

America's Second War of Independence

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Today, Korea is often called "the forgotten war." A better candidate is the War of 1812, whose bicentennial is this year.

There are two main reasons. First, the war seems to have changed nothing. The end of the conflict seemed simply to return the parties to the status quo ante bellum. Second, the American armed forces did not acquit themselves well. Only the performance by Army regulars under Brevet Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott at Chippewa and Lundy's Lane, Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans, and the repulse of the British attack on Fort McHenry at the Battle of Baltimore (which inspired Francis Scott Key to write the lyrics to "The Star-Spangled Banner") and some successes at sea provided rare bright spots in what was an otherwise dismal military performance.

Yet the outcome of this conflict made a great difference.

First, the war validated American independence. The new republic had been buffeted between the two great powers of the age. Great Britain had accepted the fact of American independence only grudgingly, using superior naval power to restrict U.S. trade with Europe and impressing American sailors into the Royal Navy. Nor was revolutionary (and subsequently Napoleonic) France inclined to recognize America's rights as a nation, and like the British it subjected American merchant vessels to arbitrary treatment.

President James Madison's war message to Congress, with its echoes of the Declaration of Independence's "long train of abuses," made it clear that the United States was willing to vindicate its rights as a state in the international system. Thus historians have sometimes called the War of 1812 the second war of American independence.

Second, it called into question the utopian approach to international relations. As president, Thomas Jefferson had rejected Federalist Party calls for a robust military establishment. He argued that the U.S. could achieve its goals by strictly peaceful means, and that if those failed, he could force the European powers to respect American rights by withholding U.S. trade.

Jefferson's second term demonstrated the serious shortcomings of his thinking. His attempts to employ economic pressure against England and France destroyed U.S. commerce, antagonized the New England states, and ultimately failed to prevent a war for which the country was woefully unprepared. As a result of the War of 1812, American statesmen realized that to survive in a hostile world, the U.S. would have to adopt measures, including the use of military power and traditional

diplomacy, that doctrinaire republicanism abhorred.

Third, the conduct of the war exploded the republican myth of the civilian militia's superiority to a professional military. Thus, during the three decades after the War of 1812, the Army would adopt generally recognized standards of training, discipline and doctrine. It would create branch schools, e.g., schools of infantry, cavalry and artillery.

In addition, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point began to provide highly motivated professional officers, many of whom were trained engineers, to lead the Army. The U.S. created the position of Commanding General of the Army, a uniformed officer in the chain of command between the president and secretary of war on the one hand and field commanders on the other. The lack of such a position had been sorely missed during the War of 1812.

Many of these military reforms were the work of John C. Calhoun, who proved to be one of the most innovative and effective secretaries of war (which was the title of the cabinet officer before 1947, when it was changed to secretary of defense).

Finally, although the war only re-established the status quo ante bellum, there were far less favorable possible outcomes. For instance, at the beginning of peace talks in 1814, the British demanded an Indian barrier state in the Old Northwest (including present-day Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and part of Minnesota) and a ban on American naval forces on the Great Lakes. It was only the American victory at Plattsburgh in 1814 that caused the British to drop these demands. Had the war not ended as it did, such an Indian barrier state could well have foreclosed or at least complicated American westward expansion.

This was no minor problem. American Indians today are portrayed as mere victims. But the Indian nations of the Old Northwest constituted a formidable threat to the U.S., especially in alliance with the British.

Likewise, much is often made of the fact that the American victory at New Orleans occurred on Jan. 8, 1815, after the signing of the peace treaty at Ghent. That treaty notwithstanding, it is extremely unlikely that, had they prevailed, the British would have given up what at that time was the most important port in North America without substantial American concessions, including territorial ones.

In short, the outcome of the War of 1812 mattered for the future of the United States. Americans should give this war its due.

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