

The War of 1812

The War of 1812 began with a conflict between France and Great Britain, but ended with a United States victory over the British that helped to boost the spirits of a young and growing nation. Struggling to find its identity in a world dominated by stronger countries, the United States was still a new nation in 1812. This was most evident in American relations with Great Britain and France. As part of an ongoing conflict between the two nations, the French and British navies regularly looted American ships and impressed, or kidnapped, American sailors for their own navies.

Despite growing resentment about the treatment of American vessels on the high seas and other insults to America's national honor, United States President James Madison attempted to keep the United States out of the conflict. He pursued a policy of American neutrality hoping both sides would honor the United States' position while allowing American merchants to continue to trade with both sides. While this idea might have appealed to the Americans, the British rejected it as trading with their enemy. In addition, the war with France was draining much-needed manpower from the British navy, and the British sought to replace this manpower with kidnapped sailors from American ships. This practice, known as impressment, angered Americans who viewed the British as bullies. With anti-British feelings running high in America, members of Congress, known as "war hawks" began to call for the invasion of Canada. They viewed acquiring Canada as unfinished business from the American Revolution.

The war officially began on June 18, 1812, when Congress declared war on Great Britain. At the time, the British had their hands full with the French, with the brilliant commander Napoleon Bonaparte leading the French military. Regarding Napoleon as the real threat, the British strategy was to block the Americans from trading with the French and providing them with much-needed war supplies. Sensing an opportunity to strike while the British military was occupied in Europe, the Americans began their plans to invade Canada. The Americans believed if they could take Canada quickly, they could force the British to negotiate a speedy end to the war. Several poorly planned attacks, however, led to a failed invasion of Canada. To make matters worse, the British forced the Americans to surrender their fort at Detroit just two months into the war. If none of this was enough to depress the Americans, news from Europe of the French surrender to the British certainly was. With the French defeated, the British now turned their attention squarely toward the Americans they wanted to punish for their support of the French.



The Americans finally did find success fighting in the West. Oliver Hazard Perry led the American naval force that defeated the British navy at the Battle of Lake Erie. This defeat forced the British to retreat from Detroit. The Americans, seeing an opportunity, decided to strike at the retreating British and their Indian allies. On October 5, 1813, General William Henry Harrison led the American army to defeat the British and their allies at the Battle of the Thames. Although the British army was defeated, the Indians suffered the most because Tecumseh, their greatest chief, died while fighting for the British.

1814 was a very rough year for the United States. Thousands of British troops that had been fighting in Europe now made their way to North America to engage the Americans. The British strategy was to overwhelm the young republic by attacking it on several different fronts. The British attacked along the Hudson River hoping to split the country in two. They also attacked on the Chesapeake Bay, burning the new American capital in Washington, D.C. Caught unaware, the Americans retreated time after time before overwhelming British power. The one bright spot during the Chesapeake invasion was Fort McHenry's successful defense of Baltimore, which drove the British forces back. In addition, the Americans won a stunning naval battle on Lake Champlain, defeating a fleet intending to capture New York. This, however, was little comfort to Americans reading of their capital's destruction.

Both sides were weary of war and began peace negotiations in late 1814. While they continued, the British pushed the war in North America with a planned invasion of New Orleans and capture of the Mississippi River. General Andrew Jackson was in command and, after receiving word that the British were on their way, prepared to defend New Orleans. Jackson used militia, regular army, and captured French pirates he had released in return for their promise to assist the Americans. On January 8, 1815, a British force marched on New Orleans. Jackson's army destroyed the British force. Fifteen hundred British soldiers were killed and just over two hundred Americans died. This great victory made Jackson a hero and later propelled him to the presidency of the United States, although the battle was actually unnecessary. The Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812, was signed weeks earlier. Because of the era's slow communication, the two armies did not know the war already was over.



The peace treaty signed in Ghent, Belgium, required both sides to return all captured territory. In addition, the Americans gained fishing rights off the coast of Canada and a promise the British would no longer interfere with American shipping. While neither gained territory, the Americans claimed victory. A standoff with the world's most powerful nation was something Americans viewed with pride. This sense of pride, or nationalism, would lead more and more Americans to think of themselves as one nation, indivisible.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. Which two powerful European countries were fighting in 1812?
2. What reasons did the Americans give for declaring war? With whom did they declare war?
3. What was the name for the congressmen who favored war?
4. What great Indian chief died at the Battle of the Thames?
5. What peace treaty ended the War of 1812? What were the treaty's provisions?
6. Which great battle occurred after the war ended? What did the British hope to achieve?