

Introduction to the War of 1812 (1812-1815)

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The War of 1812 may be the most paradoxical war the United States ever fought. It was a war neither the United States nor Great Britain really wanted. A major cause for war—the British Orders-In Council—was vacated two days before Congress voted to declare war. The war's most decisive battle—at New Orleans—was fought after the peace treaty, the Treaty of Ghent, had been signed. In that treaty, both sides agreed to return to the status quo that existed prior to the war.

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The war had its origins in the long series of European wars ignited by the French Revolution. By 1812, the French revolutionary republic had been replaced by a French empire, but the fighting continued, growing into a world war. Economic warfare accompanied military action, disrupting American trade. American sailors were forced into the British Royal Navy. The United States suspected Britain of inciting Indian nations within the United States. War sputtered to a start over these issues, fed by an American desire to grab Canada from Britain.

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Britain's initial reaction was to ignore the war and hope it went away. Instead, the United States invaded Canada.

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The American invasion was bungled. Britain repulsed American advances and then chased the United States out of what later became Michigan. American land defeats were balanced by a small string of American naval victories in 1812, which stung British pride and encouraged America to continue the war.

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In 1813, a series of British victories led the United States to return to diplomacy and seriously negotiate peace terms. By this time, British attitudes had hardened, and Britain sought terms that would make it impossible for the United States to threaten Britain again. These involved territorial concessions the United States was unwilling to make.

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The war continued into 1814. The United States regained its previously lost territories and again threatened Canada. Britain countered with a series of raids along the American eastern coastline. Both nations could make the other miserable. Neither could achieve a decisive, war-ending result at a price it was willing to pay. The Napoleonic Wars in Europe ended in the summer of 1814, rendering issues over free trade and sailors' rights moot. The military capabilities of Indian nations within the United States had been decisively destroyed. British support had become a non-issue.

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The United States and Britain were war-weary. A peace treaty was negotiated in Ghent, Belgium, which settled all territorial claims on the basis of the status quo prior to 1812. Trade issues and impressment were simply ignored, in the hope that peace would continue.

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The War of 1812 sealed the national identities of both Canada and the United States. Both sides won sufficient victories to make them happy and provide fodder for historical legend. Over the following century, Britain and the United States ceased to be adversaries, becoming instead firm allies.

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