

# The War of 1812 and the Legacy of Nationalism

Oliver Chi

*Newton North High School, 457 Walnut St, Newton, MA, 02460, USA*

## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes historical scholarship to examine the role of nationalism in causing the War of 1812, track the influence of nationalism in its historical memory, and observe how the war's legacy can still be observed in the modern day, particularly regarding the United States. In the years leading up to the war, relations between the United States and the United Kingdom soured considerably, due to several military and commercial causes. The aggressively anti-British Democratic-Republican Party, led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, was also a key factor in stirring up public opinion against Britain, which provided a popular mandate for Madison to declare war in 1812. Appeals to nationalism also colored Democratic-Republican efforts to maintain public support for the war throughout its course. After the war ended, it was initially remembered in the United States in nationalistic terms as a sort of Second War of Independence, which the Democratic-Republicans used to vindicate their support for the war and politically unify the country under them. Afterward, the memory of the war fell out of relevance following the Civil War and slowly faded from collective memory. To fully examine its subject, this article splits its literature review into two sections: One dedicated to looking at the war and its legacy through a political lens, and one through a social lens.

**Keywords:** War of 1812; Historical Memory; American Nationalism; Democratic-Republican Party; U.S.-U.K. Relations

## INTRODUCTION

War plays a large part in how people understand history. When individuals think of wars that define their country, they think of events steeped in their country's legend – events that, at least in their minds, define what

their country stands for and exemplify its glory. In the United States, for example, the Revolutionary War may bring to mind the “shot heard round the world” at Concord, George Washington and his men freezing in the cold at Valley Forge, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The Civil War conjures images of the firing on Fort Sumter, William Tecumseh Sherman's march through Georgia, and Abraham Lincoln speaking from a wooden platform on the Gettysburg battlefield. Sandwiched between these two great conflicts, paid far less respect from the general public than either but similarly impactful behind the scenes, is the War of 1812. Despite its relative lack of remembrance compared to conflicts like the American Revolution and the Civil War,

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**Corresponding author:** Oliver Chi, E-mail: [oliver.chi2008@gmail.com](mailto:oliver.chi2008@gmail.com).

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the War of 1812 was a watershed event in the history of North America. Between 1812 and 1815, the United States fought the United Kingdom, their Canadian colonies, and their Native American allies around the Great Lakes, the Gulf Coast, the Mississippi River basin, and the Atlantic (1). In 1815, the signing of the Treaty of Ghent restored the *status quo ante bellum* – no territory exchanged hands and the political status of the two countries returned to how they were prior to the war (2). Despite this lack of visible change, the legacy of the war was not so much in the borders it changed or the leaders it toppled as it was in influencing the generations that came after the conflict. The war's legacy is in building nations and narratives for the countries that fought in it – the modern-day United States and Canada. The memory of the war lives on, albeit diminished, and everything that came with it, including its causes and the context in which it was fought. According to recent scholars, the War of 1812 was primarily caused by an upsurge of national pride in the United States, which has heavily impacted the historical memory of the war and helped define how modern Americans regard their history.

On June 1, 1812, United States President James Madison made a speech before Congress asking them to declare war against Great Britain (3). In this speech, Madison cited several outstanding grievances to justify a declaration of war, many of which related to maritime commerce and trade. Chief among these were violations of American neutrality in the ongoing Napoleonic Wars between Britain and France, including the impressment of American sailors into service with the British Royal Navy, the enactment of blockades by the Royal Navy on American trade, and the related use of 'orders in council' by the British to search and seize American goods (3). Madison also decried British military support for Native Americans in the Northwest Territory in their war to prevent further encroachment by American settlers. Although all these were significant factors, the true causes of the war went far deeper. In particular, a chauvinistic, militaristic American nationalism had entrenched itself in the United States in the years since the American Revolution, whipping lingering resentment with Great Britain into a fever pitch. As a result, President Madison, along with the so-called "war hawks" clamoring for combat in Congress and much of the American public, viewed hostile British actions as infringing on the rights and honors entitled to the United States as a sovereign nation and therefore meriting a suitably hostile response in turn. The outbreak of war, which was made official by the passage of a declaration of war by Congress on June

18, 1812, only helped reinforce this nationalism (4). In the years after gaining independence, the fledgling United States faced many issues. Chief among them were the dysfunctional Articles of Confederation, defining limits to executive and legislative power, conflicts with Native Americans in the old Northwest, hyper-partisanship between Republicans and Federalists, and the embarrassing performance of a weak national army in the face of both the Northwest Indian Wars and domestic conflicts like the Whisky Rebellion; however, for the first time since gaining independence, Americans had the opportunity to ignore these differences and focus on a greater enemy. Although these sectional divisions were not confronted, under the cover of wartime unity they could now safely be disregarded. The fact that the United States held its own against the power of the British Empire was an immense achievement, even though the war ended in a stalemate. Perhaps more significantly, it also allowed U.S. delegates to assert American sovereignty at the negotiating table. A series of belated triumphs – Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans, and Stephen Decatur's final defeat of the Barbary pirates – allowed Americans to exaggerate their military performance and shored up national pride. As a result, the United States emerged from the War of 1812 energized and unified as it headed into the Era of Good Feelings.

Two hundred years later, this research paper analyzes historical scholarship to dissect how the War of 1812 shaped the nations and people it affected and observes what legacy it left behind. Thus, this paper will be organized by each article's main methodological focus. As this paper's purpose is to discuss nationalism and the political legacy of the war, and because the political effects of the war were generally felt very soon after its end, articles looking at the impact of the war through a political lens will be put first. Considering that the war's social effects may be felt more strongly in the present day, those with a more social focus will be placed second.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Political Lens

The politics of the War of 1812 revolved around the struggle to garner and keep public support either for or against the war – initially regarding the start of the war itself and subsequently perpetuating the war effort. In "Mr. Madison's War' or the Dynamics of Early American Nationalism?," Jasper M. Trautsch largely concurs with this assessment. Trautsch's article focuses on finding causes for the war but emphasizes the role of James

Madison's administration in issuing the actual declaration of war. Trautsch primarily credits the rise of American nationalism for bringing the so-called "war hawks" into Congress and providing a popular mandate for the Madison administration to declare war (5). In addition, he argues that President Madison's final decision to go to war was motivated by two factors. The first was a desire to control the deluge of nationalism by producing a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect that would unify the country under him as a wartime president (5). The second was concerns about Britain undermining American republicanism, with the ultimate goal of destroying the United States the British-led coalition had done to Revolutionary France (5). Building on preconceptions of British intervention, it led Americans to view almost every action by Britain that affected American interests as intrinsically hostile. Trautsch asserts that this "pressure from below" severely limited President James Madison's options regarding negotiations with Britain and ultimately spurred his decision to declare war (5). Paul Hanseling's "The War of 1812: The Rise of American Nationalism" also explores the varied causes of the war, including the impressment of American sailors by the Royal Navy, attacks on American shipping, and British support for Native Americans warring with American settlers in the Northwest Territory. Hanseling argues that all of these seemingly unrelated causes informed the rise of a militaristic form of American nationalism in the years preceding the war. Like Trautsch, he also asserts that the war was directly caused by the perceived affront to American honor by Britain, which led the American public to react hypersensitively to British actions (6). Hanseling specifically cites a quote from Madison in the speech he made to Congress asking to declare war, in which he declares "We behold, in fine, on the side of Great Britain a state of War against the United States; and on the side of the United States, a state of peace towards Great Britain" (6). Hanseling uses this quote to illustrate the narrative that Madison and his Republican Party sought to promote: that Britain had violated American sovereignty and neutrality enough times that they were effectively already at war (6).

In contrast to the broad focus of the previous two articles, Kristin Stone's subject is far more parochial. In her article "Under a Cloak of Nationalism: Wrangling Public Opinion During the War of 1812," Stone examines the political geography of Frederick County, Maryland, before and during the war, asserting that the consensus of Democratic-Republican domination throughout those years was not as strong as it seemed by chronicling the fight for power between Federalist and Republican

politicians in newspapers (7). Even with the success of Madison's desired unifying effect, Stone contends that the Federalists were always lurking in the background, ready to strike. They attacked Thomas Jefferson's unpopular trade embargo on Britain, used their newly improved press and electioneering infrastructure to make populist appeals, and engaged in fierce battles with the Republicans for control of public opinion (7). The two parties fought each other in the press and with campaign leaflets, although to differing degrees. The local Republicans, under *Weekly Register* editor Hezekiah Niles, gained the upper hand by seeming to 'stay above the partisan fray,' appealing to national unity amid the war by inviting moderate Federalists to their side in support of the war effort. Federalist leaders, however, alienated them by castigating them for not doing enough to oppose it (7). Federalists in the New England states met in Hartford in late 1814 to air their grievances against the Madison government, with even some talk of seceding from the Union altogether (7). However, news of Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans and the signing of the Treaty of Ghent made their demands for constitutional amendments seem out of touch. Stone connects these two reasons to the rapid decline of the Federalist Party following the end of the war, pointing out Niles' efforts to recruit moderate Federalists as emblematic of the strategies that would pave the way for the Republican domination of American politics that characterized the subsequent Era of Good Feelings (7). While Stone engages very little with the causes of the war, in contrast to Hanseling and Trautsch's approaches, she does engage with the public opinion that influenced the decision to go to war, specifically citing Republican newspapers for encouraging war. While Hanseling and Trautsch place particular emphasis on the "war hawk" faction of Congress as an indicator of the public mandate of the war, Stone's focus on the reactions of one specific county provides insight into how contentious the political fight over the war really was on a community level. Stone also provides excellent insight into the overall Republican struggle to maintain control of public opinion and the reasons for their ultimate triumph over the Federalists.

In his article "'It Taught Our Enemies a Lesson:' The Battle of New Orleans and the Destruction of the Federalist Party," Joseph F. Stoltz, III elaborates on the impact of the War of 1812 on the destruction of the Federalists, as the title would suggest. Stoltz focuses specifically on the optics of the Battle of New Orleans, asserting that Andrew Jackson's smashing victory over British troops especially caught public attention because it was one of

the few true American victories in a war that had not thus far been going well for America (8). The story of 4,000 citizen militia troops defeating a British force with every possible advantage – they had three times the soldiers the Americans did, better equipment, and they were boosted by their recent defeat of Napoleon across the Atlantic – was republished across the country in newspapers, plays, books, and every other conceivable form of media in the early republic (8). The Republicans saw a golden opportunity to embellish the role of the primarily rural Western militia infantry in the victory rather than the urban French-speaking artillery that had inflicted most of the British casualties. In doing so, they could promote the Jeffersonian vision of an agrarian America defended by yeoman farmers, paint the Federalists as against republicanism (especially considering the recent Hartford Convention), and vindicate their reliance on militias as America's primary defensive force (8). The Republicans made ample use of the fact that those militiamen were mostly Southerners and Westerners, regions that were key areas of support for the Republicans, and that they were mostly civilian farmers who had volunteered to stand against the might of the British Empire (8). Ultimately, the Republicans attributed the reason the industrializing North had failed to achieve a major victory to the idea that they did not have as much drive to defend their country because they did not own land (8). In addition, despite the relatively poor performance of civilian militias in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, both their success at New Orleans and longstanding Republican fears of a standing army gave them a short boost in popularity before ultimately being replaced by professional armies and police forces. In relation to the Hartford Convention, Stoltz also points out that the Republicans managed to paint the Federalists as traitorous despite the relative moderation of the convention, making claims about supposed attempts to leave the Union altogether (8). Thus, when the charismatic Revolutionary War veteran James Monroe assumed the presidency, his popularity along with the onslaught of Republican propaganda following the Battle of New Orleans proved a death blow to the Federalists, which effectively ceased to be a significant political force after the election of 1816 (8). Stoltz also discusses the revitalization of American nationalism and pride that the Battle of New Orleans reignited. Stoltz's discussion of post-war American nationalism compliments Trautsch's conversation about patriotism and pride as a motivator for the war. In addition, similar to Stone, Stoltz focuses on the broader political implications of a small geographic area. However, while Stone examines Frederick County as a gauge of wider

public sentiment, Stoltz's analysis of the Battle of New Orleans is the other way around, analyzing how it affected national politics. Furthermore, Stoltz also elaborates on the dynamics that Stone discusses, by breaking down the political effects of one of the biggest events that the Republican party exploited for political gain.

In summary, the main political conclusions that can be derived from Trautsch, Hanseling, Stone, and Stoltz's works relate to both the causes and the outcomes of the war. Firstly, the War of 1812 was primarily motivated by American pride encouraged by a growing American nationalistic movement, which was damaged by what they saw as Britain's lack of respect for their sovereignty on the high seas and in the Northwest Territory. Declaring war was primarily advocated by the Democratic-Republican Party and the Madison administration. Secondly, a series of well-timed events, including the Hartford Convention, success in the Third Barbary War, the favorable terms of the Treaty of Ghent, and victory in the Battle of New Orleans, helped obscure a lackluster American performance in the war. This would also vindicate the Republicans' decision to go to war, and in addition to the Hartford Convention ruining the antiwar Federalist Party's public image, would also solidify Republican dominance in the American political arena for a decade following the war.

### **Social Lens**

A subject that has received increasing attention in recent years is the impact the War of 1812 left on the memories of the countries and people who fought it – or, in other words, what the war's impact was socially. Donald Hickey, a prominent historian of the war, provides an excellent example thereof in his article "A Note on the Origins of 'Uncle Sam', 1810–1820." Hickey reviews several different origin stories for the United States national mascot, beginning with the most traditional version. This story argues that the figure of Uncle Sam was inspired by Samuel Wilson, a meat merchant from Troy, New York who supplied the U.S. Army with meat throughout the war (9). Wilson supposedly stamped his barrels with "U.S." for the United States, and when an employee asked what it stood for, another jokingly replied "Uncle Sam" (9). Thus, the byname of Uncle Sam began to refer to the U.S. government. Hickey notes that this is the version that has received the most popular and official recognition, but does list a few problems with this story. Not least of which was the fact that the supposed employee did not know what "U.S." stood for, and that newspapers in Troy completely failed to mention the name of Wilson, a prominent local citizen, when using



or mentioning the usage of the nickname “Uncle Sam” (9). Hickey lists a few other possible explanations for the origins of the nickname, most of which simply seem to be “jocular extensions of the letters ‘U.S.’” Regardless of its origin, Hickey points out that the nickname gained widespread usage through the War of 1812, mostly by Federalist newspapers editorializing against the war (9). In this way, personifying the federal government became an effective tool of mockery and satire, as seen in many newspaper editorials complaining about poor pay for militiamen. Uncle Sam became more of a neutral symbol in the 1820s as the partisanship of the early republic died down, and from there became a popular symbol of the government (9). He assumed his familiar modern appearance in the cartoons of Thomas Nast in the 1870s, which was solidified in the iconic “I WANT YOU” poster during World War I, creating the national personification that many Americans know today (9). So, while other historians focus on the many separate legacies of the War of 1812 at large, Hickey focuses on one specific point of interest that happened to originate within the war, providing an interesting microcosm of the legacy of the War of 1812 on American popular culture. Despite this, Hickey heavily focuses on historical memory and features events and symbols whose original associations have been obscured or forgotten over time.

After the war ended, it left a lasting mark on the countries involved. Matthew Dennis explores this in his article “Reflections on a Bicentennial: The War of 1812 in American Public Memory,” which aptly focuses on the idea of historical memory – how certain groups of people remember historical events – regarding the War of 1812 in the United States. Dennis contends that the war’s historical memory began by focusing on both “exaggerating American military might” – a point that Stoltz also raises in his article on the Battle of New Orleans, although with more of a singular focus – and to unify the country under the banner of victory (10). Despite the United States’ ineffective performance in the actual war, the war’s historical memory was far more unifying. The Treaty of Ghent, Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans, and Stephen Decatur’s final defeat of the Barbary pirates who had long plagued American trade in the Mediterranean were a godsend for President Madison’s struggling Republicans, all of which seemed to confirm America’s growth into a great power able to assert itself overseas and hold its own against the British (10). Interestingly, Dennis seems to indicate that this could have impacted American willingness to prioritize war over negotiation as their main tool of diplomacy throughout

the 19th century, foreshadowing future conflicts like the Mexican–American War as the United States blazed a path westward (10). Dennis notes that despite the bombast and triumph that characterized American nationalism at that time, incidents in the War of 1812 seemed to begin a trend of Americans portraying themselves as victims (10). A prime example of this was the response to the 1813 River Raisin Massacre. After defeating an American force at the River Raisin, a band of Native American allies of the British slaughtered 30-60 American prisoners (10). The resulting public outcry further helped to obscure the string of defeats the Americans had endured over the course of the war, played into stereotypes of “Native savagery,” and demonized the British (10). Dennis asserts that this narrative of victimhood, in which Native Americans became the aggressors, served as a justification for the displacement and murder of Native Americans as America moved further and further west. In time, though River Raisin was forgotten, the narrative of victimhood was not. In addition, Dennis ties the memory of the War of 1812 to a revival of the Revolutionary War mentality, seeing the new conflict as another instance in which Americans had to defend their homeland from the British – even though Britain had no plans to recolonize the United States. Considering the divisiveness of the late war, the Republicans chose to direct the outpouring of public triumph toward a celebration of the Revolution and its values (10). Commemorations for veterans of the Revolution were also now grouped with those of the War of 1812, as many had also served in the latter war. As more and more veterans of the Revolution passed away, their memories became more and more associated with the War of 1812, these groups served to prolong the memory of the Revolution and transfer its legacy to the latter war (10). In addition, the veterans’ associations to whom these veterans belonged were often exclusionary and racist, obscuring the diversity of the war’s participants. While their experiences were greatly overshadowed, Irish Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans also earned some limited respect for their service from the general populace (10). Dennis notes that the traditions of their military service would eventually lead to their full citizenship and path to equality.

Eventually, the war’s memory faded throughout the years, especially after the Civil War. By the beginning of World War I, it was sometimes referenced as a footnote in America’s relationship with Britain, a curious memento of the virulent Anglophobia of days past (10). The memory of the war was buried in the memories of other wars that earned greater prestige for Americans, and by the 1960s,

celebrations focused on the War of 1812 were local and small (10). Dennis concludes with an examination of two of the most enduring popular legacies of the war: the figure of Uncle Sam, which Hickey also describes, and the “Star-Spangled Banner,” the national anthem. Dennis, in his sweeping focus on everything that the War of 1812 affected, makes several interjections into the discussion of the war and its legacy. Like Stoltz, Dennis incorporates a focus on perceived American military glory and how that informed subsequent American perceptions of the war. However, Dennis considers multiple examples while Stoltz only explores the Battle of New Orleans. Both Dennis and Hickey also provide an interesting link between modern American culture and the rampant nationalism that characterized the era of the war, particularly patriotic symbols. On the surface, Dennis also seems to analyze the opposite side of the war that historians like Trautsch and Hanseling do, focusing on outcomes rather than causes. Regardless, Dennis builds off of their work to come to his own conclusions by exploring how the causes that Trautsch and Hanseling describe informed those outcomes – for example, by looking at American relations with Native Americans of the Northwest Territory. Trautsch and Hanseling describe how Native Americans were resented for their friendly relations with Britain and their resistance to encroachment by American settlers, with this resentment curdling into hatred during their alliance with the British during the war (10). These interactions helped to set the stage for future interactions between Native Americans and the United States. In this way, Hanseling and Trautsch’s works bookend many of the points that Dennis makes.

Though the War of 1812 greatly impacted the development of the United States, it was not purely an American affair. Karim M. Tiro explores the internationality of the war by focusing on its commemoration in modern-day Canada and the United States in his article “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: The War of 1812 in Canada and the United States in 2012.” Immediately, Tiro places heavy emphasis on the general lack of public recognition of the war in both countries, although he notes that interest in Canada has risen due to a heavy effort by the Canadian government to promote the war’s bicentennial (11). He places particular emphasis on the Canadian side of remembrance, noting that the war was fought mainly in Canadian territory, close to major population centers. In addition, he also notes that in the absence of a singular, dramatic origin story for the Canadian nation like the American Revolution, the War of 1812 fit the bill nicely (11). Upper Canada (modern Ontario) was at the time dominated by upper-class Britons

and Loyalist exiles from the American Revolution, who used the narrative of repelling American invasion to both reject American republican values and promote their own hierarchical, conservative ideology which connected themselves more strongly to Britain and its empire (11). To put things simply, war was much more exciting than the drab politicking that constituted the 1867 unification of Canada for an origin story. Tiro pins the Canadian government’s expenditure on commemorating the bicentennial – no less than 50 million Canadian dollars in total – on Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s desire to return to the older form of Canadian nationalism mentioned above, promoting pride in Canada’s military and its heritage as a British colony (11). Tiro contends that Harper did this specifically to undermine the multiculturalist vision of Canadian identity that the rival Liberal Party has traditionally promoted (11). Despite derision from much of the Canadian public, particularly among French Canadians with few ties to the British Empire, the political controversy surrounding this revised origin story has nonetheless boosted awareness of the war in Canada (11). In contrast, Tiro highlights American commemorations as sporadic, scattered, and generally ineffective at promoting the war at all, and only having much of an effect in areas directly affected by the war, like Maryland (11). He attributes this lack of American recognition to the war not fitting comfortably in the traditional narrative of American history when closely scrutinized. The secondary desire of many ‘war hawks’ to take Canada, the defeat of the Native Americans in the Northwest, and the mass dispossessions of Manifest Destiny that were influenced by the conflict are memories that Americans prefer to forget Tiro credits the War of 1812 with also influencing American perceptions of Canada, as the failure of the invasion caused Canada to be consciously, then subconsciously, ignored by American historical memory.

Tiro and Donald Hickey share some commonalities in their focus on the lack of memory of the war. Hickey, in his article on Uncle Sam, details how a symbol that originated during the war was utilized for different purposes until its origins and initial meaning were completely obscured as the war was forgotten by public memory. A parallel may be found in Tiro’s discussion of Harper’s use of the little-remembered war itself to shore up his political agenda and Canadian nationalism (11). Commemoration of the War of 1812 is also a topic that Dennis raises. However, Dennis mostly focuses on the lack of remembrance as indicative of the public’s lack of interest in the war overall. With a biting and gently mocking tone, Tiro contends that the

commemorations of the war on both sides – Canada more than the United States – had opportunities to raise the little-remembered war's public profile and use its memory to control public narratives, providing fresh insight into public memory of the war in Canada especially.

In conclusion, the primary social legacies of the War of 1812 are relatively widespread, including iconic patriotic symbols such as the United States' national mascot, Uncle Sam. In addition, both the United States and Canada sought to use narratives surrounding the war to bolster national pride. Despite these impacts, however, the war itself remains mostly unknown to the general public in both the United States and Canada – although less so in the latter due to Harper's aggressive promotion of the war ahead of its bicentennial.

## CONCLUSION

The War of 1812 appears to be a mostly “forgotten conflict” today, as Donald Hickey once so succinctly put it (12). Its memory would seem condemned to be yet another collection of names and dates that bored middle schoolers learn about and immediately forget. However, in many ways, its legacy remains alive in American memory and culture, in its national symbols, like the “Star-Spangled Banner” and Uncle Sam. It is fitting that the remnants of the war mirror its causes. The war was primarily caused by an upsurge of national pride, and its memory is now overshadowed by larger-than-life heroes and overwhelming victories. While the War of 1812 has received far greater attention in recent years, a great deal about it remains under-discussed. In particular, scholars could further explore the perspectives of marginalized groups like Native Americans, women, and African Americans, all of whom played varied, although major roles throughout the war, which remain underdeveloped and underseen. While some historians, including Matthew Dennis, have begun to elaborate on the involvement of these groups, more research is required to understand the full extent of their participation and their impact. Regardless, by examining the causes and legacy of the War of 1812 we can gain a far greater understanding of not only the war itself, but also how it has affected countries in the modern day.

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