay experienced in the British Admiralty a bit; Bickham's chapters on public opinion in Britain give a fuller picture of the level of distress felt by a power unused to defeat. Kevin McCranie's operational history of the war at sea goes into much greater detail about how deeply troubled the British Admiralty was at losing its perceived invincibility, as does Ian Toll's recent study of the origins of the American Navy.^[17]

But Lambert does acknowledge that defeat prompted needed reform. While the typical narrative depicts the British as sloppy in its gunnery practice and manning its vessels with woefully ill-trained crews prior to the American war, Lambert builds a convincing case that British officers and seamen were as good as ever at the start of the conflict, as evinced by their rapid ability to begin taking American frigates. The British were guilty of overconfidence, but the problems had more to do with the ships themselves than officers and men. "[After] two decades spent chasing elusive French ships, speed in pursuit had become the acme of naval skill," Lambert argues. The main issue here was that "frigate design had reflected the change, emphasizing speed and losing hardiness."^[18]

Bickham agrees with most existing scholarship that the turning point in the war came with Napoleon's first abdication in 1814. That freed up a vengeful British government to transfer massive numbers of ships and troops to North America. Not only did the defeat of France and its seemingly indestructible general "inflate the national ego," Bickham argues, it also "created an expectation of total victory in which a nation was not merely defeated with minimal penalty ... it was crushed."^[19] He emphasizes the rhetoric emanating from the British public that Madison and Americans in general were traitors to their common language and heritage by siding with a maniacal dictator, and thus demanded that Britain make the United States pay, now that it could wage unrestricted war without distractions.

Lambert cautions us that this view is overly simplistic. True, Britain increased its forces in the war with America after Napoleon surrendered. However, the end of the war spawned a host of security concerns in Europe. A resurgent Russia threatened British interests, British policymakers hoped to secure Belgium and Holland so that France would never again threaten a cross-channel invasion, and the accumulated debts of two decades of warfare had to be repaid. Moreover,

the British people were simply tired of war. Therefore, even with Napoleon gone, the British military was limited in its ability to wage war in America. Lambert also notes the newly-opened trade with Europe that bolstered the British economy, and the threat of future wars ensured that Britain felt it could never compromise on impressment or neutral trade. Thus the war continued. But Lambert argues the American's primary problem was not British reinforcements, but its own incompetence. With its failure to gain even a foothold in Canada, "America had run out of strategic options."[\[20\]](#)

Both books also explore public perceptions of the war, but at different times. Lambert's study has little to say about civilians during the war itself, but concludes with a fascinating study of American attitudes towards the war in the years after the conflict. The war marks a shift, he argues, away from Federalist values on community and international commerce and toward a more Jeffersonian-Republican ideal of individualistic agriculture and westward expansion. Over time, the War of 1812 became enshrined in national myth not as the humiliating defeat that it actually was, but the start of America's triumphant trek to the Pacific Ocean.

Bickham, while ending his study with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, devotes the bulk of *The Weight of Vengeance* to the British and American home-fronts. He spends two chapters on wartime opposition, one on the United States and another on Britain. Opposition in America came primarily from New England's Federalists, who were already disinclined to support the party of Jefferson after his embargo crippled them financially. Still, opponents of the war could be found in every region, and they chose their stance for a variety of reasons. The lack of unity or national leadership meant that most opposition amounted to ineffective talk. Crucially, opponents of Madison and the war remained a loyal opposition. Even the highly-touted Hartford Convention amounted to little, with most of its members unwilling to seriously consider secession. Although he briefly mentions the death of the Federalist Party soon after the Treaty of Ghent, Bickham lacks the detailed analysis of postwar politics and culture found in Lambert's book. Taken together, the two paint a fuller picture of the war's immediate and long-term impact on society than either provides alone, though they would likely quibble over each other's conclusions.

In establishing who won and lost the War of 1812, the authors establish that what the war was about in the first place mattered. Lambert argues that Americans hoped to force British maritime concessions on neutral trade and the impressment issue, and probably to take all or part of Canada as well. The Americans failed to achieve any of these objectives. Impressment and neutral trade were omitted entirely from the treaty, with Americans conveniently claiming that they were both moot points since the Napoleonic Wars has ended.

Britain, on the other hand, hoped to protect Canada, and to force the United States to stop fighting, without making concessions on these two crucial points. The British succeeded in this respect, and also nearly destroyed the American economy with little damage to their own. Lambert concurs with Brian Arthur that the blockade was wildly successful, and that it was crucial to British victory. Whatever successes the Americans might have enjoyed on the Great Lakes or in single-ship actions, the country's failure to get more than a handful of ships into the Atlantic after the first year of the war meant that its ability to strike back at Britain in any meaningful way was sharply curtailed. Moreover, British forces marched with little opposition into the American capital and burned it to the ground, all while repelling multiple invasions of Canada. In short, Lambert argues, Americans gained nothing, and suffered terribly, during the war, while the British conceded nothing at limited cost. The war, he contends, can only be considered a British victory.

In making the case for a clear-cut British triumph, Lambert does, however, have to overlook a few crucial points. He belittles the initial British demands at Ghent that Americans cede a vast tract of land as an Indian buffer zone, or that they accept a peace based on *status quo uti possidetis*, wherein each side would keep territory it held at the end of hostilities. Rather, he implies that *status quo antebellum* was the British government's primary goal all along, and their decision to settle for that cannot really be regarded as a setback. Although he acknowledges the British military's failure to take Baltimore, he rather glosses over this episode, and indicates that it made little difference in the larger outcome of the war. On the other hand, he compellingly argues that the British overwhelmingly defeated American privateering efforts, and that insurance rates never rose for British shipping, the sole motive behind American use of privately contracted ships. And clearly, if one looks at

the stated war aims of both countries, it is difficult to contest that Britain accomplished all of theirs while America achieved none.

Bickham, however, argues that assessing gains and losses must include more intangible attributes than territory or trade rights. The United States, he contends, fought for national recognition and respect, and in this sense it achieved a measure of victory. Britain, meanwhile, fought to keep America in a state of semi-dependence, not just out of the way of events in Europe. Bickham therefore strongly contests Lambert's depiction of the war as an unalloyed British success. He is not blind to the realities on the ground once the fighting stopped. The American negotiators at Ghent, he makes clear, recognized how fortunate they were to escape without ceding territory to Britain. But America's lack of quantifiable gains in territory and diplomatic concessions cannot obscure the larger outcome of the war. The "true primary issue of the War of 1812—whether or not the United States would be respected as a sovereign nation rather than humbled as a quasi-part of the British Empire—was resolved, and Britain had lost," Bickham concludes.^[21]

Perspectives matter. It probably should not come as a surprise that a British historian views the War of 1812 as a British victory while an American dissents. Still, Lambert merits some criticism for his needlessly harsh treatment of American political and military leaders. He asserts that Madison and his cabinet "deserved to be hanged," for their oversight of the war. Later, he bitterly refers to American experimentation with torpedoes by the technically accurate but politically loaded term of "improvised explosive devices," and considers the use of torpedoes as "random acts of terrorism," meriting harsh British reprisals. Yet when it comes to American complaints about British violations of the norms of warfare in the burning of Washington, Lambert casually writes their criticisms off as "sheer stupidity."^[22] Such impolitic language and harsh tone will turn many readers off to what is a compelling argument and mar an otherwise excellent survey of the war.

Two decades ago, Donald Hickey dubbed the War of 1812 a "forgotten conflict." The bicentennial celebration has thankfully brought it to the attention of British and American historians alike, but we might legitimately fear that once the bicentennial celebrations pass, the war will fade from memory once again. These two works illustrate just how unfortunate this situation would be, for we are far from consensus on

why the war was fought, how it was fought, and what the results were. Bickham and Lambert illustrate the best that these debates have to offer. Both build well-reasoned, if conflicting, cases on a wealth of evidence. Their accounts are engaging and accessible, and will surely find a broad popular audience. But one can also hope they will inspire scholars to continue fighting the War of 1812, and that future salvos in this ongoing debate will live up to the high standard set by these works.

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[1] Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 2nd edition (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 306, paraphrases Canadian historian C.P. Stacey, “The War of 1812 in Canadian History,” *Ontario History* 50 (Summer 1958), 153.

[2] For the War of 1812 as a Canadian victory, see J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965); Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); and Eliot Cohen, *Conquered into Liberty: Two Centuries of Battles along the Great Warpath that Made the American Way of War* (New York: The Free Press, 2011), 300-301.

[3] Hickey, *War of 1812*, 303. Although he notes the widespread popular belief that the War of 1812 was a culmination of the Revolution, Hickey doubts the legitimacy of this title, arguing that “the supposed threat to American independence in 1812 was more imagined than real.” See also the brief historiographic discussion in J.C.A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2-17 for discussion of Americans’ interpretation of the war.

[4] Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur: A Commodore in the United States Navy* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1846); Mackenzie, *Life of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry* (New York: Harper, 1840).

[5] Benson Lossing, *The Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (Little and Brown, 1868), 18-19.

- [6] James Fenimore Cooper, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* (1846; rpt. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001).
- [7] Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (1881; rpt. New York: The Modern Library, 1999).
- [8] George Daughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy from the Revolution to the War of 1812* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
- [9] Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 307. Hickey, it should be noted, still regards the war as largely a failure from a purely military standpoint, and seems more inclined to regard it as an American failure in the new, revised edition.
- [10] Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*, 437-438.
- [11] William James, *Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812: A Full and Correct Account of the Naval War Between Great Britain and the United States of America, 1812-1815* (1817; rpt. London: Conway Maritime, 2004).
- [12] Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- [13] Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal navy's Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815* (Woodbridge, Great Britain: Boydell Press, 2011).
- [14] J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 501, 509.
- [15] Troy Bickham, *Making Headlines: The American Revolution as Seen through the British Press* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).
- [16] Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 10.
- [17] Kevin McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011); Ian Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006).

[18] Lambert, *The Challenge*, 194

[19] Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 161.

[20] Lambert, *The Challenge*, 313

[21] Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 263.

[22] Lambert, *The Challenge*, 57, 247, 323.

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