

THE  
HUDSON  
RIVER  
VALLEY  
REVIEW

*A Journal of Regional Studies*

**MARIST**

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Tel: 845-575-3052

Fax: 845-575-3176

E-mail: [hrvi@marist.edu](mailto:hrvi@marist.edu)

Web: [www.hudsonrivervalley.org](http://www.hudsonrivervalley.org)

Post: *The Hudson River Valley Review*

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## From the Editors

Virtually every public sporting event begins with a tribute to the War of 1812. “The Star Spangled Banner,” whose words were inspired by the “red glare” of the rockets fired upon Fort McHenry by the British in 1814, is the only leftover from the conflict that remains in the public consciousness. That is a shame. Insight into this war is essential for understanding a pivotal moment in our history, when America endured the growing pains of a free, newly united nation and literally fought for acceptance on the world stage. Rediscovering the war also means reconnecting with a fascinating cast of heroes—from Dolley Madison and Tecumseh to “Old Tippecanoe” William Henry Harrison.

In this bicentennial year of the War of 1812’s commencement, we present two articles that we hope will entice readers to revisit the conflict. One offers an excellent background on the causes of the war and provides a wealth of resources to pursue additional study. The other focuses on two pivotal naval battles that occurred relatively close to the Hudson Valley—on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain.

Interestingly, another article in this issue recounts an important but oft-ignored naval battle during the American Revolution that laid the groundwork for the Continental Army’s victory at Saratoga. (It also took place on Lake Champlain.) Two authors spotlight works by nineteenth-century painters of widely divergent renown—an iconic depiction of John Brown by the unjustly forgotten Louis Ransom and two portraits by Ammi Phillips, regarded as one of his generation’s preeminent folk artists. Finally, we offer a look at how New England migrants helped their Dutch predecessors turn Albany into an all-American city.

## Contributors

**Warren F. Broderick** is emeritus archivist at the New York State Archives. He received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in American Studies from Union College. He has authored five books, edited or contributed to ten others, and written a number of journal articles on natural history, the history of American ceramics, and literary and local historical subjects. His most recent works include an introduction to a new edition of *Small Town* by Granville Hicks (2004) and *Grafton, Berlin, and Petersburg* in the Images of America Series (2006). Mr. Broderick is archivist/curator of the Lansingburgh Historical Society.

Author of *The Sea Was Always There* (Fireship Press, 2012), **Rear Admiral (Ret.) Joseph F. Callo** also wrote the award-winning *John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior* (Naval Institute Press, 2006), was U.S. author/editor for *Who's Who in Naval History* (Routledge, 2004), and has written three books about Admiral Lord Nelson. Prior to writing full time, he was an award-winning television producer and writer. A *Naval History* "Author of the Year," Admiral Callo is a graduate of Yale University's former Naval Reserve Officers Training Program and served in the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Amphibious Force. For ten years, he was an adjunct associate professor at St. John's University in New York City, where he taught courses on writing for mass media.

**Elizabeth M. Covart** completed her doctorate at the University of California, Davis, in 2011. Her dissertation, *Collision on the Hudson: Identity, Migration, and the Improvement of Albany, New York, 1750-1830*, examines identity creation and adaptation in early America. In addition to revising her dissertation for book publication, Liz also serves as a contributing editor for the *Journal of the Early Americas*.

**Walter G. Ritchie, Jr.** is an independent museum consultant, decorative arts specialist, and architectural historian with an expertise in nineteenth-century American architecture, interiors, and decorative arts. He writes, lectures, and teaches courses on a variety of decorative arts subjects in addition to organizing exhibitions for museums and researching and developing furnishings plans for the restoration of period rooms in historic house museums. He has worked with both Stair Galleries, in Hudson, and South Bay Auctions, in East Moriches, New York. Prior to that, he served as Executive Director and Curator of the Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; of the Lee-Fendall House, Alexandria, Virginia; of the Germantown Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and of Raynham Hall, Oyster Bay, New York.

**Major Gregory M. Tomlin** is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the U.S. Military Academy, where he teaches courses in American and Cold War history. A doctoral candidate at George Washington University, he is completing his dissertation, *The Fishbowl World: Edward R. Murrow, John F. Kennedy, and the Cold War*. He is coauthor (with Caleb Cage) of *The Gods of Diyala: Transfer of Command in Iraq*, published by Texas A&M University Press (2008).

**Colonel (Ret.) Harold W. Youmans** is editor of the *Journal of the War of 1812*. He has lectured at symposia and conventions in more than fifteen states and the District of Columbia. In 2011 the DeVane Chapter, Daughters of the War of 1812, honored him with its Spirit of 1812 Award, presented to individuals with a “distinguished record of study, promotion and dedication to the preservation of the history or people, places, and events of the War of 1812.” Col. Youmans served in the U.S. Army as an infantryman for more than twenty-eight years. He earned a B.S. degree from the University of Tampa, an M.S. degree from the University of South Florida, and a J.D. degree from the University of Florida.

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## Call for Essays

*The Hudson River Valley Review* will consider essays on all aspects of the Hudson River Valley—its intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history, its prehistory, architecture, literature, art, and music—as well as essays on the ideas and ideologies of regionalism itself. All articles in *The Hudson River Valley Review* undergo peer analysis.

## Submission of Essays and Other Materials

HRVR prefers that essays and other written materials be submitted as one double-spaced typescript, generally no more than thirty pages long with endnotes, along with a CD with a clear indication of the operating system, the name and version of the word-processing program, and the names of documents on the disk.

Illustrations or photographs that are germane to the writing should accompany the hard copy. Otherwise, the submission of visual materials should be cleared with the editors beforehand. Illustrations and photographs are the responsibility of the authors. Scanned photos or digital art must be 300 pixels per inch (or greater) at 8 in. x 10 in. (between 7 and 20 mb). No responsibility is assumed for the loss of materials. An e-mail address should be included whenever possible.

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Since HRVR is interdisciplinary in its approach to the region and to regionalism, it will honor the forms of citation appropriate to a particular discipline, provided these are applied consistently and supply full information. Endnotes rather than footnotes are preferred. In matters of style and form, HRVR follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

# THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

Vol. 29, No. 1, Autumn 2012

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**On the Cover:** *View of State Street from St. Peter’s downhill to Dutch Church*, James Eights (1798-1882). c.1850, Watercolor on paper, ht. 11" x 12 ¾," Albany Institute of History & Art, 1954.59.70

## Scholarly Forum: The War of 1812 in the Upper Hudson Region

*In recognition of the Bicentennial of the War of 1812, often considered America's forgotten war, HRVR is looking at where the conflict manifested in the upper Hudson region. Although the most famous aspects of the war are probably the burning of Washington and Andrew Jackson's victory in New Orleans, the following forum reveals that New York State's upper Hudson witnessed considerable action as well.*

### *The Origins of The War of 1812:*

# Causes, Reinterpretations, and Ruminations

*Harold W. Youmans*

## Mr. Madison's War

In its broadest sense, the origins of the War of 1812 can be said to date from September 3, 1783. It was on that day the negotiators representing the thirteen colonies on the eastern slope of North America and His Britannic Majesty, King George III (1738-1820), meeting in Paris, agreed to end the war that had raged between those two entities since 1775. Yes, the thirteen united colonies, now the United States, were to be free, independent, and sovereign: a state among states in the international community. A nation!

Almost from the start, those brave founding brothers discovered that keeping the peace and growing a nation was to be as challenging as winning the Revolutionary War. Almost from the very beginning, the nations of Europe with whom we quickly found we must have peaceful relations in order to prosper were at times uninterested or even hostile to American interests. The Founders were not unintelligent men. They recognized that statecraft, economic influences, the ability to wage war, and grow were all within their power. One after the other, Britain and France treated the young nation in a manner suited to their national interests. In the 1790s, more and more Americans realized that they, too, had to assert their own self-interest, or fail as a nation.

For the past 200 years, challenged diplomatic and economic historians have debated the causes of the war. Some of these writers came to the debate with a predisposition, others employed the logic of their academic discipline, and still others were writing for the audiences of their time. What we may find is that war between nations almost never has a single cause. One cause will bring the political "right" on board, another the "left." One or two causes will combine to produce a majority in the Legislature or among the advisors of the Executive. Some decisions in a deliberative, political setting may be inexplicable. While the causes of the War of 1812 are well-known, the ques-

tions for today are which, if any, causes predominated the others; which combination produced the “coalition of the willing” in 1812, and which, viewed today, withstand the judgment of history laid bare?

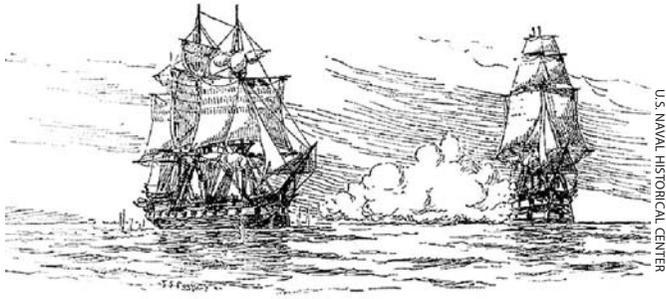
Professor George Rogers Taylor (1895-1983) provided in his short *The War of 1812: Past Justifications and Present Interpretations* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), a convenient list of the causes of the war. These were: British violation of American rights of uninterrupted commerce on the high seas, impressment of seamen, arming and incitement of Indians on the frontier, the desire of Americans to annex Canada and Florida, the belief that British measures were responsible for depressing prices, and insults to national honor and self-respect.

This essay will explore but not fully answer the questions bedeviling historians these many years. As we examine their explanations of the causes, ask yourself: Is the commentator's reasoning logical and consistent? Are their arguments plausible? Are they still pertinent? Are the declared motives of the contemporary participants the real ones or are they presented merely to sway public opinion?

## The Challenges to American Sovereignty

As the first decade of the new nineteenth century opened, the main challenges to American sovereignty were primarily economic. Along the Atlantic coast, trade with customers and suppliers in Europe and the West Indies dominated economic thought. The export trade had soared. Shipbuilding rose in importance. With Britain occupied in the French Revolutionary War after 1793 and her merchant fleet busy with supporting British interests on the Continent, America was spreading her influence. China had been reached and was becoming a regular port of call. The South Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans were open to American shipping. The new nation had proven that she would assert her rights when she took on the French in 1797 and the Barbary Pirates in 1801. With France and Britain at war, the Americans expanded into the carrying trade, serving the interests of both belligerents. Napoleon's Continental System, seeking to drive the British from European ports, was countered by Britain's economic warfare policy, the Orders in Council. The Americans were being drawn in. Each move by France or reaction by Britain put additional limitations on who Americans could trade with, what goods her ships could carry, and where they could dock. America's economy was being controlled by the belligerents. American independence, at least her economic sovereignty, was being frittered away.

As the Napoleonic War continued with the collapse of the Peace of Amiens in 1803, Britain suffered more and more manpower problems, not the least of which was the need to man the vast navy she had to maintain. Shipboard life in those days was a “floating hell” and desertion was high. Many men assiduously avoided naval service: some by immigration (mainly to the United States), some by “self-mutilation,” and some by active enlistment in the American merchant marine. The British were having none of that; throughout the prewar period they exercised the right to stop vessels on the



**Action between USS Chesapeake and HMS Leopard, 22 June 1807.** Sketch by Fred S. Cozzens, copied from his 1897 book “Our Navy—Its Growth and Achievements.” It depicts *Leopard*, at right, firing on the *Chesapeake* to enforce a demand that she submit to a search of her crew for British Navy deserters. Photo #: NH 74526

high seas and “impress” known or suspected British citizens into their Navy. There is some question as to the total number of seamen impressed during those times, but there was no question when the captain of the HMS *Leopard* hailed, fired on, and took seamen from the USS *Chesapeake* in 1807. As the fortunes of war shifted, the rate of searches and impressment spiked in 1811.

In the West, friction was developing along three lines. To the old Northwest, Americans immediately came into conflict with British interests in Canada, as both nations rushed to supply the seemingly insatiable appetite for furs and fur products. On the Kentucky and Tennessee farmsteads and in the old Southwest, access to markets down the Mississippi River brought the U.S. into renewed conflict with a decaying Spain, a reemerging France, and the ever-hovering British. While Americans west of the Appalachians sought markets for their goods, foreign influences at New Orleans—above all, Spain and England, which supported the Native Americans—created obstacles to their growth. Suspicions of British support for the Native Americans did no small harm to the fragile peace between the former colonial master and its independent offspring.

## National Interests at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century

As the first decade of the nineteenth century came to a close, it appeared to many in the American government that Great Britain was the greater threat to America; by 1810, the Madison Administration was clearly focused on that threat. What was unclear at the time to most Americans engaged in this diplomatic effort was the depth of British commitment to its perceived national interests. Nearly all of Britain’s actions between 1793 and 1815 can be attributed to either one of two overriding national interests—first the defeat of Napoleon (1769-1821) and his allies on the Continent, and second, Britain’s need to maintain access to markets to feed not only its armies, but its people at home. This meant a strong and positive assertion of political, military, and economic power

over the transatlantic and worldwide trade routes. These interests brought them into direct and continuing conflict with the United States.

By 1810, American national interests were no less compelling. It sought to protect and grow its “carrying trade,” assert influence among its border areas (by annexation, if necessary), eliminate any threats caused by contact with the Native Americans, and ultimately gain and maintain respect among the nations of the world.

## Diplomatic Postures and Policies

The British government, controlled most often by the Tories, had no real need to treat with the Americans so long as Britain was at war with Napoleon. They did make some early concessions when agreeing to withdraw from the Northwest Territories and submit to arbitration as conditions of the Jay Treaty (1795-96), but after 1807 the Orders in Council were stridently and strictly enforced by the Royal Navy, instigating a growing resentment among a wide swath of Americans. Further, both Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and James Madison (1751-1836), with their Republican allies—at heart pacifists—tried “peaceful” economic coercion to bring around the English policy. Both of their diplomatic attempts, the Embargo (1807) and the Non-Intercourse Acts (1809-11), each with their political variants, failed to prevent tensions from rising. What these policies really did was to play into Napoleon’s hands without extracting any meaningful concessions from England.

Although certainly not insignificant, these diplomatic postures and policies of both Britain and the United States were unavailing. They failed to address the perceived needs of both; then as now, without recognition of the needs and objectives of opposing political entities, there is no avenue of peaceful reconciliation. War was coming in 1810. It was only a matter of time.

## President Madison’s War Message

By June 1, 1812, that time had run out. Madison sent his War Message to the Congress. It recounted failed attempts at diplomacy and the events that had driven him to this end. In less than three weeks, the United States was at war. Politicians and editors at the time sharply disagreed over the real causes of the war. Historians and theorists have continued to disagree over them ever since. Nonetheless from June 1812 on, any discussion of the war’s causes have begun with those outlined by Madison in his War Message. In the U.S., the Orders in Council, impressment, search and seizure, and British support for Indian deprecations were held up at the time as just causes for war. Over time and particularly in the twentieth century, however, we have seen major shifts by historians as they interpret the causes of the war.

Two works are of particular interest to those studying the causes of the War of 1812. These are: *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961) by University of Michigan Professor Bradford Perkins (b. 1925) and *The Causes of The War of 1812* (Philadelphia, PA: University of

**BY THE PRESIDENT  
OF THE  
*United States of America,*  
**A PROCLAMATION:****

**W**HEREAS the Congress of the United States, by virtue of the Constituted Authority vested in them, have declared by their act, bearing date the eighteenth day of the present month that WAR exists between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and the dependencies thereof, and the United States of America and their territories; Now, therefore, I, **JAMES MADISON**, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim the same to all whom it may concern: and I do specially enjoin on all persons holding offices, civil or military, under the authority of the United States, that they be vigilant and zealous, & discharging the duties respectively incident thereto: And I do moreover exhort all the good people of the United States, as they love their country; as they value the precious heritage derived from the virtue and valor of their fathers; as they feel the wrongs which have forced on them the last resort of injured nations; and as they consult the best means, under the blessing of Divine Providence, of fabricating its calamities; that they exert themselves in preserving order, in promoting concord, in maintaining the authority and the efficacy of the laws; and in supporting and invigorating all the measures which may be adopted by the Constituted Authorities, for obtaining a speedy, a just, and an honorable peace.

**I**N TESTIMONY WHEREOF I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed to these presents.

(SEAL)

**D**ONE at the City of Washington, the nineteenth day of June, one thousand eight hundred and twelve, and of the Independence of the United States the thirty-sixth.

(Signed)

**JAMES MADISON**,

By the President,  
(Signed)

**JAMES MONROE**, Secretary of State.

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D21 35

*By the President of the United States of America, a proclamation. Washington, 1812*

Pennsylvania Press, 1962) by University of Wisconsin Professor Reginald Horsman (b. 1931). Besides adding much that is new and revealing on the internal political situation in Great Britain as well as the United States, both authors make a serious attempt to weigh the various factors involved in the coming war. They are both used in this essay.

## The Maritime Causes

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain and France had been at war for almost a decade. Neither paid much attention to what came to be called the “Neutral Rights” of non-belligerents. America claimed its neutrality from the beginning of the conflict at the same time that it experienced a tremendous growth in trade. It was inevitable that these policies (proclaimed neutrality with an insistence on neutral rights) were to produce conflict with the warring European powers. Neither Britain nor France would concede the right of any third party to trade with its enemies. The seeds of the conflict sprouted from these opposing interests.

The maritime issues were directly mentioned in Madison’s War Message and for decades were the most frequently quoted causes. However, if these were the causes, many asked why the U.S. had not gone to war earlier, when the rates of both impressment and seizures were higher than in 1812? As early as 1890, Henry Adams (1838-1918), the great-grandson of John Adams, in his monumental, nine-volume *History of the United States* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), hinted at a reinterpretation

tion providing a partial answer. Adams castigated both British policy (suggesting that it was a challenge to America's honor and interests) and the Republicans, whom he cast as incompetent. Nonetheless, he still gave maritime issues as the primary cause.

These views also were also echoed by John Bach McMaster (1852-1932) in *The History of the American People* (New York, NY: D. Appleton, 1885-1913) and Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) in *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (Boston, MA: Little-Brown, 1905). Both the engineer-turned-historian and the naval theorist and philosopher, respectively, held that the British violations of American rights on the high seas were the prime cause of the war.

By the 1940s, many historians were still maintaining these as the primary cause. However, Alfred Leroy Burt (1888-1971), a Canadian-born Rhodes scholar writing in his *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America from the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace after the War of 1812* (New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1940) and Warren H. Goodman, in his "Origins of the War of 1812: A Survey of Changing Interpretations," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (MVHR) 28/2 (September 1941): 171-186, began to show the subtlety of the issue by discussing the role of international political theory and the failure of America's policy of neutrality. Burt went so far as to state that Madison's mention of the Indian menace in the War Message was an afterthought and even Congress did not take that cause seriously.

Some writers maintained that America could have avoided the war if its diplomatic postures had been more attuned to the realities facing Britain. These writers are represented by Louis Martin Sears (1885-1960), who posits in his *Jefferson and the Embargo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1927) that Jefferson and Madison were idealistic dreamers. Another writer pointing to the U.S. diplomatic failure in dealing with the maritime issues was the English economic historian Herbert Heaton (1890-1973). In his "Non-Importation, 1806-1812," *Journal of Economic History* 1/2 (November 1941): 118-197, Heaton pointed to the total failure of American counter moves vis-a-vis the Orders in Council. Leonard D. White (1891-1958) in his *The Jeffersonians, a Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York, NY: Macmillan & Co., 1951), in the end simply said that American diplomacy only delayed, but did not cause the war. The other two authors above would have agreed. Britain was simply not as vulnerable to this type of economic coercion as Jefferson and Madison thought.

The maritime issues were real enough. The U.S. response to the British policies was in the end unavailing. It is fully within the logic of reason to lay at the feet of these British policies a cause for war in 1812. The persistent question today, however, is what would have been the result if America had 1) abandoned its policy of neutrality early on in the Anglo-French conflict, or 2) moved more aggressively on the diplomatic front, or 3) simply waited to see what outcome the European war was to bring. These questions are the fodder of future fulminating on the causes of the War of 1812.



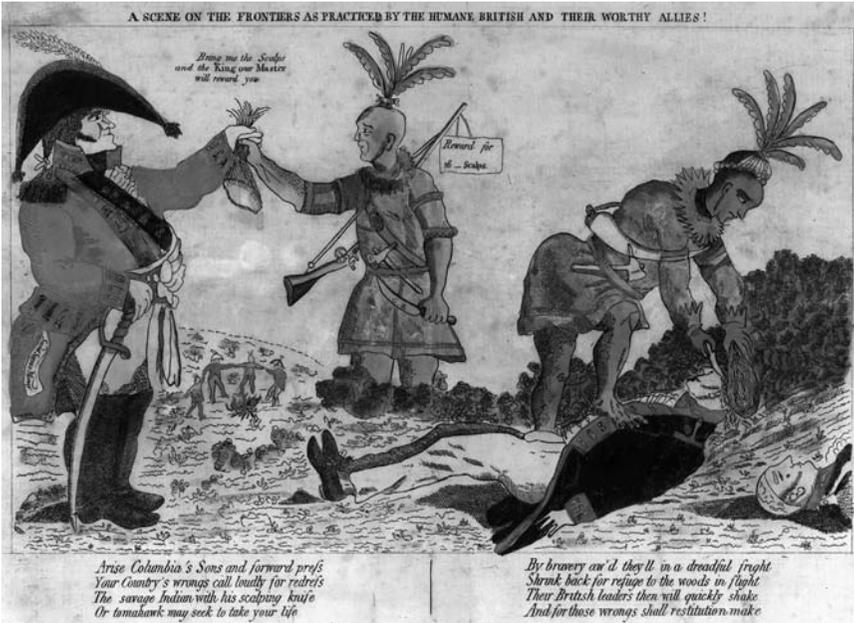
*A view of Col. Johnson's engagement with the savages (commanded by Tecumseh) near the Moravian town, October 5th, 1812.*

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## Land Hunger Causes

The leaders in the Congress from the newer Western and older Southern states and territories saw the elimination of European influences on their western peripheries as the solution to their economic challenges. By the early twentieth century the land hunger thesis was all the rage in academic circles. The first argument to appear in print was by Howard T. Lewis (1888-1973). In his "A Reanalysis of the Causes of the War of 1812," *Americana* 6 (1911): 506-16, 577-85, he flatly stated that Westerners wanted the rich Canadian lands and were quite willing to go to war for them. Dice R. Anderson (1880-1942), also writing in 1911, advanced the view that only by driving the British from Canada could the economy grow and the Indians be quieted (See "The Insurgents of 1811," *American Historical Association, Annual Report for 1911*, I: 165-76).

In "Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812," *MVHR* 10 (March 1924): 366-395, Columbia University historian and dean Louis M. Hacker (1899-1987) reached the same conclusion independently: He thought that the hunger for conquest in the West explained the war. Diplomatic historian Julius W. Pratt (1888-1983) vigorously continued the theme in "Western Aims in the War of 1812," *MVHR* 12 (June 1925): 38-50, stating, "[t]he belief that the United States would one day annex Canada had a continuous existence from the early days of the War for Independence to the War of 1812.... The rise of Tecumseh (1769-1813), backed, as was universally believed, by



**A scene on the frontiers as practiced by the humane British and their worthy allies!** Charles, William, 1776-1820, artist, 1812. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-10752 (digital file from original)

the British, produced an urgent demand in the Northwest that the British be expelled from Canada. This demand was a factor of primary importance in bringing on the war.”

Professor Pratt continued this argument in his *Expansionists of 1812* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1925). There he suggested that although the land hunger thesis was but one set of causes, the vote in Congress was a bargain struck between the South and West to achieve their respective ends. Pratt maintained that it was not primarily the land the western states wanted. It was the elimination of the support provided to the Indians, by cutting off their supplies and lowering their resistance to western expansion. In the South, it was Spanish protection to runaway slaves and the limited access to Gulf ports that motivated the business interests there. Pratt, however, does not fully explain the results of the vote for war in Congress. For example, why did Pennsylvania, which by 1812 had no real Indian threat or no real desire for Florida, vote sixteen to two in Congress in favor of war?

Lastly, while George Dangerfield (1904-1986) also stressed the importance of frontier imperialism as a cause for the war in *The Era of Good Feelings* (London: Methuen & Co., 1953), Horsman concluded that there was simply too much emphasis given to the expansionist factors.

## Economic Causes

All war on this planet is based in “economics.” Just ask any twentieth-century historian. Again, Professor Taylor (“Prices in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812,” *Journal of Economic and Business History* 3 (1930-1931): 148-163, and “Agrarian Discontent in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812,” *Journal of Political Economy* 39 (1931): 471-74) analyzed the land hunger argument by bringing forward a thesis that the war was not solely the result of maritime issues, nor land hunger, nor the Indians: it came about because of the government’s failure to provide an atmosphere that kept commodity and trade prices up. The trans-Appalachian western economies depended on 1) foreign trade, 2) access to adjoining lands, 3) peace or at least accommodation with the Indians, and 4) importantly, “national respect” (read: national honor).

Others joined Taylor. Margaret Kinard Latimer (“South Carolina—A Protagonist of the War of 1812,” *American Historical Review* 61 (July 1956): 914-929) notes that in agricultural areas in the U.S. a “depression” drove down prices in 1811 and 1812. It was no surprise that War Hawks John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), Langdon Cheves (1776-1857), and William Lowndes (1782-1822) were all from South Carolina. It was the government’s task, said these new Republicans, to protect and promote the commerce of the country. The argument sounded more like the Federalists of the 1790s than the republicanism of the Jeffersonian Revolution in 1800, but what would accomplish the political and economic aims “faster” than a removal of the perceived impediments to “prosperity”?

## National Honor Causes

Some other writers rejected the political, hegemonic, and economic arguments and based their theory of the causes of the war on pure jingoistic “honor.” These theorists were represented by writers Norman K. Risjord (“1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation’s Honor,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 18 (April 1961): 196-210), a DePauw University professor, and the renowned Reginald Horsman (“Western War Aims, 1811-1812,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 53 (March, 1957): 1-18).

Risjord maintained that even a casual search through the letters and speeches of the day reveals that those who fought were primarily concerned with the nation’s honor and integrity. Stop search and seizure, restore honor, conquer Canada and take Florida, increase respect among nations, diminish the Indian challenge, improve markets and insure “prosperity”—all this was in the mind of those voting for war! Does this thesis bring us back to the maritime issues as the prime causes of the war? Probably, but...

The national honor thesis does not fully explain sectional divisions. Why did New England ultimately and vigorously oppose the war? My answer is twofold: First, New Englanders were traders and businessmen. Losses at sea were common. Added to all of the other possible reasons for a ship’s loss, search and seizure and impressment were just other costs of doing business. They could live with that. Second, going to war offended their religious upbringing. Note here that the vast bulk of the religious opposition to the war sprang from the New England Puritan traditions.

## The Nature of War in 1812

As we today try to understand the causes of the War of 1812, we must keep in mind that our view is backward, not forward. We know today what Madison and the War Hawks did not; we know what Spencer Percival (1762-1812) and his Tories did not. An understanding of what war was from the top down was known to those learned eighteenth- and nineteenth-century leaders who had studied Thucydides. Some may even have read of Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632) or even Frederick the Great (1712-1786). But our view is tainted today by what we know of Baron Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) and the modern view of war. Clausewitz, our modern “God of War Theorist,” was a twenty-six-year-old Prussian in the service of Imperial Russia in 1812. At his death in 1831, his work, for which today he is so renowned, was unfinished. Madison never read it; neither did Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) or Alexander Macomb (1782-1841) or Jacob J. Brown (1775-1828), until perhaps after the war.

In 1812, the activities of the potential belligerents were only vaguely known to one another weeks if not months after the event. Madison and his advisors could not know what was really happening in London. And perhaps after all is said, Bradford Perkins, the Bancroft Prize-winning professor, was right. In his *Prologue to War*, he maintained that wars cannot often be explained in rational terms and that emotional factors more often than not dictate the course of history.

A unique way of looking at the causes of the War of 1812 was the technique employed by Harold M. Hyman (b. 1924), Rice University professor and editor of the America’s Alternatives Series, written in the 1970s. Hyman, too, realized that the decisions of the Jefferson and Madison administrations between 1807 and 1812 were made only “in the light of” the information “available” to the historical participants. General George C. Marshall (1880-1959) knew the phenomenon well. He made life-and-death decisions for a decade based upon only the information at his command at the time. Using the detailed study of contemporary documents made by Robert A. Rutland (b. 1922), Hyman approached the subject asking:

Why did the decision makers (the legislative and executive branches of the U.S. government between 1805 and 1812) adopt one course of action and reject others? What influence did then-existing expert opinion (their Cabinet, with “portfolios” in State, War, Navy, and the Treasury Departments), administrative structures (an almost non-existent military staff structure), and budgetary factors (the rational opinions of Albert Gallatin, 1761-1849) exert on the decision? What did the participants hope for? What did they fear? On what information did they base their decisions? How were the decisions executed?

In *Madison’s Alternatives: The Jeffersonian Republicans and the Coming of War, 1805-1812* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1975), Hyman, relying on Rutland’s studies, concluded that if Madison had waited just one more year war could have been averted. However, he also noted that Madison and the nation in the years leading to the war reacted daily in face of both “known” and “unknown” facts and factors.

With all this said, here is a strong candidate for the most immediate cause of the War of 1812:

## The “Unknown Unknowns” of 1811

In historians’ discussion of America’s march to war in 1812, little has been written about England’s part in precipitating the conflict and the events in 1811. Relations with Britain had been up and down since 1783. Britain had to deal with the perceived threats from Revolutionary France in the late eighteenth century and from Napoleon in the early nineteenth century.

The war between Britain and France had resumed in 1803 and in the intervening time came the *Chesapeake* incident, the Rule of 1756 enforcement that banned American ships from French ports, British intrigues with the western Indians, and impressment, each of which focused the minds of American leaders. Ever hopeful, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison had pursued progressively coercive economic retaliation in an effort to promote a more conciliatory Britain. Their efforts were to fail by June 1812.

Nonetheless, during the winter of 1810 to 1811 there was renewed American optimism. There were domestic political stirrings in Britain that may, just may, presage a new policy. King George III had finally been declared irrevocably insane following the death of his favorite, Princess Amelia (1783-1810). His son, the Prince Regent, later George IV (1762-1830), was a different fellow who had toyed with both the hardline Tories and the realistic and commercially minded Whigs.

A lean toward the Tories would lead to a quickened march to war; a lean toward the followers of America’s friend, Alexander Baring (1774-1848), and the march would lead to conciliation and peace. Yes, 1811 was to be the year. There were still “unknown unknowns” ahead, but it could not go on much longer.

February 3, 1811, is not a date that quickly comes to mind when historians assemble chronologies of the War of 1812, but on that date perhaps the most significant prewar political event of the age occurred. With authority granted by the Regency Act, the Prince sent the message: Spencer Perceval’s (1762-1812) ministry was to stay in office.

The view of Madison and Henry Clay (1777-1852) that the ascendancy of the Prince Regent would lead to a repeal of the Orders in Council was dashed. The further diplomatic efforts of William Pinkney (1764-1822) as American ambassador in London, and those of Augustus J. Foster (1780-1848), the prince’s man in Washington, were to come to naught.

In July 1811, Madison directed the convening of what turned out to be the War Hawk Congress with Henry Clay as the Speaker of the House for the following November. Brushing aside Whig suggestions, Perceval continued to pursue the policies in effect since 1807 that were inimical to the Americans.

Assessing the attitudes of Madison and the Congress given what they knew in the spring of 1811 is difficult. There were still many “unknowns” ahead. The U.S. would reinstate the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809, prohibiting trade with Britain. The USS

*President* would strike back at impressment in its battle with the HMS *Little Belt* in May of 1811. Westerners would strike at Tecumseh's Indian confederation at Tippecanoe in Indiana Territory. Georgians would encourage "revolt" in Spanish East Florida. And the British? They would begin their steady march through the Iberian Peninsula under the Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) that would lead to Napoleon's first abdication.

In *James Madison: The President, 1809-1812* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956), Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaperman Irving Brant gives another clue as to Madison's attitude. The President had received a formal communication from the British Foreign Secretary, the Right Honorable Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh (1769-1822), through Foster that spring. It seemed to indicate that the Orders in Council would be obdurately defended.

Neither Perceval's death at the hand of a lunatic in April 1812 nor a firm inclination by the Earl of Liverpool (1770-1828), his successor, that the Orders in Council would be withdrawn were enough to head off the declaration of war on June 18, 1812. The final slide toward war was underway. That slide began on February 3, 1811, when the future King George IV supported one of his "known knowns"—a political party whose policies would lead to war with America.

## Conclusions

As we can see, each of the causes of the war has been, and will throughout this bicentennial period, be thoroughly discussed and analyzed. What is really clear, though, is that these present and future discussions will do no more than echo the contemporary arguments raised in the spring of 1812. The decision to go to war is, and should be, complicated. One of the enduring strengths of our union is our ability to debate and put forward various and alternative explanations of past events. Whether it was the Price Regent's decision in February 1811, or a broad and deep economic and diplomatic failure, we should welcome the further discussion of the origins of the War of 1812.