

Were there any victors in the war of 1812?

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Section A - Identification and Evaluation of Sources

To answer the question "*Were there any victors in the war of 1812?*" this investigation considers the achieving of war aims for the two main participants, Britain and the US, and general outcomes to all participants. For this the investigation utilizes secondary and primary sources. Officially nobody was declared victorious to date and historians have differing opinions on the matter - finding a comprehensive result will be interesting and time well spent. In particular James Madison's message to congress on the treaty of Ghent will be used to gain perspective of the American side in the conflict and Andrew Lambert's article on the subject will be used to gain British perspective on events. Both, due to their potential for their purposes, will be examined in depth.

Madison, James. "Special Message to Congress on the Treaty of Ghent." 18 Feb. 1815

The origin of the first primary source is James Madison, the president of the US during the war of 1812. The origin is valuable since as the president Madison was extremely familiar with the events and outcomes of the war. A limitation of the origin is that Madison had a stake in the events and might have a certain bias in his narration. The purpose of the source is to inform the congress of the peace and the war which is valuable since Madison likely wanted to portray the event in as much positive light as possible; he listed most, if not all, positive outcomes of the war in his message. On the other hand Madison's purpose was also to endorse his policies, this would be achieved with positive points of view perhaps leading to him excluding or downplaying negative outcomes of the war. The value of the content would be the comprehensive coverage of his view on the outcomes of the war and its limitation that while reading the message one will note that Madison excluded concrete facts from his message.

Lambert, Andrew. "A British Perspective on the War of 1812." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/british-perspective/.

The origin is valuable since Lambert is a Laughton professor of Naval History at King's College and his article is based on his book on the very subject called "*The Challenge*". Lambert also benefits from hindsight. The purpose of the article is valuable, since it aims to inform and make a point with proof and fact base. The content of the article is valuable since it's based on Lambert's book, which, considering Lambert has an extensive career, is likely well researched. The content is limited for the same reason - it alone has no listed sources.

For the purposes of the investigation the article is limited in that it contains only the outline of Lambert's argument, without the details available in his book.

Section B - Investigation

Formally neither side had lost - the peace treaty detailed returning to the state before the war. The treaty of Ghent details that all territories, prisoners, slaves and stolen possessions would be returned to their pre-war country¹ and so in terms of loot, reparations or concessions both sides gained practically nothing. This renders both sides to an economic loss from the war - armies cost money and little was gained despite successful ship raiding especially by the US². Whereas the US did prove itself and in a sense achieved its grand goal for the war, the British achieved next to nothing except for British Canadian seeds of nationalism. The indigenous people of North America played a key role in a number of battles, but it is quite apparent that they lost - the war marked the end of any hope to retain their land and culture³ hence the investigation won't further consider them.

The British public didn't hold the war of 1812 to high importance. Great Britain was far greater than the US and quite beleaguered at the time - for example the Napoleonic conflict had higher priority⁴. The British public was fed up after almost two decades of wars and peace negotiations with the US started only months after Napoleon's abdication. The war was regarded more as a distraction from the Napoleonic conflict and which the British weren't eager to fight from the onset. Right before the war started the British repealed the Orders in Council of 1807, which detailed the French blockade from neutral powers and was the primary cause of US dissatisfaction⁵. The British felt this should be enough and felt betrayed by US actions, the British felt they were perfectly within their rights to conscript British soldiers off of US ships⁶. Even after the war the conflict didn't gain much British interest due to its relatively minor scale - 8600 casualties⁷ was nothing compared to the Napoleonic conflict's cost and no decisive outcome was reached.

Great Britain was too powerful for the US to challenge alone, but with the Napoleonic conflict came opportunity - the US sought to achieve its goals "*with the assistance of Napoleon's France*"⁸. The grand goal of the US as stated by Madison was to avoid return to a state of British oppression not unlike before independence⁹. US political figures like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams agreed with Madison that the British were unjustifiably asserting

¹ "Peace and Amity - The Treaty of Ghent." Belgium, 24 Dec. 1814, Ghent.

² "The Development of a Democracy 1789-1841." The Penguin History of the USA, by Hugh Brogan, 2nd ed., Penguin, 2001, pp. 254

³ Berton, Pierre, and James H. March. "War of 1812." The Canadian Encyclopedia, 6 Mar. 2012, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/war-of-1812.

⁴ Lambert, Andrew. "A British Perspective on the War of 1812." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/british-perspective/.

⁵ "The Development of a Democracy 1789-1841." The Penguin History of the USA, by Hugh Brogan, 2nd ed., Penguin, 2001, pp. 253

⁶ "Declaration of War." Aberdeen Journal, 05 Aug. 1812, p.4

⁷ R. Taylor, William. "Summary About the End of the War of 1812." Access Heritage, www.warof1812.ca/summary.html.

⁸ "List of Reasons America Went to War in 1812." The Evening Post, 20 Feb. 1815, p. 2.

⁹ "The Development of a Democracy 1789-1841." The Penguin History of the USA, by Hugh Brogan, 2nd ed., Penguin, 2001, pp. 254

power over neutral US vessels and violating US rights with their blockade¹⁰. Short-term the US wanted to stop Britain from intervening in US trade with the blockade against Napoleon's France and from conscripting and kidnapping seamen of British -and too often US- nationality from US ships¹¹. Some members of congress and other officials, so called "war-hawks", were looking to fully annex Canada - Major General Henry Dearborn for one was advocating for the idea¹². Effective also in sending the aforementioned message the annexation was the main military goal of the US going into the war.

The US was unprepared for the war as indirectly admitted by James Madison in his message to congress; "*a certain degree of preparation for war is not only indispensable to avert disasters in the onset...*"¹³, referring to the US' lack of success at the start of the war in invading Canada. The US had a belief in a swift victory despite their small, poorly trained and commanded army¹⁴; a miscalculation based on the British forces in Canada being tiny¹⁵. Despite British Canada's small military, they weren't afraid of invasion; "*On this day I saw nothing before me but my Father's honour and glory. Although I knew how small a force we had to defend the Canadas ... I did not feel the slightest apprehension of any reverse*"¹⁶ from Canada's governor general's daughter's journal. Despite her possibly having a degree of unrealistic faith in her father, Canada indeed deflected the US offensive even capturing Detroit momentarily - until Captain Perry gained control of the great lakes in 1813. The battle of the Great lakes marks the strategically most significant British naval defeat of the conflict - some other defeats being the sinking of HMS Reindeer and HMS Avon, separately, by USS Wasp¹⁷. These naval defeats shocked the British public¹⁸. Especially the battle of the Great Lakes played a strategic role in stopping British advancements from the north by cutting supply chains. The war didn't develop much until the abdication of Napoleon in Europe when the US rose in the British priority list and the British sent their navy across the Atlantic. After the British navy arrived they blockaded the US ships to their ports and stopped almost all coastal trade. This, coupled with the embargo on France, hurt the US economy¹⁹, mainly short term as we see from the US rise as an economic power toward WW1. Even more so in 1814 Britain burned Washington, the capital of the US. This was a blow in a symbolic sense, but militarily the British had to retreat quickly after burning the public buildings of the city and the operation had little strategic value. The US won important battles around the end of the war, such as the Battle of New Orleans in January of 1815 - after the war ended but

¹⁰Berton, Pierre, and James H. March. "War of 1812." The Canadian Encyclopedia, 6 Mar. 2012, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/war-of-1812.

¹¹ "List of Reasons America Went to War in 1812." The Evening Post, 20 Feb. 1815, p. 2.

¹² Berton, Pierre, and James H. March. "War of 1812." The Canadian Encyclopedia, 6 Mar. 2012, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/war-of-1812.

¹³ Madison, James. "Special Message to Congress on the Treaty of Ghent." 18 Feb. 1815

¹⁴ Blum, John, et al. "The War of 1812." *The National Experience - a History of the United States*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, pp. 173-174.

¹⁵ "The Development of a Democracy 1789-1841." The Penguin History of the USA, by Hugh Brogan, 2nd ed., Penguin, 2001, pp. 254

¹⁶ The daughter of George Prevost, the governor general of Canada at the time, Anne Prevost, journal, June 25, 1812

¹⁷ Roosevelt, Theodore. "Chapter VII." *The Naval War of 1812*, 1882, pp. 214-219.

¹⁸ Blum, John, et al. "The War of 1812." *The National Experience - a History of the United States*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, pp. 176.

¹⁹ "The Development of a Democracy 1789-1841." The Penguin History of the USA, by Hugh Brogan, 2nd ed., Penguin, 2001, pp. 254

nonetheless a show of strength. Neither side was spared of casualties, British suffered 8600 and the US 11300²⁰. Overall the military portion of the war was largely a standstill - neither side made significant advancements or gains. Any possible gains were nullified by the treaty and the US failed in their goal of annexing Canada - to the war-hawks the war was a failure.

British Canada benefited socially from the conflict. Due to British preoccupation in Europe Canada fought the early war alone, British Canadian soldiers and citizens against the US. The US expected Canadian civilians, many of whom were from the US, to flip to the US side. Instead the Canadian people united against the invading force which inspired a myth that it was the civilians who joined the corps that held the US offensive²¹. As stated by James Marsh and Pierre Berton in their article on Canada in the war, *"war itself — or the myths created by the war — gave Canadians their first sense of community and laid the foundation for their future nationhood. To this extent the Canadians were the real winners of the War of 1812"*²².

Britain was the leading naval power and a powerful ground force which didn't defeat a young country with at best a military of 35 000 soldiers²³. The Battle of Orlando hurt the British pride and naval defeats *"shocked the British public, which had heard the American navy described as a 'few fir-built frigates, manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws'"*²⁴. Despite their overall naval success Britain had failed to assert their superiority and the British public was disappointed. On the other hand the war was never prioritised and defeating Napoleon rendered any lost prestige inconsequential²⁵.

The US was happy; President Madison in his message to congress comments on the course of the War of 1812; *"It has been waged with a success"*²⁶. Madison goes on to point out that the US successfully defended itself and specifically credits the navy for its success, referring to aforementioned duels and the great lakes. Madison's stance was only further enhanced with Andrew Jackson's victory in the battle of New Orleans which, despite being fought after the war ended, gave the US an additional sense of empowerment - the US wasn't to be disrespected. According to Hugh Brogan the British learned, for the second time, *"that war with the United States was almost invariably not worthwhile"*²⁷. The US had earned a degree of respect from the British and prestige amongst the nations of the world. Then again Andrew Lambert proposes that the US was spared from the full wrath of the British military

²⁰ R. Taylor, William. "Summary About the End of the War of 1812." *Access Heritage*, www.warof1812.ca/summary.html.

²¹ Berton, Pierre, and James H. March. "War of 1812." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 6 Mar. 2012, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/war-of-1812.

²² Berton, Pierre, and James H. March. "War of 1812." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 6 Mar. 2012, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/war-of-1812.

²³ Blum, John, et al. "The War of 1812." *The National Experience - a History of the United States*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, pp. 174.

²⁴ Blum, John, et al. "The War of 1812." *The National Experience - a History of the United States*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973, pp. 176.

²⁵ Lambert, Andrew. "A British Perspective on the War of 1812." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/british-perspective/.

²⁶ Madison, James. "Special Message to Congress on the Treaty of Ghent." 18 Feb. 1815

²⁷ "The Development of a Democracy 1789-1841." *The Penguin History of the USA*, by Hugh Brogan, 2nd ed., Penguin, 2001, pp. 255

due to the Napoleonic conflict and were lucky to sign the treaty since if the war had yet carried on the British would've sent the Waterloo army to crush the US²⁸. However, since the British public was fed up with almost two decades of war, an extended conflict in America would've likely lacked public support. The British were just as relieved with the peace as the US, further supported by aforementioned British reluctance to start the war. In terms of the treaty of Ghent not detailing any US war goals²⁹ it should be considered that the orders in council of 1807, as mentioned the primary source of US dissatisfaction, were nullified in 1812. Undoubtedly the US would've lost horribly had the British focused their whole military, but this doesn't render the achievements of the US obsolete.

In conclusion neither side made economic or military gains. However in terms of prestige the US was victorious. Their grand goal for the war, to teach the British a lesson, was somewhat achieved - the war is still often considered unnecessary due to removal of the Orders in Council before its start. The British were unhappy in the extent that the war mattered to them. Canada, then a part of Britain, gained its first seeds of nationalism from the war.

²⁸ Lambert, Andrew. "A British Perspective on the War of 1812." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/british-perspective/.

²⁹ "Peace and Amity - The Treaty of Ghent." Belgium, 24 Dec. 1814, Ghent.

Section C - Reflection

Turns out research can be very challenging. I only found the British newspaper clipping toward the end of the investigation during my final research attempt. Adding any more sources at that point could've been a poor choice had there not been a perfect slot for British war motivations. Historians must know when it's too late.

Analysing the sources was fascinating - especially Madison's message to congress offered an opportunity to find what wasn't there; Madison excluding mention of material gains indicates none were made. Sources can be of varying reliability and factualness, content can be altered due an author's bias. I found that bias, when properly addressed, can act in an investigator's favor - again Madison's message to congress was biased and extremely useful.

I found value in primary sources since they tend to offer a viewpoint to the time which secondary sources can't. On the other hand secondary sources were great for data and outside points of view from educated historians. A historian must consider both to succeed.

My initial attitude on the conflict was pro-British. The only pre-existing knowledge I had was from an internet forum that Britain burned Washington and supposedly won. As I've found this was quite limited if not entirely incorrect - completing the investigation required abandoning my previous view.

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