

Introduction

The War of 1812 is one of those episodes in history that make everybody happy, because everybody interprets in his own way. The Americans think of it primarily as a naval war in which the pride of the Mistress of the Seas was humbled by what an imprudent Englishman had called "a few fir-built frigates manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws." Canadians think of it equally pridefully as a war of defence in which their brave fathers ... saved the country from conquest. And the English are the happiest of all because they don't even know it existed.

-Charles P. Stacey¹

In this famous quotation from a 1958 speech to the Ontario Historical Society, the Canadian historian Charles Stacey provided one of the most succinct summaries of the War of 1812 historiography that has yet been written. The War of 1812, a continental battle that pitted the infant United States against the mighty British Empire, has been almost completely forgotten in modern British historiography. In terms of recent scholarship, the only major works that have been produced by British authors are *The Challenge* by Andrew Lambert and the provocatively titled *How Britain Won the War of 1812* by Brian Arthur. United States scholarship, whilst more prolific, has been proportionately outmatched by Canadian authors such as Donald Graves and John Grodzinski, with the war portrayed by both major participants as an embarrassing blip in international relations that is best put behind us. This is understandable; for Britain, it was an inconsequential sideshow compared to the Napoleonic Wars ravaging the European continent at that time, and for the Americans, besides a couple of plucky victories here and there, the war was a military humiliation. Canada, in contrast, almost seems to interpret the war as some sort of struggle for national independence, despite the fact that it would be a few decades before they were ever actually granted nationhood by their British Imperial masters. In fact, the jingoistic mythologies surrounding Canadian military participation² have obscured the nature of warfare in the North American theatre and how the British planned their strategy.

Given the lack of attention paid to this war by the British government, the successes of the British army in halting American incursions over the Canadian border, as well as the profitable forays against Baltimore and Washington, are notable for their ingenuity. Contrary to what many nationalist histories of the United States often claim, the use of light infantry was a tactic that British commanders excelled in, and this enabled them to cooperate very effectively with indigenous warriors under Tecumseh and John Norton.³ Such a use of resources was generally characteristic of British approaches to North American warfare at this time; Europe was the priority, and therefore the war in America would have to be conducted on a limited basis, pursuing highly specific goals.⁴ An analysis of the strategic and diplomatic exertions of the colonial administration and British Army in

¹ Charles Stacey, *The War of 1812 in American History*, reprinted in *The War of 1812 Magazine* Issue 25 (May 2016). Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2016/Issue25/c_tableofcontents.html

² Donald Graves, *The Canadian Militia Myth of the War of 1812: Its Origin, Course and Dissolution*, *The War of 1812 Magazine* Issue 25 (May 2016). Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2016/Issue25/c_tableofcontents.html. Last accessed on 20.06.20.

³ Carl Benn, *The Iroquois in the War of 1812* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998)

⁴ Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812* (London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 2012) pp.83

Canada can provide valuable insights in to the waging of such a war, not only in a British military context, but also in an international context.

Defensive priorities in British North America

Beginning in June of 1812, this war saw persistent American invasions of Canada until 1814. Whilst their attacks may have had more complex motivations than a simple thirst for territorial expansion, the central British objective was decidedly simple: hold the line. With little interest in reclaiming their old colonies, the British government committed their military resources to a defensive campaign that would require minimal commitment of supplies and materiel. This can be quite clearly seen in preliminary planning at the level of High Command, the use of defensive battle, and the surviving documents pertaining to the invasions of 1814.

At the beginning of the war, the commander of British forces in Canada was George Prevost, who held authority over General Isaac Brock in Upper Canada. Brock is most well-known for his early forays against Detroit and Michigan, but it was ultimately Prevost that devised the strategy for defending the British colony. Although allowing Brock a certain degree of tactical independence, he prioritised the defence of Quebec before all else, believing it to be the most defensible sector of the American-Canadian border;

“Quebec is the only permanent Fortress in the Canadas: It is the Key to the whole and must be maintained: To the final defence of this position, every other Military operation ought to become subservient, and the retreat of the Troops upon Quebec must be the primary consideration... In framing a general out line of Cooperation for defence with the Forces in Upper Canada, commensurate with our deficiency in strength, I have considered the preservation of Quebec as the first object, and to which all others must be subordinate.”⁵

Prevost’s dedication to the defence of Quebec was necessitated by the strained nature of the resources that the British were having to deploy during the defence of their North American colonies. Tactical offensives were usually launched *in spite* of strategic direction, not because of it. For example, George “Red George” McDonnell’s strike against Ogdensburg in February of 1813 directly contravened the orders that Prevost had issued just days earlier.⁶ The appointment of the aggressive Gordon Drummond as Governor General in late 1814 was primarily a reaction to the deteriorating military and commercial capabilities of the United States, as the British government now considered the cautious Prevost to be an inconvenience. However, he had fulfilled the role assigned to him. The failure of his offensive against Plattsburgh was not sufficiently catastrophic to enable an American counterattack, allowing him to consolidate British defensive positions in Lower Canada for the duration of the war.

One of the best pieces of evidence that demonstrates the nature of British priorities in the North American Theatre is the distribution of reinforcements following the defeat of Napoleon in 1814. There seems to be a myth that the Duke of Wellington’s elite troops of the Peninsular War were transferred to America *en masse*, but of the 44 units dispatched, only 21 were drawn from Wellington’s forces. Moreover, just over 60 percent of these reinforcements were sent to the Canadian and Maritime provinces, with campaigns in the Penobscot and Chesapeake being treated as subsidiary operations.

⁵ Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost to the Earl of Liverpool, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 18th May 1812, reprinted in John Grodzinski, *Defender of Canada: Sir George Prevost and the War of 1812* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2013) pp.248

⁶ Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007) pp. 126

According to the National Archives, by December of 1814 there were 20592 men stationed in the Canadas fit for duty, compared to just 3189 in July of 1812.⁷ Donald Graves has estimated that 75 percent of British troop strength was committed to the defence (and *potential* expansion) of the Canadian frontier.⁸ In light of these statistics, it seems fairly obvious where the priorities of British command really lay.

Table 1: Command origins and destinations⁹

Destination	Peninsular Army	Other Commands	Totals
American Territory	8	9	17
Canadas	12	10	22
Maritime Provinces	1	4	5
Totals	21	23	44

Realities of the Chesapeake and Plattsburgh campaigns

One could be forgiven for imagining that the Chesapeake Campaign was an ambitious gambit to retake the American Colonies, going off much of the existing historiography. Similarly, David Fitz-Enz's book *The Final Invasion: Plattsburgh, the War of 1812s Most Decisive Victory* has received critical acclaim for its portrayal of the supposedly disastrous defeat of the British in Prevost's 1814 incursion. However, when these campaigns are situated within the context of the wider British defensive strategy, the nuances and results of these two offensives emerge as setbacks rather than being constitutive of outright military defeat.

In fact, there is an argument to be made that the Chesapeake Campaign was a resounding success. Under Sir Thomas Beckwith in 1813, a force of 2202 men launched attacks against Craney Island, Hampton, St. Michaels and Queenstown, dealing immense economic damage and stretching the tiny American army to its limit. They were operating under orders from Earl Bathurst to "effect a diversion on the coasts of the United States of America in favour of Upper Canada and Lower Canada... the object of the Expedition is to embarrass the Enemy by the different attacks, you will, avoid the risk of general action."¹⁰ Evidently, British commanders had no illusions about the viability of long term occupation. Robert Ross was following much the same strategy in his 1814 invasion of the Chesapeake, cooperating with naval forces under Rear-Admiral George Cockburn to ravage the coastline of New England. This decidedly more famous incursion resulted in the destruction of countless civilian properties, several US ships, and even the burning of the Capitol buildings in Washington DC.¹¹ Perhaps the most notable action of Ross' offensive was the destruction of government offices in Washington; aside from the immense political fallout, the financial consequences were terminally dire for the American war effort. The attack was followed by a run on Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia banks, from where government deposits were usually withdrawn. This was particularly damaging given the earlier export of \$3.8 million worth of specie to

⁷ Andrew Bamford, *British Army Theatre Returns: 1808-1815 / War of 1812*. Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/organisation/Britain/Strength/Bamford/c_BritishArmyStrengthStudyWarof1812.html. Last accessed 20/06/20.

⁸ Donald Graves, *The Redcoats are Coming!: British Troop Movements to North America in 1814*. Can be found at <http://www.warof1812.ca/redcoats.htm>. Last accessed on 20/06/20

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Henry, Earl Bathurst to Sir Thomas Sidney Beckwith, reprinted in Donald Hickey ed., *The War of 1812: Writings from America's Second War of Independence* (New York, Library of America, 2013) pp. 211-12

¹¹ Peter Snow, *When Britain Burned the White House: The 1814 Invasion of Washington* (London, John Murray, 2013) pp.104-125, *passim*

Canada, producing debilitating shortages of coin in the latter stages of the war.¹² Ross' subsequent death at the failed attack on Baltimore is something that has become more famous, but it should not be allowed to shroud the exceptionally efficient use of force that characterised British army operations on the Eastern Coast. Combined with John Warren and Alexander Cochrane's highly effective naval blockades, the British Army's invasions proved to be decisive in halting American incursions against the Canadian border in the long term.

At first glance, Prevost's essay against Plattsburgh was a clearer cut case of expansionism than the Chesapeake Campaign. Certainly, David Fitz-Enz has claimed that the British defeat at Plattsburgh was the most decisive incident of the war, stalling an ambitious plan for recolonization that was kept secret until he was able to procure a copy of Prevost's 'secret' orders in the late 20th Century.¹³ Unfortunately, the basis of the entire thesis is flawed; the allegedly secret orders have been well known to historians since the early 20th Century, currently available in the Colonial Office documents at the National Archives of Kew.¹⁴ More grievously, Fitz-Enz puts forward a highly erroneous interpretation of the document, with his claims of British expansionism holding little evidence in the literature itself. Bathurst gave specific orders:

*"The object of your operations will be, first, to give immediate protection, secondly, to obtain if possible ultimate security for His Majesty's Possessions in America."*¹⁵

Prevost's invasion was intended to open up a two front war against the United States, not to fulfil some colonialist desire for American territory. Both the Plattsburgh and Chesapeake Campaigns were episodic incidents in a wider conflict that was characterised by defensive strategy, political caution and tactical subtlety. The disastrous invasion of New Orleans, however, is slightly more complex in its execution and objectives.

The invasion of New Orleans: an act of political opportunism

The New Orleans Campaign is, in many ways, an anomaly in the War of 1812. Unlike the diversionary strikes against Plattsburgh and Baltimore, it was an invasion with very specific goals, and may have had the potential to change the course of the entire war. Resulting in an embarrassing fiasco for the British, the campaign was ultimately cut short by the arrival of peace in February 1815, whilst the army was preparing to attack Mobile. The extent to which this reflected broader British objectives is an issue that perhaps doesn't deserve the controversy that it has received, considering the scant evidence put forward by historians to substantiate their claims. Ronald Drez, for example, has made a colossal leap of logic in his own work on the Battle of New Orleans,¹⁶ which we will quickly examine here.

On 24th October 1814, Bathurst issued orders to the British commander, Edward Pakenham, instructing him that, "Hostilities should not be suspended until you shall have official information

¹² Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812 -15* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2011) pp. 117-18

¹³ David Fitz-Enz, *The Final Invasion: Plattsburgh, the War of 1812's Most Decisive Victory* (New York, Cooper Square Press, 2001) pp. xv-xi

¹⁴ Fitz-Enz, *The Final Invasion* (Book Review by John Grodzinski) *The War of 1812 Magazine* Issue 2 (February 2006). Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2006/Issue2/c_fitzenz.html Last accessed on 21.06.20.

¹⁵ Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies to Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, 3rd June 1814, reprinted in John Grodzinski, *Defender of Canada* pp.251

¹⁶ Ronald Drez, *The War of 1812, Conflict and Deception: The British Attempt Seize New Orleans and Nullify the Louisiana Purchase* (New Orleans, Louisiana State University Press, 2014)

that The President has actually ratified the Treaty and a Person will be duly authorized to apprise you of this event.”¹⁷ It is obvious that the British were highly conscious, and to some degree fearful, of the dangerous uncertainty produced by the peace treaty negotiations then taking place in Ghent, Belgium (they had begun in August of 1814).¹⁸ After all, New Orleans had an easily recognisable strategic value for British interests; the capture of the city could potentially nullify the Louisiana Purchase in any future peace settlement, impeding American trade on the Mississippi River.¹⁹ When viewed from this perspective, a long term occupation of New Orleans seems very attractive indeed, as Drez has quite rightly noted. However, beyond this, the thesis of his book slips largely in to speculation. The New Orleans Campaign tells us little about broader British objectives, or even the specifics of how New Orleans would have been treated in future peace negotiations. In any event, the entire campaign was an exception, rather than a rule, in the course of the war, displaying an unusually aggressive streak that colonial commanders generally shied away from in the midst of the Napoleonic conflict. Aggressiveness of this magnitude was most likely motivated by the frankly disastrous performance of American regulars on the Eastern Coast and on the Canadian Frontier, a blatant act of political opportunism that one would expect from an imperial power like Britain.

Issues of supply

When situating the war in the context of a wider imperial conflict, the most easily recognisable interrelation lies in the area of logistics. Arthur Wellesley’s armies on the Spanish Peninsula were forced to live off local food sources during the 1809 campaign season, but the growth of the military presence in the region necessitated the establishment of large scale import arrangements. Between 1809 and 1814, the supply quantities required to sustain the Peninsular Army in the field more than tripled, and by November 1813 the Commissariat was supplying 100,000 pounds of biscuit, 200,000 pounds of forage and slaughtering 300 head of cattle per day.²⁰ Napoleon’s closure of European markets required the British to search further afield for sources of supply, and America was one country that possessed abundant grain and flour.²¹

During the fall and summer of 1810-11, over one million barrels of flour were shipped to the Peninsula from the United State, resulting in an extremely lucrative trade that was threatened by the passing of Plan Four February 1811, which forbid the entry of British ships in to American ports.²² The Duke of Wellington was worried by this development, believing that the new trade measures would saddle his army with crippling grain shortages:

“You will observe that the ports of America will have been shut against us on the 1st of February. It is possible, nay, probable, that the grain for which you sent the 400,000 may not have quitted the ports

¹⁷ Reprinted in *Documents, Artefacts and Imagery*, The War of 1812 Magazine Issue 16 (September 2011). Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2011/Issue16/c_PackenhamOrders.html. Last accessed on 21.06.20

¹⁸ Frank Updyke, *The Diplomacy of the War of 1812* (Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1915) pp.198

¹⁹ Robin Reilly, *The British at the Gates: The New Orleans Campaign in the War of 1812* (Montreal, Robin Brass Studio, 2002)

²⁰ John Grodzinski, *The Duke of Wellington, the Peninsular War and the War of 1812 Part 1: North America and the Peninsular War – Logistics*, The War of 1812 Magazine Issue 5 (December 2006). Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2006/Issue5/c_Wellington.html. Last accessed on 21.06.20

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

*of America at that time, and it is at all events desirable not to neglect any means which can be adopted to secure so desirable an object.*²³

The prelude to war culminated in a ninety day embargo, passed through American Congress in April 1812, prompting Wellington to complain to his deputy, Sir Thomas Graham;

*"I have a paper from America from which it appears that the Americans have laid a general embargo on all vessels. This is a measure of importance as all this part of the Peninsula has been living this year on American flour."*²⁴

But the damage this dealt to British interests on the Peninsula was more superficial than real. Prior to the American trade measures, Wellington had stockpiled copious supply quantities that were sufficient to allow him to decline a shipment of 60,000 barrels of American flour in May 1812.²⁵ US traders often flouted the regulations of their weak government, believing the profitability of trade to the Peninsula as being worth the risk of persecution from the authorities. This illegal trade was stimulated by the British issuance of an Order in Council in April 1812, opening licences to the United States. One month alone saw the granting of 722 licences for goods as varied as grain, biscuit, flour, wheat, turpentine and tar.²⁶ Contrary to Wellington's initial fears, American supplies of grain were relatively unhindered by privateering on the Spanish coast, with 381,000 barrels of flour reaching Spain in 1812, and 430,000 arriving in 1813.²⁷ By the time that licences were withdrawn in the summer of 1813, Napoleon's continental system had effectively collapsed and the Baltic ports quickly reopened to British ships, whilst advances in to Northern Spain had improved the prospects of local procurement. Ultimately, British armies on the Peninsula continued to function without serious hindrance for the duration of the war in the Americas.²⁸

Conclusions

In summing up the historical record of British army operations during the War of 1812, it is worth examining the material results of their campaign strategies and how this contributed to the peace settlement in the Treaty of Ghent. Brian Arthur has documented the catastrophic impact of the British naval blockade, but we will be focussing on more politically based measures in order to understand the import of British army operations on the American mainland.

Firstly, we can examine the territorial shifts (or lack thereof) engendered by the war. Simply put, the war between the Americans and British did not result in any severe territorial losses or gains for either side, despite the continual aggressions against Canada and the temporary British occupation of Northern Massachusetts.²⁹ The Treaty of Ghent allowed the British to maintain control of a number of territories in this region, but they were nothing more than useless tokens of respect from the United States; they were completely returned to the Americans (save for a number of islands in

²³ Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, to Charles Stuart, 1st March 1811, reprinted in John Gurwood ed., *The Dispatches of Field Marshal, the Duke of Wellington: Volume 7* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp.324

²⁴ Wellington to Sir Thomas Graham, 8th May 1812, reprinted in Gurwood, *Dispatches*, Volume 9 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp.129-30

²⁵ Grodzinski, *North America and the Peninsular War*

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ T.M.D Redgrave, *Wellington's logistical arrangements in the Peninsular War 1809-14* (dissertation, University of London) pp.28

²⁸ Grodzinski, *North America and the Peninsular War*

²⁹ This campaign is well covered in George Young, *The British Capture & Occupation of Downeast Maine 1814-15/1818* (Stonington, Penobscot Books, 2014)

Passamaquoddy Bay) in 1818, roughly three years after the treaty had been ratified.³⁰ However, the Americans were far more conspicuous in their failure to secure territorial gains on the Canadian border. Pure expansionism is not widely accepted as the *sole* motivational factor for the American invasion of Canada, but the seizure of such a substantive chunk of British territory would have served a crucial strategic purpose: diplomatic leverage to defend American maritime rights. The utter failure of the American armies to make any headway was representative of a clear victory for British policy, and a failure for the ambitious pretensions of James Madison's administration in Washington.

Other than the successful defence of Canada, the end of the war essentially signalled the end of international conflict between both powers. Although the issues that started the war, such as impressment and British naval domination, remained unchanged by the Treaty of Ghent, the Americans showed little further interest in pushing back against the British.³¹ The extent to which this can be assigned to the operations of the British army as opposed to naval actions on the Eastern seaboard is unclear. Nevertheless, military victories on the mainland were immeasurably important in forcing a status quo antebellum, as the arrival of war on American soil met with outrage from many state legislatures (particularly those dominated by the Federalist Party). For example, there were widespread calls for secession at the Hartford anti-war convention in 1814, attracting accusations of treason from Republican war-hawks.³² Those who organised the convention were not especially supportive of going to war with Britain in the first place, but the disappointing results of American offensives, and the devastation of New England communities such as Hampton, was ample persuasion for the local population to turn against their government.

The British army did not produce a world class performance in North America during the War of 1812. The disasters at New Orleans and Plattsburgh were both seen as embarrassments by the national press, and are wildly celebrated in American historiography. Yet, regardless of these setbacks, the strategy of the British High Command was largely successful in making use of limited resources in pursuit of a limited military objective. Donald Graves perhaps summed it up best in the PBS Documentary *The War of 1812: "People ask me who won the War of 1812. I often say the British army won the War of 1812. I don't say Britain. I say the British army. Because the British soldier always did what he was asked to do"*.

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³⁰ Stipulated in the *Convention respecting fisheries, boundary, and restoration of slaves*. Signed at London on 20th October 1813, entered in to force 30th January 1819.

³¹ Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, Bicentennial Edition* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2012) pp. 284-303 passim.

³² Latimer, *The War of 1812*, pp.367

An exploration of limited war strategies: British Army operations on the North American Continent 1812-1815

James Mair

---- *The Canadian Militia Myth of the War of 1812: Its Origin, Course and Dissolution*, The War of 1812 Magazine Issue 25 (May 2016). Can be found at https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2016/Issue25/c_tableofcontents.html. Last accessed on 20.06.20.

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