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Highlights
of the

War of 1812

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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WAR OF 1812

AMERICAN HANDICAPS

1. **The United States Was Not Militarily Prepared for War.** The regular army was small, badly equipped, and without competent leadership. For its fighting force on land, the country had to rely on hastily recruited and untrained militia. On the sea, the United States had a navy of 16 warships. Though it was efficient and experienced and though it performed many notable feats, this tiny fleet was hardly a match for Britain's mighty navy, the largest in the world.

2. **The Nation Lacked Money to Carry on the War.** After hostilities began, foreign trade was practically stopped. This brought a sharp decline in tariff revenues, a major source of income for the government. Also, the government found it difficult to borrow money because: (a) The wealthy Northeast opposed the war. (b) The national bank was no longer available for floating loans. The charter of the Bank of the United States had expired in 1811, and the Democratic-Republican Congress had refused to renew it.

3. **The Nation Was Not United in Support of the War.** There was much opposition to the war in the commercial Northeast, especially in New England. Although they were hurt by England's seizure of our ships, American merchants and shipowners made so much profit from their successful voyages that they were willing to risk a few losses. They considered the outbreak of war a calamity because it meant the end of all trade with their most important customer, England. Calling it "Mr. Madison's War," the New England states refused to furnish their share of militia or to lend the government money to finance the war.

In 1814 the New England states called a meeting at Hartford, Connecticut. The *Hartford Convention* passed resolutions condemning the war and recommending constitutional amendments to protect the interests of New England. Some extremists even talked of *seceding* (leaving the Union) and concluding a separate peace with England. Before any action could be taken, however, the War of 1812 ended.

The Hartford Convention discredited the Federalists, who were then predominant in New England, and helped to drive the party out of existence.

THE WAR AT SEA

During the first year of the war, the Americans proved their ability at sea by scoring a number of outstanding victories against the British. The

warship *Constitution*, commanded by Isaac Hull, destroyed the British warship *Guerrière* in a furious battle off Nova Scotia and later defeated the *Java* off Brazil. These victories earned her the nickname "Old Ironsides." The *United States*, commanded by Stephen Decatur, captured the *Macedonian*; and the *Wasp* defeated the *Frolic*.

American naval vessels and privateers preyed on British shipping, seizing or destroying about 1,500 ships during the course of the war. Eventually, however, the numerically superior British navy drove the Americans from the sea, established a blockade of our coast, and brought our foreign commerce to a standstill.

In a fierce duel between the British frigate *Shannon* and the American warship *Chesapeake* in 1813, the British were winning the battle. The last order given by the dying American captain, James Lawrence, was "Don't give up the ship!"

These words became the rallying cry of the United States Navy.

THE CANADIAN CAMPAIGN FAILS

For three years the Americans vainly tried to conquer Canada. In 1812 they attacked from three separate points: (1) from Lake Champlain, (2) across the Niagara River, and (3) from Detroit. Each attack failed. The next year a force of raiders invaded and burned York (Toronto) and then withdrew. Later, an unsuccessful attempt was made to take Montreal.

In 1814 an army under Generals Jacob Brown and Winfield Scott crossed the Niagara River into Canada. The American army seized Fort Erie, inflicted a severe defeat on the British near the Chippewa River, and fought the British to a draw at Lundy's Lane. The Americans then pulled back to Fort Erie, successfully withstood a British siege, but finally withdrew across the border. The Americans abandoned their plans to capture Canada.

THE AMERICANS LOSE AND REGAIN THE NORTHWEST

Early in the war the British captured Detroit. Their Indian allies, under Tecumseh, seized Fort Dearborn (Chicago) and massacred its entire garrison. These defeats left the British in control of Lake Erie and the upper part of the Northwest Territory. The United States, however, regained possession of the region as follows:

1. **Battle of Lake Erie.** Using timber from the nearby forests, the Americans laboriously constructed a small fleet of vessels at Erie, Pennsylvania, on Lake Erie. The tiny squadron, commanded by Captain *Oliver Hazard Perry*, engaged the British in 1813 and decisively defeated them in one of

the fiercest naval battles of the war. In reporting his victory, Perry sent the famous message, "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

2. Battle of the Thames. Perry's victory gave the United States control of Lake Erie and forced the British to abandon Detroit and withdraw to Canada. A force of American frontiersmen under General William Henry Harrison crossed Lake Erie into Canada, pursued the British and Indians, overtook them at the Thames River, and defeated them. Tecumseh was killed during the fighting, causing the Indians to desert the British. As a result of this battle, the British hold on the Northwest Territory was broken.

THE BRITISH TAKE THE OFFENSIVE

After Napoleon's downfall in Europe in 1814, the British were able to turn their full attention to winning the war in North America. They sent a large force of veteran troops across the Atlantic and planned to crush the Americans with attacks at three strategic points: Lake Champlain, Chesapeake Bay, and New Orleans.

1. Battle of Lake Champlain. About 11,000 British troops descended from Canada and invaded New York along the western shore of Lake Champlain. Before proceeding southward, however, they had to gain control of the lake. The British had a fleet on the lake, as did the Americans. The British confidently expected that their more heavily armed warships would destroy the American vessels in short order. When the Battle of Lake Champlain took place, however, the American fleet, commanded by Captain Thomas Macdonough, skillfully outmaneuvered the British and defeated them completely (1814). As a result, the British army was forced to retreat to Canada, and the invasion of New York was abandoned.

2. Burning of Washington. Also in 1814, a squadron of British ships entered Chesapeake Bay and landed troops in Maryland, south of Washington. Marching on the poorly defended American capital, the English routed a force of militia at Bladensburg and entered Washington almost unopposed. In retaliation for the destruction of the government offices at Toronto by American raiders the year before, the British set fire to many government buildings in Washington, including the Capitol and the White House. They then withdrew from the city.

3. Attack on Baltimore. The British fleet in Chesapeake Bay then sailed northward to attack Baltimore, but found the city prepared to resist invasion. The English landing party met strong opposition from American troops and was stopped at the outskirts of the city. The fleet tried to

destroy Fort McHenry, which guarded the entrance to the city's harbor, but failed despite an all-night bombardment. Unable to crack Baltimore's defenses, the British gave up the attack and soon after left Chesapeake Bay.

On September 13, 1814, an American, *Francis Scott Key*, went aboard a British ship to seek the release of an American prisoner. While detained on the ship for the night, he witnessed the English bombardment of Fort McHenry. Next morning he saw the American flag still flying over the fort. This sight inspired him to write the verses of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which later became our national anthem.

4. **Battle of New Orleans.** Thwarted at Lake Champlain and Chesapeake Bay, the British tried to carry out the third part of their plan. They transported 7,500 troops through the Gulf of Mexico and landed them near New Orleans. The American frontiersmen defending the area, led by the Indian fighter *Andrew Jackson*, erected a barricade and awaited the enemy. Early in January, 1815, the English launched their attack. In the battle that followed, the British were decisively defeated, suffering more than 2,000 casualties at the hands of the sharpshooting Westerners. American losses were 71 killed and wounded.

This great victory at New Orleans, after many defeats on land, restored the nation's pride. It also made a national hero of Andrew Jackson. However, it did not influence the outcome of the war. A treaty of peace had been signed in Europe two weeks earlier, but the news had not yet reached America.

TREATY OF GHENT

By the end of 1814 both sides were eager for peace. Meeting in Ghent, Belgium, representatives of England and the United States concluded a treaty of peace. It ended the state of war and restored the boundaries existing before hostilities began. No reference was made to the impressment of seamen or the violation of America's rights at sea. Although this *Second War for Independence* against England did not end in victory for either side, it had important effects on the United States.

RESULTS OF THE WAR OF 1812

1. The war inspired a spirit of nationalism (national unity and patriotism) among the people. America turned away from Europe and began to concentrate on developing her resources and building a great nation.

2. The United States showed the world that we were prepared and able to defend our rights. We thus earned the respect of England and other foreign nations.

Relations with Britain improved greatly after the war, and several problems were solved by friendly discussion and negotiation. The *Rush-Bagot Agreement*, signed in 1817, provided that neither nation would maintain warships on the Great Lakes. The *Treaty of 1818* (a) fixed the disputed boundary between Canada and the United States from Minnesota to the Rockies along the 49th parallel, (b) reaffirmed American fishing rights off the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland, and (c) opened the Oregon Country to settlers from both countries.

3. The war encouraged the growth of American industry. Unable to obtain manufactured goods from abroad during the war, the United States was forced to develop its own production facilities.

4. The war stimulated westward expansion by removing the Indian menace in the region between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. In the Northwest Territory the Indian confederacy collapsed with the death of Tecumseh. In the Old Southwest the power of the Creeks was broken by Jackson's campaigns against them in 1813-1814.