A Look Back at the War of 1812

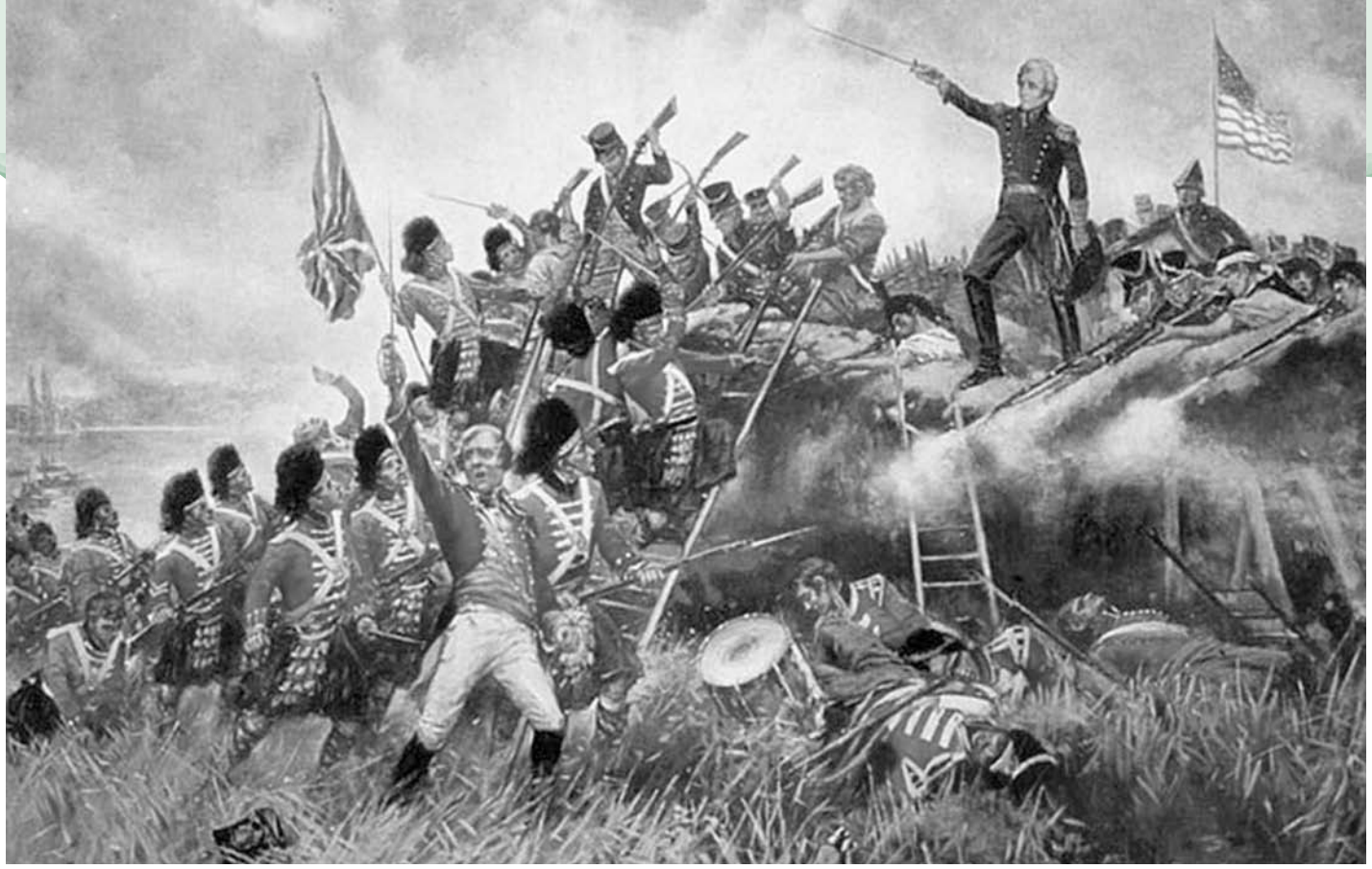
While King George III of Revolutionary War fame was technically the king during the War of 1812, it was actually his eldest son, George (above)—along with Prime Minister Lord Liverpool—who was running the government due to the king's mental illness. (It is now believed George III suffered from the blood disease porphyria.) In 1810, after a severe relapse, a regency was established. George's reign as prince regent lasted from 1811 to 1820 and, upon George III's death in 1820, the prince regent became King George IV.

Was the War of 1812 an unavoidable war? Was it a just war, unlike so many of America's wars? What were the real issues that caused the conflict, and were they resolved by the bloodshed? In this article, written upon the 200th anniversary of the conflict, TBR editorial board member Dr. Harrell Rhome takes a look at the War of 1812—called by some America's Second War for Independence—and finds that this was a war America could most likely not have avoided.

By Harrell Rhome, Ph.D.

Except for the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, the wars in which the United States has fought were avoidable and strategically unnecessary. This includes the War Between the States, which was essentially a struggle over the constitutional rights of states versus the encroaching power of the U.S. federal government. The highly politicized slavery question could have been resolved without war, but that's a topic for another essay. The War of 1812 ended the Federalist Party, raising several issues that remained unresolved and which arose again half a century later when Southern and Northern interests conflicted and war ensued.

Without digressing too much, the two biggest examples of unjust and unnecessary wars are World War I and World War II, which I see as Eurasian affairs in which the United States had no business intervening.



Gen. Andrew Jackson, already a favorite of the American citizenry for his victory against the Creek Indians of northern Alabama and Georgia at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814, solidified his fame with a major victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. In this battle Jackson commanded a motley assemblage of 5,000 U.S. regulars, backwoods militiamen, slaves—and even pirates—and guided them to a stunning victory against 7,500 highly trained and well-equipped British troops. According to author Robert Remini, over a quarter of the British forces were either captured, wounded or killed in the battle. American casualties were very light. (See the ad on page 10 for Remini's book *The Battle of New Orleans*.)

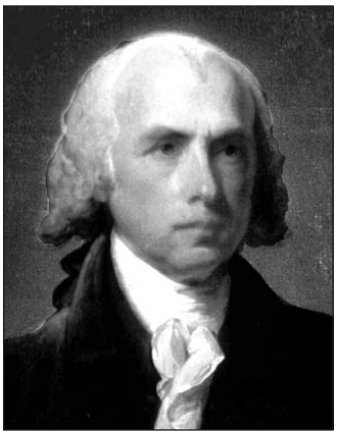
The various wars after that speak for themselves. All have been undeclared, unrighteous and unpopular. None was a "just war"—not at all. So here we are, 200 years after the War of 1812, posing the probing question: Was this now largely forgotten conflict a "just war" or "just an inevitable one"? The U.S. Congress declared war June 18, 1812. Let's take a look at what many Americans regard as the "Second American War of Independence."

PROVOCATIONS ON BOTH SIDES

A number of things led to this American struggle against an aggressive, highly trained and experienced European military juggernaut. The causes were numerous and complex, but here is an overview of what provoked it. As you will see, this war very well may have been inevitable, as the newly founded United States still had a basketful of issues with its former British overlords. As we know, France helped the new nation succeed in the First American War of Independence, and a little over three decades later, the British were at war with the French. Due to the Napoleonic Wars, in 1807 the British implemented numerous trade restrictions, all illegal and unacceptable under international law and customs, to prevent trade between America and France.

Of course, this was highly resented and unpopular with Americans, but that wasn't all. The Brits routinely boarded American ships, capturing our sailors and impressing them into the Royal Navy.

This was an era in which both nations experienced a massive growth in military and commercial naval assets. The U.S. merchant fleet doubled in size between 1802 and 1810, and, ironically, Britain became our largest trading partner. Among other things, they consumed over three-quarters of American cotton, not to mention over half of all other exports. While the English needed our goods, they must have resented being



JAMES MADISON
President during the war.

DOLLY MADISON
Became an American legend.

ANDREW JACKSON
Solidified his reputation.

ALEXANDER COCHRANE
British vice admiral.

dependent on the United States, which was once theirs, not all that long ago. Another challenge to British hegemony was the great expansion of both the U.S. Navy. Moreover, we must certainly not forget the most famous American warship, the *USS Constitution*, also known as "Old Ironsides." It captured a host of British merchant ships and thoroughly defeated five Royal Navy ships of the line.

Not only did our fleets grow significantly, but due to the Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy greatly expanded as well, creating a need for a large number of sailors to man its warships and the numerous ships needs for an effective blockade. When the Britishers could not get enough volunteers, they turned to illegally "impressing" or kidnapping American seamen. Further compounding the problem, the United States recognized the right of foreign sailors to defect and become American citizens. Records show that by 1805, there were over 11,000 naturalized sailors on U.S. ships. Over 80% were born in the British Isles, many being Irish. As far as the Brit government was concerned, these naturalized Americans were still British subjects, so they felt free to snatch them off our boats.

A further provocation came when British naval vessels stationed themselves in international waters just off the Atlantic coast, in full view from shore. They not only captured naturalized British and Irish sailors, they took native-born Americans as well. In all fairness, identifying who was who was difficult. False identity papers were rampant, so the Brits quickly began seizing whomever they wanted. As a result, a rallying cry of the War of 1812 was "Free trade and sailor's rights."

However, on the other side of the list of provocative acts, the United States obviously had an interest in seizing parts—if not all—of Canada, gaining control over Lake Erie in 1813.[1]

Another matter of great importance to the Americans—perhaps even more of a concern than the impressment of sailors—was that the British, still tied down in Europe, attempted to use various coalitions of Indian tribes to establish an independent confederacy in the Midwest—allied of course, with England. English middlemen made sure the Indians continued to received the most advanced guns, tipping the military advantage to the Indians when engaged in forest fighting. However, these efforts failed in the South when Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson and Sam Houston defeated the Red Stick Creeks under Monahee the Prophet and William Weatherford in the decisive March 27, 1814 Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Alabama.

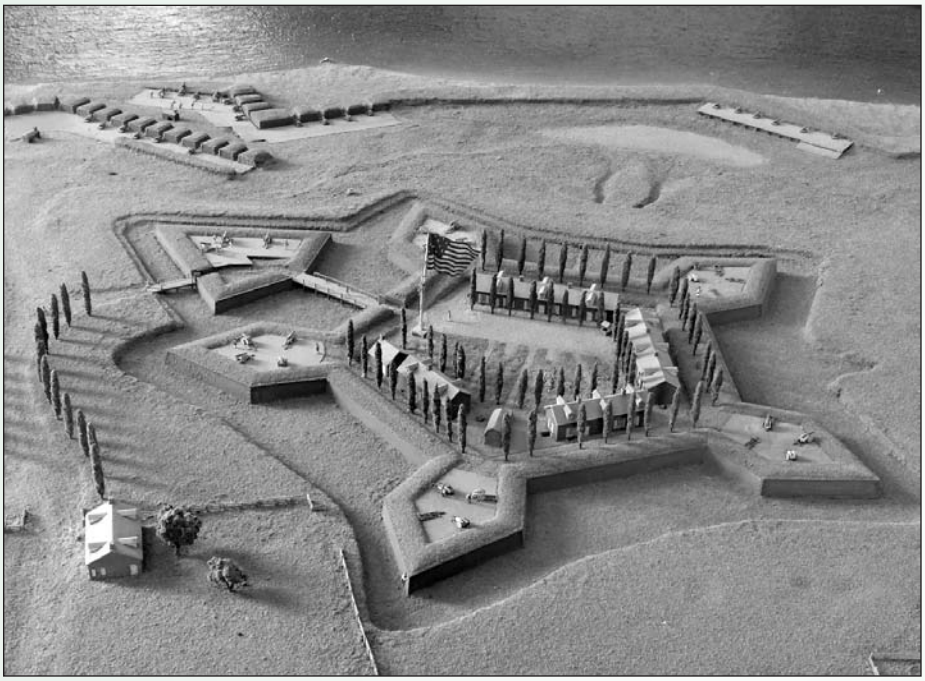
When Napoleon was defeated, the English gave their full attention to the war in North America, capturing Washington and burning portions of the city, including our Capitol Building and White House. Nevertheless, our troops were successful in turning back three invasion attempts in New York, Baltimore and the better-known Battle of New Orleans (Jan. 8, 1815), the greatest and final land battle of the war. And as we well know, our victory in the Battle of Baltimore.

CANADA EVOLVED INTO NATIONHOOD

According to a website dedicated to Canadian history, "[T]he War of 1812 brought some lasting benefits to British North America—the future Canada; there was a new sense of pride among the people, a pride in having defended their lands with courage and skill.

Fort McHenry

Designed in 1789 by Frenchman Jean Foncin to protect the port of Baltimore in the upper Chesapeake Bay, Fort McHenry has become a national symbol of freedom. Built on the Locust Point Peninsula at Whetstone Point, which protrudes into the opening of Baltimore Harbor, the fort was named for James McHenry, a Scots-Irish immigrant, surgeon and soldier who served under President George Washington as secretary of War. During the Battle of Baltimore, the British fleet remained out of range of Fort McHenry's guns. Though the fort was hit with over 1,500 cannonballs, it received little real damage.



Fort McHenry was constructed in the form of a five-pointed star (with an additional arrow-shaped bastion) in the style of the time, with a fortified bastion located at the end of every point of the star. The thick brick walls were surrounded by a dry moat. The moat allowed musketmen to defend the fort from a land attack, threatening to catch invaders in musket and cannon crossfire. At left a scale model depicts how the fort looked at the time. In the 1860s, Union troops were stationed at Fort McHenry, and the fort became a notorious Federal prison for Rebel sympathizers, anti-war activists and any others the administration deemed a threat and thus wished to silence via indefinite detention without charge. Sound familiar?

Above left, Fort McHenry's powder magazine. The powder magazine, according to tour guides, was hit with a British bomb that fortuitously failed to explode. At right, the guns of Fort McHenry today—Civil War-era guns that have replaced the much smaller cannon used by the Americans in 1812. Nineteen British naval ships assisted in the bombardment of Fort McHenry with rockets and mortars, including the scarily named *Terror*, *Volcano*, *Devastation* and *Aetna.*

William Henry Harrison Unites Indian Confederacy *Against* the United States?

Six months before America declared war on England, the then-governor of the Indiana Territory, future president William Henry Harrison, led American forces against a Shawnee Indian confederacy commanded by famed chief Tecumseh and his brother, Tenskwatawa. For some time before the battle in September 1811, tensions between the white men and the red men had been rising, and many outbreaks of violence had occurred. Ensuring a battle, Harrison marched his troops to Prophetstown, in present-day Indiana, determined to wipe out the Indian confederacy's headquarters and the Indian refugee camp that had sprung up around it, packed with Shawnees who had been already forced out of Ohio and upper Indiana by white settlers. Harrison did agree to talk with Tenskwatawa, as Tecumseh was away meeting with leaders from other tribes determined to halt America's western expansion. Tenskwatawa, a spiritual leader and a not a military man, attacked Harrison in the morning before the scheduled parlay, concerned that the white men would break their word and attack the Indian encampment before the meeting. And they had good reason to believe so. As governor of the Indiana Territory, one of Harrison's major duties was to acquire Indian lands by treaty, bribes or trickery, and his reputation for being a man who could not be trusted when it came to dealings with the Indians preceded him. It was also known by the Indians that Harrison fully intended to destroy Prophetstown. After a two-hour fight near the Tippecanoe River, the outnumbered forces of Harrison prevailed when the Indians ran out of ammunition. The Indians abandoned Prophetstown and Harrison burned it to the ground. This solidified the anti-American opinions of the disparate tribes, who now agreed to come together under Tecumseh. Had Harrison been a square dealer in his land acquisition efforts and his treaty relations with the Indians, and had he not wantonly destroyed Prophetstown, a peace might have been reached between the U.S. and the Indian tribes of the region. Harrison has thus been blamed by historians for sending tens of thousands of Indian braves into the arms of the British in the War of 1812. These warriors proved a deadly and tenacious foe.

There was, too a better understanding between French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians, for each race had fought a common foe."[2]

Had the United States prevailed in its efforts to occupy Canada, many Canadian scholars believe, Canada would not have developed into a sovereign nation. At the very least, there would have been another war between the United States and Britain for the fate of Canada.

BATTLE FOR THE MID-ATLANTIC

On the Mid-Atlantic Coast, British troops landed in the Chesapeake Bay area in 1814, and marched toward Washington. U.S. Gen. William Winder made an attempt to stop the British forces, commanded by Gen. Robert Ross, at Bladensburg, Maryland. The U.S. troops were badly routed. The city of Washington was evacuated, and the British burned the Capitol and the White House, along with most of nonresidential Washington. The British pressed onward, and Adm. Alexander Cochrane sought to invade Baltimore. Ross was killed in the skirmishing as his forces advanced toward the city, and their movement stalled. Cochrane's forces bombarded Fort McHenry, which guarded Baltimore's harbor, but were unable to take it.[3] This event inspired Francis Scott Key, an American lawyer detained on one of Cochrane's ships, to write *The Star-Spangled Banner*. [See TBR September/October 2009.—Ed.]

Unsuccessful at Baltimore, Cochrane's damaged fleet limped to Jamaica for repairs and made preparations for an invasion of New Orleans, hoping to cut off American use of the Mississippi River.

THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS

The United States acquired the city and a huge portion of territory from France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The British greatly resented this massive expansion of the new nation and, not only that, the money from the sale aided their French enemy.

The British believed the capture and control of New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi would help cripple the United States, so they massed ships and men for an attack on the city. The ensuing Battle of New Orleans turned out to be the best-known encounter of the war. Andrew Jackson and his hastily assembled troops thoroughly repulsed and defeated the highly trained brigades of Redcoats under the command of Maj. Gen. Edward Pakenham, who was killed

in the battle. Thus, the British effort to control the Mississippi had been derailed.

Ironically, the war was officially over before the battle even took place. The Treaty of Ghent had been signed on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 1814, and was ratified by the U.S. Senate on Feb. 17, 1815.

However, what most people don't know is that hostilities continued until well into 1817.

Andrew Jackson—a national hero for his victories against the Indians and the Brisitsh—became U.S. president, being elected in 1828. Many patriots consider him to be one of our greatest presidents—partly because of the way he stood up to the bankers.

Looking back, we see the War of 1812 had several theaters of operation. The naval war involved regular ships of the line and scores of privateers on both sides. The Royal Navy blockaded and attacked the East Coast, landing troops and capturing Washington. On other fronts, land and naval battles occurred on the border with Canada, including the Great Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River. American forces completely defeated the Indian tribes who allied with Britain.

Both sides captured territory, but the Treaty of Ghent restored the original borders. Further results of the war were growing feelings of nationalism and patriotism among the Canadians, as the U.S. had unsuccessfully attempted to annex their territory, and they are holding several ceremonies for the 2012 bicentennial. Apparently, the UK has essentially ignored the war, regarding it as a minor event in the larger struggle against Napoleonic France, but not all historians agree.

According to one website: "The War of 1812 is also, perhaps, America's most diversely interpreted war. Everyone agrees that Britain's disrespect for American maritime rights—its interference with American trade and its illegal impressment of seamen off American ships—severely strained Anglo-American relations in the years before 1812. But there is considerable disagreement as to why this ultimately led to war and what this war represented."

One group of historians argues that the war was a complete waste of resources and lives. For starters, they say, it was unnecessary. When Britain failed to meet James Madison's demand that it revoke the Order in Council declaring American commercial vessels subject to interception and seizure, Congress declared war. Within a week of the declaration, however, Britain did suspend the provocative order—and one cause for

War of 1812 Trivia . . .

• Early in the War of 1812, Britain did not fear the United States. This was poignantly illustrated by the remarks of George Canning, Britain's Foreign Secretary, who stated that the American naval fleet amounted to "a few fir-built things with bits of striped bunting at their mastheads."

• In August of 1814, Sir George Prevost commanded a force of 30,000 veteran British troops in Montreal. As they moved towards Plattsburgh, New York, they constituted the largest force Britain had ever sent to North America—bigger than any British armies during the Revolutionary War.

• The Virginia militia had a medical requirement of two teeth. Each man was required to have one tooth on the upper and lower jaw in order to tear cartridges for the flintlock muskets used at the time.

• During the war, the U.S. regular troops ran out of the blue dye for military uniforms and had to switch to drab wool uniform with green trim.

• All U.S. lighthouses on the Chesapeake Bay turned off their lights because the lights only helped guide British ships of the war blockade.

• According to Christopher George, author of *Terror on the Chesapeake*, the "rocket's red glare" referred to in the *Star-Spangled Banner* was first seen in Virginia when the British used Congreve rockets to fire upon the *USS Constellation* at Fort Norfolk.

• During the Battle of Hampton, Va., the first casualties on the British side were actually French POWs who were offered the choice between a stint in British prison or fighting against the United States.

• One of the first modern uses of the torpedo was in Lynnhaven Bay, off the Chesapeake. The first torpedo was essentially a glorified floating barrel, full of explosives, which was carried by a small boat as close as possible to enemy ships and set adrift.

• According to Walter Borneman in his book *1812: The War That Forged a Nation*, the War of 1812 was nearly the War of 1807, the year of the USS *Chesapeake*-HMS *Leopard* affair in which a British ship pursued and crippled the *Chesapeake* looking for British deserters. Americans were so enflamed by this incident that many appeals were made to Congress to declare war. However, the trial of the former vice president, Aaron Burr, for his duel with Alexander Hamilton, distracted the nation so much that no declaration was made.

Above information: www.opsail2012virginia.com.

war was thus eliminated. With just a bit more patience, or more efficient communication, these historians argue, the war could have been avoided.

In addition, these historians argue that the war was inconsequential. After three years of fighting and nearly 6,000 American casualties,[4] the United States and Great Britain agreed to a treaty that resolved none of the substantive issues that had prompted the war. In fact, the argument over trade policies and maritime rights that preceded the war persisted well into the 1820s, almost as though the war had never occurred at all.[5]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

After looking back at the War of 1812, we see the newly independent American nation was definitely attacked, hence justified in going to war. Even so, there were provocative acts on both sides. When we examine the whole story, we see the war was most likely inevitable. The United States was establishing itself as a power both in the Americas and on the world scene. Naturally, this was highly resented by our former English overlords. The results were indisputable. The new American nation defeated a major European-trained army and navy, which hardly anyone thought we could do. We were attacked, responded in kind, and really had no other choice.

Moreover, the war had more than a few long-term results for our rapidly growing and developing nation. The ensuing ban on English manufactured goods was quite helpful to the New England factory owners, who no longer had to compete with the highly industrialized British. Among other things, American industry grew very rapidly, creating the need for an effective national rail system. To say the least, the 1812 war truly transformed the new American nation. Feelings of patriotism and nationalism evolved from this conflict in both the United States and Canada, which significantly influenced the peoples and policies of both countries.

So enjoy the bicentennial of an event from seemingly simpler times, but when we take a closer look, we see the geopolitical issues of the era were rather multifaceted and convoluted. Unfortunately, as I said in the beginning, the wars that followed were neither justified nor righteous, nor popular, and certainly not all that productive. Of course, back then as now, wars are always politically and financially profitable for the ubiquitous Powers That Be, who stand behind the curtains and behind the thrones and executive desks in the world's power centers. As we know, nowadays they don't bother to conceal themselves all that much. ✦

ENDNOTES:

1 www.battleoflakeerie-bicentennial.com/.

2 http://www.canadaka.net/content/page/57-the-war-of-1812-summary.

3 http://www.sparknotes.com/history/american/warof1812/summary.html.

4 According to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, about 15,000 Americans and Choctaws and other Indian allies died, while 1,600 Britishers and their Indian allies died.—Ed.

5 http://www.shmoop.com/war-1812/summary.html

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Why Did the British Burn D.C.?

The truth is, the British never burned down Washington, D.C. in August of 1814, but they did burn down the White House and the partially constructed Capitol Building as well as every government building they could touch with their torches. In fact, British commanders had issued strict orders that the troops should only set afire public, government buildings, and no private dwellings or stores.

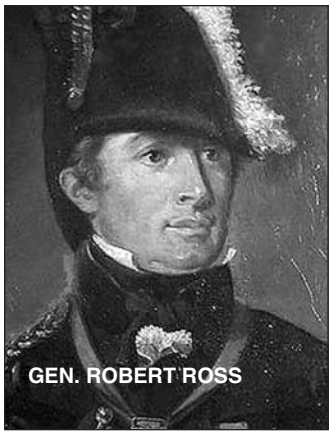
Thus, strict discipline prevented private property and the whole city from being set ablaze by the British troops.

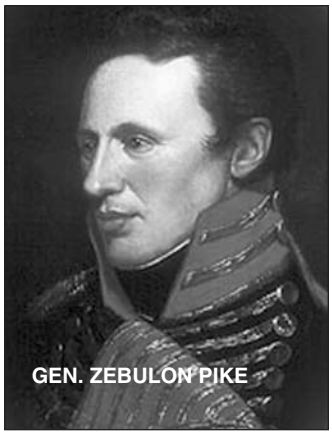
So why did the British "burn Washington"? Washington, D.C.—compared to the port of Baltimore—had no real strategic value, only symbolic value, yet British troops had to be restrained from turning the entire city into an inferno.

Too small in size to effectively occupy the city, perhaps the force under Major General Robert Ross intended to cause as much damage as it could. But there is more to the story. According to eyewitnesses in the British army, including George Gleig, a British soldier:

> Such being the intention of General Ross, he did not march the troops immediately into the city, but halted them upon a plain in its immediate vicinity, whilst a flag of truce was sent in with terms. But whatever his proposal might have been, it was not so much as heard, for scarcely had the party bearing the flag entered the street, than they were fired upon from the windows of one of the houses, and the horse of the general himself, who accompanied them, killed. You will easily believe that conduct so unjustifiable, so direct a breach of the law of nations, roused the indignation of every individual, from the general himself down to the private soldier. All thoughts of accommodation were instantly laid aside; the troops advanced forthwith into the town. . . . Having first put to the sword all who were found in the house from which the shots were fired, and reduced it to ashes, they proceeded, without a moment's delay, to burn and destroy everything in the most distant degree connected with government.

Adding to the British desire for revenge, American troops had burned the parliament building during their attack on York, in Ontario, in 1813 during U.S. attempts to control the region around Lake Ontario and the Niagara frontier. (York is now called Toronto.) During the occupation, order among the U.S. occupying forces deteriorated and they regularly looted private residences, the library and even churches. Some were even accused of rape.


GEN. ROBERT ROSS


GEN. ZEBULON PIKE

The American looting and burning of York led to calls for revenge across Upper Canada, and set the stage for subsequent burnings by British troops during the invasion of the United States a year later.

As it turns out, the burning of Washington might never had occurred had U.S. commanders, including Zebulon Pike, kept more strict discipline among their men. Pike, incidentally, was killed when the British commander of the York garrison ordered the power magazine blown up and the town abandoned before Pike realized what was happening. Being positioned too close to the magazine when it exploded, Pike was hit with bomb fragments and other shrapnel and was killed. This death of their commander angered the Americans enough to be listed as an aggravating cause of the poor treatment of the Canadian civilians living in York. (Actually British citizens, as there was no nation called "Canada" yet.)

Add to this the fact that the U.S. medical corps could not care properly for the British wounded during the York campaign—they were placed more or less unattended in a warehouse—and the slow fuse for retribution had been lit at York by American impetuousness.

Thus, when British commanders saw the opportunity to even the score at D.C., they apparently took it. ✦