

Spring 2016

# A Politically Selective Memory: The Battle for Memory in the Wake of War, 1812-1845

Jesse D. Van Divier

University of Colorado Boulder, jeva1658@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr\\_theses](https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses)



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Van Divier, Jesse D., "A Politically Selective Memory: The Battle for Memory in the Wake of War, 1812-1845" (2016). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 1063.

[https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr\\_theses/1063](https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/1063)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact [cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu](mailto:cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu).

**A POLITICALLY SELECTIVE MEMORY**  
The Battle for Memory in the Wake of War, 1812 – 1845

Jesse Van Divier  
History | University of Colorado Boulder  
Defended March 10, 2016

*Advisor:* Professor Fred Anderson, History

Professor Mithi Mukherjee, History

Professor John Griffin, Political Science

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: A “FORGOTTEN WAR”	3
PART ONE: VICTORIES	
CHAPTER 1: NEW ORLEANS	14
CHAPTER 2: THE THAMES	31
PART TWO: DEFEATS	
CHAPTER THREE: DETROIT	43
CHAPTER FOUR: WASHINGTON D.C.	59
CONCLUSION: BALTIMORE	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY	82

## ABSTRACT

As Americans emerged from the War of 1812, they referred to the conflict as the “Second War of Independence,” a Revolutionary reprise against the British military and navy that the American public would come to remember as brave and honorable. Both the war itself and the creation of its public memory were developmental steps for a young nation—but they are both steps relatively unappreciated by today’s public and historians. Many of the events of the war itself have fallen into obscurity, and only a few of its most glamorous battles persevere.

This thesis contends that our contemporary understanding of these moments—as well as the inability to establish a complete narrative of the War of 1812 and its ambiguous conclusions—is a direct result of the public memory that those in the wake of war forged. Through an examination of four of the war’s battles, it demonstrates that this public memory was a deliberate creation by the contemporary political elite and is laden with personal and political motivations. The first two battles are victories, and in the aftermath of both we witness a demonstrable pattern of the events’ dormancy until political motivations require them to be summoned a decade or more later. The next two are defeats, and we witness in contrast the rapidity with which their memory is solidified. While there are observable patterns, each public memory is also different in that it is manipulated in a way that serves the most salient political interests of the moment.

In remembering America’s “forgotten war,” there is much to be learned about the process of memorialization. In the post-War of 1812’s increasingly democratic society, public memory, a deliberate political creation, was afforded legitimacy through the judgments of the emergent public. The public memory formed has shaped the historical understanding of the war and its most prominent events today. Rather than attempting to “suppress and destroy” memory, the critical endeavor of history elucidated by the French historian Pierre Nora, we can learn to understand the generations that have emerged from formative events through the ways in which they shaped public memory.

## INTRODUCTION: A “FORGOTTEN WAR”

Since its unveiling in November 2014, countless tourists, government officials, and citizens have passed by the federal monument to the War of 1812 every day. A rugged bronze composition of seven war archetypes ranging from a marine to a militiaman to a Native American, it serves, as many monuments do, as a tangible representation of a memory that is otherwise largely ethereal. Each figure, while larger than life in its scope, was designed by the sculptor to invite passersby to “interact,” to climb atop the same hulking block of granite it sits upon; the figures’ circular, dynamic positioning begs a circumspect examination of the history the monument represents.<sup>1</sup> Officially dedicated on the bicentennial anniversary of one of the War of 1812’s final battles, the monument is entitled “Triumph Through Diversity,” honoring collective courage, preserving and revering a crucial moment in the nation’s history.

That nation is not the United States; it is Canada. “Triumph Through Diversity” sits on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario, commemorating the war as a central focal point for Canadian political discourse and collective memory. Meanwhile, in America, the war has all but slipped from the public consciousness.

The tendency for an individual to lose a single, commonplace memory is natural. But that there is a pervasive fragility of an entire nation’s memory seems almost intentional, faintly conspiratorial. Such a phenomenon is repulsive to our generation, one obsessed with information, archives, and the permanence of memory, sometimes in a book and other times in a physical manifestation of bronze. This is amplified when the forgotten event is war, an engulfing

---

<sup>1</sup> Jo Calvert, “Forging a Nation: Triumph Through Diversity Sculpture,” *University of Toronto Magazine*, Autumn 2015, accessed December 9, 2015, <http://magazine.utoronto.ca/all-about-alumni/forging-a-nation-triumph-through-diversity-sculpture-adrienne-alison/>.

political exhibition that creates veritable destruction of a theoretically unforgettable quantity. To the modern historian, the eradication of such a memory begs we find the generation that destroyed it. In the process, we neglect the individuals who created it.

Historians, in wrestling over the War of 1812's ambiguous conclusions and tenuous place in the canon of American history, have tragically underestimated the role of the war's memory in shaping the political culture of the decades that followed: Jacksonian America. Examining the American written historical record—newspapers, histories, and literature—from 1812 to 1845 in clearly depicts the ability of a society to wield collective memory both offensively and protectively, for both unity and division. Memory, while founded in absolute truth, is forged to serve a purpose. The memory of the War of 1812 is a case study in the purposeful creation and utilization of collective memory: it is the story of an event that growingly dominated public discourse only to almost immediately vanish from its prominence. That is not to say it did so without a trace; indeed, its artifacts are residual subtleties that surround us even today. Yet each artifact—memorialized ships, a venerated Navy, ashes in Washington, our national anthem—is evidently an element of our national subconscious, not our national consciousness.

The American memory of the War of 1812 is not immortalized in bronze, monumentally or metaphorically. Instead, it survives below the surface; its story is one of a rising and falling tide that scatters its remnants along the shore. It is a story potent in its claims about memory's utility, malleability, and fragility.

\*\*\*

Everyone remembers where he or she was on September 11, 2001. Societal consensus suggests that the instantaneous combination of surprise and dread leaves an imprint on the memory, which heightens our recall of the trivial elements that surrounded the tragedy. Such a

phenomenon is not unique to our generation. On the eve of 9/11, an inquisitive student of memory would have found much the same knowledge widely in circulation surrounding the societal memory of the Challenger disaster. Another decade back, the phenomenon is evident with the memory of the assassination of John F. Kennedy; another century back, the assassination of Lincoln.

“Flashbulb memories” are intensely clear memories of politically and publically important tragic happenings upon each of our memories. Whatever the event, the implication is that the public memory of tragedy is created through a special process that provides unique accuracy. For those within society, they could serve as a constant reminder of what lies behind us. For historians, they could serve as an entryway to a primary source field laden with better material, both in quantity and quality.

Except increasingly, researchers are finding that “flashbulb memories” are just as fickle as those of our everyday lives. In a 2003 study entitled “Confidence, not Consistency, Characterizes Flashbulb Memories,” researchers Jennifer M. Talarico and David C. Rubin from Duke University discovered in the wake of 9/11 that all of our memories are equally subject to persuasion and riddled with inaccuracies whether or not our daily routine of watching the morning news and sipping coffee included a generous scoop of unprecedented catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

While it is a principally neuropsychological finding, it comes in a long line of historical discoveries that similarly problematize the creation of public memory. Almost innately, the human tendency is to call into question an individual account when it lacks corroborating evidence, and this is especially true for historical idiosyncrasies. But just as instinctual is the tendency to accept such and such an explanation of a story or event merely because the majority

---

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer M. Talarico and David C. Rubin, “Confidence, Not Consistency, Characterizes Flashbulb Memories,” *Psychological Science* vol. 14 no. 5 (2003), 455-461.

of its contemporaries say it was so. As Talarico and Rubin have so scientifically posited for us, perhaps it is best not to merely take the collective at its word, even when the collective is at its most confident. The reaction is the modern field of history, which is “by nature critical, and all historians have sought to denounce the hypocritical mythologies of their predecessors.”<sup>3</sup>

Pierre Nora’s provocative critique of the transformation of memory to history cites the societal obsession with archival production as a step away from the past, where the creation of public memory was the creation of a form of truth about national identity. While he suggested that United States memory was less inherently “polemical” than French historiography, within a few years historian Michael Kammen had provided the Americanist response: “we prefer plasticized apotheosis to historized memory developed in judicious doses.”<sup>4</sup> That is, American attempts at “undercutting myth” (or achieving a true history) were largely less polemical than, say, those in Nora’s France, because they were content to recognize the purpose of also accepting myth, which was (and is) that national identity stems from consensus rather than accuracy.<sup>5</sup>

Kammen posits that America, in its first century of existence, was content to be a nation concerned with optimism towards the future rather than a concern for an understanding of the past, but over the course of his work, he also becomes the forerunner of revisionists on American memory. Those that came after him, such as Alfred Young and Amy Greenberg, would also focus on the moments of historical introspection by America, be they of memorialization of the Revolution or regret over the Mexican-American War respectively. In particular, the Civil War

---

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” *Representations* no. 26 (Spring, 1989), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*; Michael Kammen, *The Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 28.

has felt a critical approach to its memory in recent years, with Kammen himself using Lost Cause ideology as an example of the danger of tradition, and the public following up with critiques of widespread acceptance of the Confederate Flag. Yet in all cases, the tendency seems to be to relapse into the humbly brilliant observation of Pierre Nora, which is that “history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.”<sup>6</sup>

Recognition of this paradox of memory, which for Americans manifests as a settled obsession with both critique and veneration all but unwilling to examine itself, acts as the first of two overlapping historiographical gaps that frame this paper. The second is an almost complete historiographical drought concerning the memory of a critical, transformative moment in American history: the War of 1812. In the next section, we will establish just how deep this drought extends, but for now, we will merely acknowledge the fact that, to use Kammen’s own example, we “remember” the Alamo, the *Maine*, Pearl Harbor, and—in the post-Kammen era—9/11, but we rarely remember the burning of our nation’s capital in 1814.

Still, the purpose of this thesis is not to examine the accuracy of the memory of the War of 1812. As we will soon discover, one does not need to move beyond 1818 or so to recognize the depth of its inaccuracy, immediately obvious especially to British critics. Instead, we examine the creation of public memory as the creation of a mythic truth. There is a degree to which this must have been even more true in a time without the openness and accessibility of media and information that exists today, but there is also a degree to which our society, historically one that almost constantly has emerged from war or is on the brink of another, can connect to this idea: the form of truth most relevant in our daily lives is a mythic truth, and it is found in societal consensus rather than fact. When events are heavily memorialized and

---

<sup>6</sup> Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 9.



constantly invoked within the national discourse, whether they are discrete tragedies such as September 11, 2001 or a more ambiguous extended conflict, this effect is compounded. And of all of America's wars, its "Second War of Independence" had almost as many memories to contribute as the first.

As a relatively unstudied topic in the intensely scrutinized realm of American history, the War of 1812 is ideal for examining how it is not the numbers of casualties or tactical advantages of each victory that constitutes the significance of war. Instead, an understanding of the significance of war only emerges when we understand it as those that created its memory did. Rather than executing history with the goal of destroying memory, we can use it to understand that memory's evolution. We begin in the thick of a generation where the tide of the war was beginning to recede, carrying away with it its heroes and veterans.

\*\*\*

On the morning of April 13, 1844, readers of Hezekiah Niles' *National Register* would have been dismayed to read of the passing of Major General Morgan Lewis.<sup>7</sup> Born 90 years earlier in 1754, Lewis had seen nearly the full extent of the birth of the American empire. When he was only 21, his father, Francis Lewis, signed his name to the Declaration of Independence; on his deathbed, Morgan Lewis would have read in the news of the meteoric rise of James K. Polk, a politician willing to fight an imperial war on Mexico *and* Britain. Having occupied a variety of political roles—New York Supreme Court Chief Justice, New York Governor, and United States Senator—Morgan Lewis lived a life "protracted beyond the usual period allotted to man" yet nonetheless full politically. But it was in the military where he would truly forge his legacy; as

---

<sup>7</sup> Hezekiah Niles had died in 1839, but his unrepentant Whig political ideology mingled with the fervor of a militiaman was preserved by the *Register's* new editor, Jeremiah Hughes. So too was its expansive readership.

the reverent obituary would put it, he was as an honorable veteran not only of the first, but also the second war of independence.<sup>8</sup>

It seems unfortunate that the man who helped found the New York Historical Society has been forgotten by history. Not a single biography depicting the life of Morgan Lewis as a standalone work has been developed to date. But in many ways, the overlooking of Morgan Lewis as a figure of early American History is no accident. In fact, Morgan Lewis is arguably a figure American historians cannot study, at least via the traditional approach.

Whether or not Morgan Lewis's contributions to the cause of American state formation would have been significant enough to be remembered by modern historians, the rigid patterns of early American periodization completely eliminate the possibility. Morgan Lewis was a product of the Revolutionary and Constitutional eras; he was a politician of both the first and second party systems, and had he lived a few more years, he would have seen the rise of the third party system, as well. Even calling him an "American" is to fail to recognize the constraints historical periodization place upon our examination of history, as he was born in a land before independence, let alone nationalism. He was elected a Jeffersonian Republican but would later identify as a moderate Whig, despite only minimal evolutions in his New York political ideals. The immediate memory of him, as his obituary suggests, was of a politician of an era where temperance and integrity were forged not by partisan rhetoric, but war. And his military credentials extended from his involvement in the Revolution to the War of 1812, with both mentioned in the same sentence.

But before the periodization of early America, unfortunate to the cause of not only Morgan Lewis but the understanding of the legacy of the War of 1812, can be discussed, the full

---

<sup>8</sup> William Popham, "Death of Gen. Morgan Lewis," *Niles' National Register*, April 13, 1844.

extent of the historiographical absence of the memory of the war must be acknowledged. In telling the story of Morgan Lewis, the War of 1812 was important. So why do the public *and* historians today so readily discount it? At the bicentennial of the war, only 36% of Americans suggested that there were any significant outcomes to the War of 1812.<sup>9</sup> Donald Hickey, who by the same bicentennial had still maintained his status as one of the dominant historians of the war, titled his 1989 magnum opus “*The Forgotten War*,” and still publicly refers to the war as “obscure.”<sup>10</sup> Even the most recent, groundbreaking works on the period introduce the topic with deep dismissals of the war’s legacy, suggesting, “very few ordinary people would experience any direct impact of the conflict.”<sup>11</sup>

That the *Register*, the work that for a time characterized the popular dialogue, referred to the War of 1812 as the “Second War of Independence” should clearly indicate that the generation that emerged from the conflict saw it as holding undeniable significance, perhaps even at the level of the Revolution.<sup>12</sup> But we do not have to wait for this 1844 publication of the *Register* to see the conflation of the two wars of independence. In fact, it is clear that the War of 1812 had become the “Second War of Independence” as early as 1815, the same year as the Treaty of Ghent. The half-decade that followed would see at least ten full volume works on the

---

<sup>9</sup> Steve Vogel, “The War of 1812, still seeking a little respect,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2012, accessed October 30, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-war-of-1812-still-seeking-a-little-respect/2012/06/07/gJQAblrwLV\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-war-of-1812-still-seeking-a-little-respect/2012/06/07/gJQAblrwLV_story.html).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Hickey’s interview with the Library of America, accessed October 30, 2015 <http://blog.loa.org/2013/05/historian-donald-r-hickey-discusses-how.html>. Hickey in passing mentions the legacy of the war, particularly symbolically, but predominantly hypothesizes a failure of the war and its President to resonate with modern American as reason for its “obscurity.” The interview, in the same vein as his *Forgotten War*, sympathizes with the Federalists that elements of the war were “unwise.”

<sup>11</sup> Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), xvi.

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion on the societal importance of the *Register*, see William Earle, “Niles’ Register, 1811-1849: Window on the World,” *Journal on the War of 1812* I no. 5 (Fall 1996).

War of 1812 by different authors, including representations from British and Canadian viewpoints. Of the first of these works was the theologian Alexander McLeod's spiritual analysis of the war, which specifically used the phrase "second war of independence," citing as chief among its purposes the crusade to purge the love of money and replace it with the original "love of country."<sup>13</sup>

Exhaustive research on the pre-war era has provided historians the tools to draw intelligent connections right up to the war itself. For instance, the well-read historian will recognize that McLeod's internal, post-war dilemma was not original at all; in fact, it borrows heavily from the pre-war thoughts of John Adams. Surprising to many modern historians, Adams supported the declaration of war on grounds of patriotic purification from "unbounded ambition," the sin of the French Revolution.<sup>14</sup> While the sentiments of pre-war Americans are by no means a closed topic, thorough historical work has culminated in the detailed psychology of Joyce Appleby's *Inheriting the Revolution* and Steven Watts' lasting argument that Americans fought the war as a vehicle for purification in *The Republic Reborn*. Indeed, one does not need to look much past a high school classroom to find intelligent discussion of the "War Hawks" as some of the earliest dominant congressmen.

But the post-war legacy has proven more problematic. *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*' Bradford Perkins has taken aim at the post-war generation's inclination for revisionism, citing Niles' *Register's* claim that America "dictated" the Treaty of Ghent as

---

<sup>13</sup> Alexander McLeod, *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes, and Ends of the Present War* (New York: Eastburn, Kirk and Co, 1814), 218.

<sup>14</sup> John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 15, 1813.

evidence of “self-induced amnesia.”<sup>15</sup> His 1993 critique is nothing new; by 1818, a British military official, William James, had completed his two volumes on the war (and notably, apologized for the “length of time” and “delays” in the volumes’ release) motivated by intent to correct revisionist American accounts, which he saw as “demi-official performances” predictably “deficient in particulars.”<sup>16</sup> Historians continue to be puzzled by the fact that post-war memory seemed to have more in common with pre-war dogma than the actual events therein.

This disconnect is the precise reason for studying the creation of the memory of the War of 1812, especially as a driving force of the coming era. Perkins’ depiction, among other historiographical trends, has caused historians to analyze the importance of Andrew Jackson’s military past only as a means towards accomplishing the end of his presidential election; the untimely occurrence of the Battle of New Orleans, technically after the Treaty of Ghent, used as yet more ammunition against the war’s actual relevance. The historian Daniel Walker Howe also directly invoked Perkins’s “self-induced amnesia” in demonstrating the war as a cause for the onset of American nationalism and industrialism.<sup>17</sup> While Hickey’s reference of the war as “obscure” may be damaging to public discourse about the war’s relevance, Perkins’s diagnosis has relegated the memory of the “Second War of Independence” to the stuff of fiction. But if his dismissal is correct, the inaccuracy of the memory—perhaps deliberate, perhaps clinical—makes it all the more important in understanding the decades that followed: the Age of Jackson.

---

<sup>15</sup> Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations Volume I: The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 146.

<sup>16</sup> William James, *A full and correct account of the military occurrences of the late war between Great Britain and the United States of America : with an appendix, and plates Volume I* (London: Printed for the Author, 1818), xi-xxv.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71-73.

## PART ONE: VICTORIES

## CHAPTER ONE: NEW ORLEANS

“General Jackson, whom the Americans have twice elected to the head of their Government, is a man of a violent temper and mediocre talents; no one circumstance in the whole course of his career ever proved that he is qualified to govern a free people... But he was raised to the Presidency, and has been maintained in that lofty station, solely by the recollection of a victory which he gained twenty years ago under the walls of New Orleans.”

-Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

“The Battle of New Orleans may turn out to be as fatal to John Quincy Adams as to Pakenham.”

– *The Salem Gazette*, January 8, 1825

The historian of good faith might suggest that the memory of New Orleans was born in the glorious days following the successful defeat of the British. The revisionist historian might suggest that the memory was instead created recently by the machinations of historians before him or her. But the critical historian finds that the memory of the New Orleans was a product of the 1820's, a deliberate creation on the brink of an explosive political career perhaps unparalleled in American history.

Andrew Jackson was without question the preeminent warlord of the American West in the 1810's. Combat profoundly suited his temperament, and his older contemporaries such as Thomas Jefferson noted that the “rashness of his feelings” and his tendency to “choke with rage” were more suitable to the fields of battle than the halls of government. Jackson himself agreed: impatient with the debates of legislators and the hairsplitting arguments of lawyers, he had resigned from positions as a United States Senator and as a judge on the Tennessee Superior Court by the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Above all he was driven by the need to defend his honor, managing his temper and propensity for violence imperfectly—he fought duels

---

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Jefferson, interview with Daniel Webster, 1824, in Henry Mills Alden, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine Volume 69* (New York: Harper and Brother's Publishers, 1884), 279.

in 1788, 1803, 1806, and 1813—but never losing sight of his ambition for military command, or his desire to drive Native Americans from their territory and open the West to white settlement.

By 1810, Jackson was reputed an able politician, lawyer, and businessman; he had acquired the cotton plantation near Nashville on which he would later build his mansion, the Hermitage, and had been the commanding general of the Tennessee militia for a decade. By 1812, this role would set him on an irreversible track: while he and his fellow westerners were never wont to shy away from violence against Native Americans, the increased tension at the geographic margins of the United States society as a result of the coming war with Britain provided an even greater occasion and arena for the pursuit of land and glory. The violent expulsion of Indians would become a theme unshakeable for the rest of Jackson's life.

The Creek War of 1813-1814 was the ideal beginning for Major General Jackson's crusade. Most technically a civil war between the hostile Upper Creeks, called the "Red Sticks" after the war clubs that were their signature weapon, and the Lower Creeks, a less militant faction aiming to preserve trade with the United States, the American people saw the Creek War as an added frontier dimension to the War of 1812. While American forces in the north were engaging in inconclusive attempts to reclaim Detroit, Jackson's front could be characterized as decisive. On March 27 1814, the Creek War ended at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend: with unrestrained violence, Jackson's forces of approximately 3,000 militiamen, U.S. Army soldiers, and Native allies trapped about 1,000 Red Stick Creeks in a loop of the Tallapoosa River, annihilating virtually all of them in the battle and subsequent massacre. Arrogant, ignorant, or some combination of the two, Jackson reported his "victory" to Major General Thomas Pinckney



of South Carolina with the suggestion that “the history of warfare I think furnishes few instances of a more brilliant attack.”<sup>19</sup>

And yet, the victory did not get the national attention Jackson almost certainly had hoped. His letter to Pinckney was reprinted widely, but was, in essence, the start and end of a national discussion on Horseshoe Bend. In some publications, such as the *Norwich Courier* in Connecticut or New York’s *Weekly Museum*, Jackson’s letter was far from the headline, slighted from prominence by General James Wilkinson’s letter reporting that his troops had once again invaded Canada. One editorial, appearing in early May of 1814 in the *Boston Patriot* and *The Repertory*, did comment on the nature of the events at Horseshoe Bend, but used it as an example of American barbarism to serve as a comparison to exaggerated claims of British brutality:

“But we can show them where these outrages, even if there were no exaggeration in this description, have been far exceeded... we beg them to read again the narrative of the massacre at Tallapoosie [Horseshoe Bend], the cold-blooded slaughter [of Indians].”<sup>20</sup>

Whether this opinion hints of the existence of a wider censure in New England surrounding the morality of Horseshoe Bend is impossible to say, but there is no question of the importance the battle held for Jackson. Until the moment of Horseshoe Bend, Jackson’s life had been a frustrated search for glory, a quest for the annihilation of opponents that had not found its fulfillment in the Senate, the quaint streets of Tennessee, or in the wealth that his slaves and land speculation had earned him.

The self-proclaimed heir to an American “empire of liberty” that had thus far grown relatively peaceably through the Louisiana Purchase, Jackson believed his moment had arrived,

---

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Jackson, “On the battle ground in the bend of the Tallapoosie,” *Norwich Courier*, April 27, 1814.

<sup>20</sup> “Incorrigibility of the Essex Junto,” *The Repertory*, May 5, 1814.

and that the rapid, unrestrained expansion of white settlers into the interior was now inevitable.<sup>21</sup> As the late Andrew Cayton observed, “Horseshoe Bend was the most decisive military encounter of Jackson’s career: the climax of a life lived intimately with violence, it unleashed his passions and the fury of his men in a dance of death that continued until they had spent the last of their strength.”<sup>22</sup> Some historians suggest that Andrew Jackson adopted his Creek Indian son, Lincoya, after the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, in an attempt to expiate a sense of guilt at the eradication of the Red Sticks. But in light of Jackson’s self-ascribed importance as a conqueror, perhaps we may see Lincoya as a sort of grotesque souvenir.

While Jackson initially reported that only ten Red Sticks escaped, it would eventually become clear that approximately 200 Red Sticks survived to flee to Florida where they joined with other refugee Native peoples who had taken up residence there under Spanish protection since the 1710s, forming the Seminole nation. Jackson’s relentless aggression led him to invade Florida in 1816, immediately after the conclusion of the War of 1812. Although the decidedly unmilitaristic James Madison had passed the presidency in 1817 to a more aggressive successor in his former Secretary of War, James Monroe, the United States government gave little direction to Jackson’s operations in what came to be called the First Seminole War. In turn, the improvisation of the conflict indicated Jackson’s willingness to indulge in his rage against the Indians and their British and Spanish allies with little restraint. In the absence of authorization from Washington, his invasion of Florida became a full-on offensive, even executing two British

---

<sup>21</sup> The phrase “empire of liberty” is most widely associated with Thomas Jefferson as a theme outlining the role America would play in the changing world. It is used throughout this analysis to demonstrate the ways that this “empire” changed under Jackson: while Jefferson’s growth of the empire occurred peaceably through the Louisiana Purchase, Jackson’s vision was of a disruptive form of expansion, both in the Creek Wars and Indian Removal.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Cayton, *Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 233.

agents who had been taken as prisoners of war in 1818.<sup>23</sup> Despite controversy over these actions within the Cabinet, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams avoided publicly disparaging Jackson's maneuvers, using the effort to demonstrate the practicality of the early Monroe Doctrine. The cession of Florida to the United States in the Adams-Onís Treaty cemented the American hold in the area; it was principally forged by the looming threat of Jackson's unpredictable aggression. It would be the last time Adams came to Jackson's defense.

Jackson's search for glory reached its apex at the head of armed American citizens answerable only to himself and categorically victorious, but there would be surprisingly little public notice taken of them at the national level. Even Horseshoe Bend, in Jackson's own mind the defining victory of his career, would only attract public attention outside the West when a Jacksonian Presidency appeared inevitable.<sup>24</sup>

The nation may have initially overlooked Jackson's military ventures, but those who participated in the eventual buildup to his presidency did not, utilizing his military career to position him as a candidate with a mandate to rule. Jackson's obsession over the will of the majority, which would later form the basis for "Jacksonian Democracy," would not have justified him to expand the powers of the presidency in such unprecedented fashion; his eventual victory in 1828 carried only 15 of 23 states along predictably polarized lines. Rather, Jackson's expansion of the Presidency principally came from his belief in the inextricable link between war as the highest form of patriotism. He himself extended this idea to its absolute extremes, claiming, "the individual who refuses to defend his rights when called by his Government,

---

<sup>23</sup> For a thorough discussion on the political and military tension arising in the time of the Seminole Wars, see Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought*, Chapter 3.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, the January 14, 1828 issue of the *Daily National Journal*, which, after almost 14 years of no recorded discussion in newspapers surrounding Horseshoe Bend, asks the question "Do they [the people] approve of the General's determination 'to exterminate' the Indians at Tallapoosie... including their unoffending women and children?"

deserves to be a slave.”<sup>25</sup> By 1824, it seemed, many were calling upon him to defend the country in a new way. Jackson’s progression from victorious general to President naturally invoked the memory of George Washington. But outside of Jackson’s circle of ardent followers, those uncertain of a potential Jackson presidency—and indeed, in many cases, wary of such a possibility—would have resisted making such a clear connection to Washington. The complexities arose in the differences between the two men’s military careers: one most often characterized as a man of self-restraint and virtue, the other, as a man of brutish violence. Jackson’s supporters needed a Yorktown, not a Horseshoe Bend. They found it in the military outlier in the middle of Jackson’s career as an Indian fighter: the Battle of New Orleans.

\*\*\*

That it was a detour from Jackson’s campaigns against the Indians was not to say that the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815 was insignificant in the life of Jackson or in the minds of his contemporaries. Nor was his success accidental: it reflected his brilliant arrangement of troops in a well-protected defensive line, and from the decision of Major General Sir Edward Pakenham to launch a frontal attack, which quickly resulted in his own death, as well as that of his second-in-command and another general. The void of leadership led to disorder in the British ranks and a truly Jacksonian level of violence: contemporary historians suggested that “the plain between the front line of the British and the American works, a distance of 400 yards, was literally covered with the enemy’s dead and wounded.”<sup>26</sup> If the slaughter was reminiscent of Horseshoe Bend, however, the fact that the dead were highly trained British troops rather than

---

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Jackson, “Proclamation to the People of Louisiana,” September 21, 1814 in Andrew Jackson, *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson, Vol II*, ed. John Spencer Bassett (Washington, D.C., 1926-1934), 57-59.

<sup>26</sup> William McCarty, *History of the American War of 1812, from the commencement, until the final termination thereof, on the memorable eight of January, 1815, at New Orleans, Third Edition* (Pennsylvania: McCarty and Davis, 1817), 232.

Native American warriors carried special significance: in one brief moment Jackson was transformed from a local leader into a national one.

The immediate impact of the battle, reported by Jackson as a complete annihilation of more than 1,500 British with fewer than 10 American casualties, is arguably one of the most unclear of all of the War of 1812's events. A product of slow communication lines throughout the country and abroad, the victory at New Orleans was clouded among rumors and then factual reports of the Treaty of Ghent all at once, some time during the second week of February in 1815.

On Thursday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, the *Delaware Gazette* published Major General Jackson's official letter to the Secretary of War, dated January 9<sup>th</sup> and detailing the main events of January 8<sup>th</sup>. This included Jackson recording the details regarding number of British troops killed.<sup>27</sup> On Saturday, February 11<sup>th</sup>, *Niles' Weekly Register* published the same letter, prefaced by an editorial denouncing those that are skeptical that this letter is not the testimony of Jackson and is actually a forgery, as word seemed to have traveled on foot far enough North to corroborate the claims.<sup>28</sup>

On Wednesday, February 15<sup>th</sup>, the *American Telegraph*, in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, published a different letter from Andrew Jackson dated January 13<sup>th</sup>, in which Jackson expressed concern that his letter sent on January 8<sup>th</sup> may have not been received by Secretary of War Monroe. He reported further:

“Their loss was immense. I had first computed it at 1500, but it is since ascertained to be much greater. Upon information, which is believed to be correc [sic], Col. Haynes, the inspector general, reports it to be in total 2500... My loss was inconsiderable, being only 7 killed and 6 wounded. Such a disproportion in loss, when we consider the number and

---

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Jackson, “Letter from Major General Jackson to the Secretary of War,” printed in the *Delaware Gazette*, February 9, 1815.

<sup>28</sup> Hezekiah Niles, “Glorious From New Orleans,” *Niles' Weekly Register*, February 11, 1815.

the kind of troops engaged, must, I know, excite astonishment, and may not everywhere be fully credited; yet I am perfectly satisfied that the account is not exaggerated on the one part, nor underrated on the other.”<sup>29</sup>

Did Jackson truly believe his letter had been lost, or did he merely see the opportunity to report the increasingly large and increasingly precise numbers in an attempt to play a part in creating the memory of New Orleans? Perhaps; if so, it was no more than a prudent move in a day when conflicting notions of what had happened and wholesale confusion arose from newspaper accounts that reflected the piecemeal arrival of information, at varying times, dependent on the uncertainties of travel.

As a result, weeks passed before a clear account of military operations at New Orleans and their significance emerged from the scattered arrival of details in various local newspapers. . . On the same day as the *American Telegraph* account, February 15, the *Hallowell Gazette* included no mention of the battle of January 8, but rather reprinted Jackson’s account of a naval engagement of December 26, 1814.<sup>30</sup> And closer to Washington, the *Baltimore Patriot’s* February 15 paper reported none of these letters, but instead outlined the terms of the Treaty of Ghent under the headline, “PEACE!” In a manner that seemingly anticipated the uncertainties of how New Orleans would fit into a treaty penned in December of 1814, the writer suggested that it was perhaps for the best that the British were not aware of their utter defeat on January 8<sup>th</sup> when writing the treaty, as this would have likely tinged the process with unnecessary antagonism. However, the article also acknowledged the possibility that the aggression on New Orleans was a conspiratorial move by the British meant to cripple the United States even as they

---

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Jackson, “From the N. Intelligencer Extra of Saturday Evening: Letter from Major General Jackson to the Secretary of War,” printed in the *American Telegraph*, February 15, 1815.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Jackson, “Official Accounts: Letter from General Andrew Jackson to the Secretary of War,” printed in the *Hallowell Gazette* (Hallowell, Maine), February 15, 1815.

took ostensible steps towards peace; General Pakenham's defeat was therefore a punishment from Providence for such British dishonesty.<sup>31</sup>

If historians today consider the conclusion of the War of 1812 to be ambiguous, contemporaries who read of the Battle of New Orleans and the Treaty of Ghent in the second week of February, 1815 had even greater reason to think so. This issue was muddled by the attempts at creating memory, with many adopting events into a message of national identity for the war and its conclusions even as the story of the war was unfolding differently all around the nation at the same moment. Ambiguous events, we shall see, are prey for those who would forge or manipulate public memory.

Congress ratified the Treaty of Ghent on February 18<sup>th</sup>. By the same day, the attempts to create meaning of the events of the last two months had already begun. Hezekiah Niles would write with praise, "Who would not be an American? Long live the republic! All hail! last asylum of oppressed humanity! Peace is signed in the arms of victory!"<sup>32</sup> By February 25<sup>th</sup>, the *American Advocate* (also based in Hallowell, Maine) would clearly articulate the connection between Jackson and Ghent, suggesting, "the name of Jackson will be immortalised—and children yet unborn... with gratitude to the defenders of our soil, shall exclaim 'these patriots were at the Battle of New Orleans—these are they that assisted in defending our country, and preserving our independence.'"<sup>33</sup> Jackson, the Tennessee militia warlord, had in a matter of days become a crucial national figure.

At the Battle of New Orleans, Jackson had sparked a moment of national patriotism, but he had not, in all truth, won the war, much less established himself as a presidential candidate.

---

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Munroe and Ebenezer French, "PEACE!" *Baltimore Patriot*, February 15, 1815.

<sup>32</sup> Hezekiah Niles, "Glorious News! Orleans saved and peace concluded," *Niles' Weekly Register*, February 18, 1815.

<sup>33</sup> "Victory at New Orleans," *American Advocate*, February 25, 1815.

His biographers and other historians have pinned the moment of the Battle of New Orleans as the beginning of his march to the presidency, but such a teleological perspective distorts the ambiguous atmosphere at the close of the war we have just examined. In fact, it would take every one of the 14 years until Andrew Jackson became President for the memory of New Orleans to become one that justified Jackson's ascension. That is not to say the formation of the memory was gradual or natural; in fact, it was quite rapid and quite purposeful.

In the months and years that followed, we can observe a distinct effort on the part of early war historians in framing New Orleans as a culmination of national accomplishment as opposed to a militaristic outlier. Robert B. McAfee, one of the most important early historians of the war, argued that Jackson's "lofty character as an energetic, intrepid, and skillful general had gone before him, and having secured him the unbounded confidence of his people, enabled him to exercise an unlimited influence over them." We can acknowledge that in the moment, Jackson was indeed aware of this. His decision to declare martial law, accompanied by strict curfew and importing and exporting requirements, has been critiqued by many historians as evidence of a thirst for power, but McAfee sees it as a calculated step that received the "cordial acquiescence of every friend to the safety of the country." Almost prophetically, McAfee claimed, "at such a crisis and in such circumstances, the utmost exertions of every patriot, and the most rigorous and efficient measures for the public security become indispensable"; this was not the final time the national career of Jackson would invoke such logic in protecting the Union.<sup>34</sup>

The aftermath of the Battle of New Orleans, much like the war as a whole, was fraught with memorialization by the public, not simply historians. The phrase the "Battle of New Orleans" seems intuitive, but early journalists preferred the "Defense" of New Orleans or even

---

<sup>34</sup> Robert B. McAfee, *History of the Late War in the Western Country* (Ohio: Historical Publications Company, 1919), 543–547.



the “Victory” at New Orleans. The “Battle of New Orleans” would not be popularized until mid-1816 with the release of a play in five acts by the same title; the play documents a fictional build up over a few weeks’ time in New Orleans between the master strategists Jackson and Pakenham, and culminates when Pakenham dies ingloriously on the battlefield on January 8<sup>th</sup> as a result of his arrogance. This further cemented the “Battle of New Orleans” as a specific reference to the engagement on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1815, as opposed to the month long conflict at land and sea that preceded it.<sup>35</sup>

Even as historical works on the war, such as the volumes by McAfee and McCarty, continued to emerge in 1816 and beyond, the extent of the interest of many Americans was limited to the play by Grice. Interest in Jackson’s national ascendancy was present in the West, where more politically motivated works, such as the early publications of John Reid and John Eaton’s biography of Jackson in 1817, began to emerge. But nationally, the memory of the War of 1812 and the Battle of New Orleans quickly faded from its pole position in politics in favor of the 1816 election, when the coming “Era of Good Feelings” would supersede Jackson’s wartime victory. American voters, still highly deferential and only choosing the presidential electors by popular vote in about half of the states, overwhelmingly endorsed the nominee of the Republican Congressional caucus, James Monroe, for the Presidency. While his Federalist critics decried him as a member of the “Virginia Dynasty” due to the previous four terms having been occupied by Jefferson and then Madison, Americans embraced Monroe’s traditionalist values of the Revolution. He would be the final figure of the American Revolution to hold the office, and symbolically unified in his person both America’s first and second war of independence. National unity came at no small cost to the Federalist party, which had been cast as subversive

---

<sup>35</sup> C. E. Grice, *The Battle of New Orleans, or Glory, love, and loyalty: historical and national drama, in five acts* (New York: Printed for the Author, 1814).

and anti-patriotic due to the ill-timed, anti-war “Hartford Convention” only days before news of the Treaty of Ghent would arrive in America. Many believed that with the Federalist’s collapse, the days of partisan politics were behind Americans. Monroe’s opponent, Rufus King, would provide the Federalist Party’s epitaph when he commented that, “Federalists of our age must be content with the past.”<sup>36</sup> While the Federalists were certainly the more educated and fiscally adept party, the country’s politics were beginning to appeal to a national unity that did not preclude the common man, demonstrated by popular campaign mugs that misspelled the future President’s name as “Munroe.”

Throughout the Era of Good Feelings, the memory of Andrew Jackson’s bravery at New Orleans was kept alive, principally in the West, by supporters who toasted him at memorial dinners, commemorated him in engravings, and followed his accounts of his activities printed in local newspapers. It is important to recall that the Jackson of Monroe’s term was not a man whose glory was past, but a principal—and disruptive—actor in current events. To America’s leaders and public alike, Jackson’s involvement in the Seminole Wars of 1818-1819 would prove that he was still the autonomous Indian-slaying warlord the country had thought he was for the previous half-dozen years. While New Orleans had been a glorious moment, it was an exception to the rule of Jackson’s obsession with the defeat and removal of Native Americans. Insofar as he persisted in the national consciousness, Jackson was a quintessential figure of the West rather than of the nation. There was no need for a different memory of Jackson until the Tennessee Legislature nominated him as a candidate for the President of the United States in mid 1822.

This is not to say that Jackson fell into obscurity; by the time Jackson’s candidacy was announced in 1822, dinner memorials on January 8<sup>th</sup> had become ostentatious affairs, toasting no

---

<sup>36</sup> Rufus King, letter to Christopher Gore, May 15, 1816, in Rufus King, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, ed. Charles R. King (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1895).

longer only to “Jackson, lover of his country” but to “Jackson, The American Scipio; but greater than the Roman Hero.”<sup>37</sup> Memorial events, reported by the local news as “Public Dinners to Andrew Jackson,” enjoyed glamorous portrayal in the media, portrayed a larger than life figure, and almost always began with toasts to the United States and to George Washington.<sup>38</sup> Jackson’s popularity and growing prominence compelled the highest echelons of American political leadership to take note of him, culminating with his appointment by Monroe as envoy to Mexico in 1823. Not only was Jackson’s national relevance being acknowledged, he had been promoted to a position of diplomatic relevance. Perhaps nothing could suit his temperament less.

It would appear even those from his home in Tennessee began to not only acknowledge this national memory, but even begin to remember him for New Orleans’ nationalism as opposed to his efforts in western expansion. In 1822, shortly after receiving the nomination for the Presidency, Andrew Jackson would be the recipient of a ceremonial sword from the Tennessee legislature due to his efforts as “the Hero of New Orleans.”<sup>39</sup> While the Battle of New Orleans had ended in 1815, in 1820 Jackson’s potential as a Presidential candidate was truly being felt for the first time, and the formation of a nationalistic memory followed suit. By 1824, this rapidly evolving memory had grown into a powerful endorsement for the Presidency. The *Norwich Courier*, typifying the part of the country Jackson is thought to have resonated with the least, published on January 14<sup>th</sup> of the election year an opinion piece entitled “Honor to whom Honor is Due,” stating that:

---

<sup>37</sup> “Public Dinner,” *Spirit of the Times and the Carlisle Gazette*, November 9, 1818; “Toasts Drank By the Citizens,” *American Beacon*, July 7, 1820. Notice the subtle differences that develop in only two years, most notably, the increased degree of heroism, the willingness to invoke Roman leadership, and the transformation from a “Public Dinner” in memorial of the Battle of New Orleans to a “Public Dinner to Andrew Jackson.”

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, George White, *National Advocate* (New York), “Public Dinner to Andrew Jackson,” February 25, 1819.

<sup>39</sup> “The Hero of New Orleans,” *Albany Argus*, July 30, 1822.

“Gen. Andrew Jackson, who had for some time by his superior talents commanded the confidence of his government, was ordered to the defence of New Orleans, the grand object of the enemy. And there it was that his illustrious deeds bursting forth upon an astonished world, won him that high character, which resulting from a combination of every qualification necessary to constitute true greatness, *marked the man to whom a nation may at all times and in all places, can safely commit its greatest interests.* Look for a moment in the scene—Inspired by emanations from the great soul, a militia, yes, *a militia*, is brought to heroic thought... And what was the consequence of the victory? Not only New Orleans, but our country, was thereby saved... *The heroic Jackson, his country’s second political savior, is converted into... the scourge of God...* Wisdom dictates that interests are most promoted, where best defended: and in December next, may we all obey her voice, and give a unanimous vote to Andrew Jackson, for President of these United States.”<sup>40</sup>

Three things in particular stand out in this passage. First, the story typically touted surrounding Jackson’s elections, which is that he was the champion of the common man, is not present. In fact is not only absent, but also refuted; the emphasis of the endorsement carries on the fact that Jackson is no ordinary man, as he is the next Washington, the “second political savior.” Secondly, this story should stand out as virtually identical to the one used in prefaces and introductions and first chapters of works on the Jacksonian Presidency. The most evident issue with this is that it attributes the conclusion of the war to Jackson, despite the already signed Treaty of Ghent, but there are tangential issues, as well: it attributes the victory to the militia where it should not necessarily do so, it overly emphasizes a country’s recognition of Jackson’s “superior talents” that was truthfully undeveloped prior to New Orleans. But the key is not that the story is inaccurate. The most crucial truth to understand is that the essence of this memory is identical to the memory that exists today; the understanding of the relevance and meaning of New Orleans has remained unchanged since before Jackson had even made his first attempt at the presidency. This leads to the third observation, which is that this memory did not develop immediately or naturally. In fact, it was one that did not even exist in a shape recognizable to us

---

<sup>40</sup> R. Hubbard, “Honor to Whom Honor is Due,” *Norwich Courier*, January 14, 1824.

in 1815 or 1816, yet was completely solidified by 1822 and beyond when Jackson had become a viable Presidential candidate. The memory of Jackson at New Orleans was not simply a recollection of events; it was deliberate creation that blended historical familiarity and political utility.

In 1817, John Henry Eaton was a 28 year-old Tennessee lawyer who seemed to be mostly an adept state politician and had a desire to complete the biography of Andrew Jackson begun by the Major General's subordinate, John Reid. Eaton, wary of the potential problems of writing a biography with so little physical or temporal distance of his subject, acknowledged the concern, stating "he who draws [events] at a moment when recollection treasures them oftentimes ... ascribes events to motives never induced them... and commendation where it is not merited." Still, Eaton reassured his readers, promising that he had presented things "truly as they occurred," evidenced by the fact that "he had no inducement to do otherwise."<sup>41</sup>

His biographical work brought him closer to Jackson, and by the time of the election of 1824, Jackson had victory in sights and Eaton was one of his closest political allies. As far as the biography was concerned, it was political only in its ability to detail Jackson's military heroics. But eventually, Eaton would be "induced" to participate in a more deliberate form of solidifying the national position of Jackson, and he did precisely that with his 1824 publication, *The Letters of Wyoming*. Eaton had long seen the connection between Jackson and Washington as clear, his military narrative stopping short of verbalizing the parallel, presumably on account of the political distance he wished to maintain. *The Letters of Wyoming* did not take the same precautions, opening with the following remarks:

---

<sup>41</sup> John Reid and John Henry Eaton, *The Life of Andrew Jackson, Major General in the Service of the United States: Comprising a History of the War in the South, from the Commencement of the Creek Campaign, to the Termination of Hostilities Before New Orleans* (Philadelphia: M. Carey and Son, 1817), iii.

At the formation of our government... no controversy existed as to who should preside over the destinies of the nation. One flushed with success, and at the head of a victorious army, was called to take charge of the government... The leading men of the present day, like Alexander's generals, are seen maneuvering after power, and ready to stake the happiness of their country on the success of some favourite... [who] will patronize them if successful... With the exception of that veteran in his country's service: the man who met every peril, and known no danger too disastrous to be encountered when it was demanded by the public... The Hero of Orleans, Andrew Jackson.<sup>42</sup>

Gone was the Eaton with humble dreams as a Tennessee politician: he was now a member of the national political scene, and had achieved such ranking by taking part in the distortion of memory. Just as the contrast the former motivations with the latter is visible, so too is the contrast between the two different works. *The Letters of Wyoming* were clearly accepted by the public, helping to popularize Jackson's lasting nickname, "Old Hickory." Nonetheless, the memory in its current state was not enough: Jackson was barely kept out of the White House in 1824.

Ten years after his original publication, in 1827, Eaton, now perhaps Jackson's most intimate friend, published a new edition of the biography with an Appendix that detailed the perceived corruption of the election of 1824. Countless objections—age, partisanship, desire for power—had been raised against William Crawford, John Quincy Adams, and Henry Clay, but according to Eaton, no such accusations could be leveled against Jackson. Eaton furthered the comparison between Jackson and Washington, particularly citing the state of Maryland's argument that Jackson should have been delivered to the presidency from the "bosom of the people." Eaton's Appendix ended with a rallying call for Jackson towards not only the future presidency, but also the "page of the historian." Three years earlier, it would seem, Eaton still saw the respectability in keeping the political separate from the historical. But now, in biography, they were deeply intertwined, just as they had been continuously intertwined in the

---

<sup>42</sup> John Henry Eaton, *The Letters of Wyoming* (Philadelphia: Simpson and Conrad, 1824), 3-5.

minds of the public. Four hundred pages earlier, his original preface—a promise towards disinterested analysis—still remained in the final copy.<sup>43</sup>

John Eaton's new edition of the biography seemed to catch on in a way the original had not, and may serve to us as perhaps the most extreme example of this memory making process as it relates to Jackson. Ten years removed, the same biography had completely transformed in its utility: what had begun as Reid's intended, disinterested military retelling now served as a political endorsement for America's next George Washington, stripped of all non-heroic elements. Fundamentally, the content behind the memory was the same. But the meaning, as indicated by the contrast between the Preface and the Appendix, could not have been more radically different. Jackson had become the Hero of New Orleans on January 15, 1815, and over the next 12 years, he had become the Hero of the United States, as well. With this more powerful memory as an endorsement, one that would come to be embraced by the common voting man who felt disenfranchised by 1824, Jackson would face little difficulty in his next election.

---

<sup>43</sup> John Henry Eaton, *The Life of Andrew Jackson, Major General in the Service of the United States: Comprising a History of the War in the South, from the Commencement of the Creek Campaign, to the Termination of Hostilities Before New Orleans* (Cincinnati, Ohio: W. M. & O. Farnsworth Jr. Printers, 1827), 430-454.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE THAMES

“Thus fell the great Tecumseh in his might,  
 And with him the spirit of the fight.  
 Now Johnson’s charger wounded through his life,  
 By balls that shower’d like April rain, in strife,  
 Sinks fainting to the earth, deform’d with gore  
 And all the glory of his strength is o’er.”

-“The Battle of the Thames, or, the Death of Tecumseh,” 1834 poem by  
 William Emmons

“Assure our friends that the humblest of us do not believe that a lucky random shot, even  
 if it did hit Tecumseh, qualifies a man for Vice President.”

- Supreme Court Justice John Catron, 1835

By the end of Jackson’s second term as president, those close to him would surely have appreciated the political power of a properly constructed memory. Jackson and his political allies had taken a victory that was irrelevant to ending an ambiguous, stalemated war and built it into a battle cry for the empire of liberty; on its foundation, they had built a transformative political movement. More distanced critics have been less impressed with the illusion, evident in both Europe in the 1830s when Alexis de Tocqueville maintained that Jackson had in “no one circumstance in the whole course of his career ever proved that he [was] qualified to govern a free people,” and in the twentieth century when Bradford Perkins accused contemporary Americans of suffering from “self-induced amnesia” regarding the War of 1812. In America, the strategy of assigning deliberate meaning to memory was just beginning.

As Jackson prepared to leave office in the mid 1830’s, it had become clear that his Vice President and probable successor, Martin Van Buren, was no Jackson. Martin Van Buren was met in many areas of the country with scorn, not for his political beliefs but his political approach; his nickname of “The Little Magician” contrasted greatly with Jackson’s “Old Hickory.” Indeed, to the common man Jackson attempted to build his empire around, Van Buren



represented everything Jackson was not: he was born into the New York elite and gained political prominence through a propensity for compromise rather than the unwavering tenacity Jackson proved on the fields of battle. No state was more disappointed in the nomination than Jackson's home of Tennessee. The historian Mildred Ethel Vance suggested in 1908 that Jackson and his confidants, "feeling the need of a military reputation," were drawn to nominate Richard Mentor Johnson of Kentucky as Vice President.<sup>44</sup> As we shall see, this martial reputation oversimplified another memory's distortion, already years in the making.

Richard Mentor Johnson's "military reputation," in the sense that it did exist in American minds in 1835, rested on the fact that he was the only one of Congress' dozen or so "War Hawks" who actually fought in the war. His most important military exploit was the Battle of the Thames, where he allegedly killed the Shawnee chief Tecumseh. In this lopsided battle on October 5, 1813 near the Delaware Indian mission of Moraviantown (modern Chatham, Ontario), an American force under Major General William Henry Harrison attacked a coalition of the British regulars, led by Brigadier General Henry A. Procter, and Native American allies, under Tecumseh, a celebrated Shawnee war chief from Ohio.

On September 10, almost a month prior, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry of the U.S. Navy had decisively defeated the British on Lake Erie in one of the pivotal battles of the war, compelling Procter and the British forces to retreat northward from the lake. The three components of the American forces totaled about 3,500 and included the force led by Harrison himself and aided by Commodore Perry, the Kentucky militiamen led by Governor Isaac Shelby, and Colonel Richard Johnson's mounted riflemen. They convened approximately 25 miles east of Detroit along the Thames and headed almost 60 miles farther northeastward towards

---

<sup>44</sup> Mildred Ethel Vance, *Tennessee Politics in the Jackson Era* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1908), 95-96.

Moraviantown, making preparations to attack the British. The “battle” lasted no longer than 30 minutes: the American troops heavily outnumbered Procter’s 800 redcoat infantry and Tecumseh’s 500 Indian warriors, who lacked any sort of defense against the attacking American cavalry.<sup>45</sup> It was a decisive victory for the Americans as the British retreated farther up the river, abandoning their Native American allies. Nonetheless, it was a tiny moment largely overshadowed by Perry’s key maneuver a month earlier that ensured that Detroit and Lake Erie would be held by America for the rest of the war.

Early historians recorded the events of the 30-minute skirmish in a wooded area along the Thames, but they did not provide the Battle of the Thames with the disproportionate attention it would receive a few decades later. McCarty and McAfee both briefly delved into the Battle of the Thames, presenting a relatively quick account of the victory: Harrison split the American forces into two lines, the first going to the right and approaching the British by horseback, easily trampling through and penetrating their lines. For McCarty, writing in 1816, this was “a measure altogether novel... crowned with the most signal success,” and was the element of the battle he chose to emphasize.<sup>46</sup> McAfee (and other early historians, such as Samuel Williams) instead focused on the other maneuver, led by Johnson, where “the contest with the Indians was more obstinate.”<sup>47</sup> This account merited some level of import in that it was here where Tecumseh was killed, and McAfee noted that “it is generally believed that this celebrated chief fell by the hand

---

<sup>45</sup> McCarty, *History of the American War of 1812*, 101.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>47</sup> McAfee, *Late War in the Western Country*, 423. The fact that McCarty also uses the sentence that “Upon the American left, however, the contest with the Indians was more severe,” indicates the interreliability of these early sources, despite their different areas of emphasis.

of the colonel.” Still, his 1816 account was willing to acknowledge a few potential other candidates for the deed.<sup>48</sup>

Of the two areas of emphasis, it is clear that the public latched onto the one more glorious: the thorough rout of the British. Harrison’s initial report on the event, a letter to the Secretary of War, John Armstrong, did not even note the death of Tecumseh, praising the “complete victory” while suggesting, “the brave R. M. Johnson is the only officer whom I have heard of that is wounded, be badly [sic], but I hope not dangerously.”<sup>49</sup> In the coming weeks, many newspapers skipped over the event entirely, instead noting the triumphant return of Commodore Perry and General Harrison. But a minority of newspapers did choose to reprint Harrison’s letter and a few more, a report by Armstrong which detailed the capture of 60 British troops and the pursuit of General Procter, allocating but a sentence to Tecumseh’s death.

For years afterward, McCarty and other commentators who characterized the battle as a glorious victory emphasized the thorough rout of the British regulars, perhaps because contemporary Americans seldom ascribed much glory to fighting Native Americans. Over the course of the next few years, the event would gain minimal momentum, the drama of McCarty’s account heightened slightly by less historically accurate pieces such as Samuel Williams’ *Sketches of the War*, which implausibly posited that the “peculiarity” of the terrain along the Thames rendered the Americans essentially outnumbered.<sup>50</sup> Within a few years, these ideas had

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>49</sup> William Henry Harrison to John Armstrong, “Letter from General Harrison to the Department of War, Head Quarters, near Moravian Town, on the River Thames, 80 miles from Detroit,” October 5, 1813.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Williams, *Sketches of the war, between the United States and the British isles: intended as a faithful history of all the material events from the time of the declaration in 1812, to and including the treaty of peace in 1815, interspersed with geographical [!] descriptions of places, and biographical notices of distinguished military and naval commanders. Volumes I and II* (Vermont: Fay and Davison, 1815), 174.

to some degree spread to the public; writing in 1817, the British historian William James took the following issue, specifically noting to which the historians of America were to blame for recasting the Thames as something it was not:

By adding some circumstances, and concealing others, the historian was able to convert the thing into what he pleased; but who could have imagined, that every town in the republic would illuminate, and every church ring a merry peal, on the occasion? Such was actually the case. All of this to be sure, might have been a political measure... to render the war popular, but no sober-minded American could, one may suppose, see any reason to exult, because 3500 of his countrymen had conquered 4 or 500 British and the same number of Indians.<sup>51</sup>

As British critiques so frequently failed to do, James' account produced no meaningful change of opinion in the American populace. The Battle of the Thames had been established as an important moment in the early war, but it was notable only as a brief, cunning success against British regular troops.

\*\*\*

It had taken the willingness of an entire nation to distort the memory of New Orleans, and it remains unclear exactly who—whether Jackson and his political allies, or historians, or writers in the press, or the public itself—bore the greatest responsibility. The Battle of the Thames similarly underwent a dramatic and deliberate transformation in the years after the War of 1812, but unlike New Orleans, can be traced to a tiny number of individuals.

In the centuries since, numerous historians have endeavored to prove that Richard M. Johnson did indeed or did not kill Tecumseh. Perhaps the most thorough account was complete by Benjamin Drake in his 1841 work, *Life of Tecumseh*, which problematized many of the early historians who attributed the deed to Johnson. A Potawatomi tradition, for instance, states that a wound in the forehead killed Tecumseh and that “upon his fall the Indians ran.” However, Drake

---

<sup>51</sup> James, *Military Occurences*, 286.

noted that the five wounds Johnson sustained removed him from battle a full 20 minutes before the Native Americans fled. He noted the inaccuracies of numerous other “observations” provided by these early histories; for instance, Tecumseh did not enter battle that day with a sword, he did not wear ostentatious garb as he saw himself as one of his tribe, and that blood on the face of the man alleged to be Tecumseh rendered him impossible to identify with certainty.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than engage more thoroughly in the worn debate, the issue of memory once again forces us to consider the potential utility of such an event. Richard Johnson returned to Congress after the close of the war, and Americans of all social levels were content to let the understanding that he had killed Tecumseh pass with virtually no debate through the 1810’s and the 1820’s. Cementing his claim as historical fact would not be necessary until the political utility of it required verification. For this reason, the discussion of the memory of Richard Johnson, the Thames, and the killing of Tecumseh stagnated, away from the public eye for 20 years.

By the early 1830’s, Richard Johnson had become in many ways the new representative of the west just as Andrew Jackson had become a figure of the nation. Seemingly, Johnson was quite popular: he earned endorsements to run for President in 1832 and 1836 from figures such as Davy Crockett, but his deep loyalty to Jackson had not truthfully caused him to have such aspirations in 1832. However, behind the closed doors of political society, Johnson was struggling, and his predisposition to scandal as a congressman—he faced criticism for his common law marriage to a slave and propensity for intemperate debate—resulted in his demotion by the party from the Senate back to the House of Representatives from 1829 to 1837. Here he was appointed chair of the Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, where he would meet many of his crucial political allies. In 1832, Martin Van Buren won the nomination for Vice

---

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Drake, *Life of Tecumseh, and of his Brother the Prophet: with a Historical Sketch of the Shawanoe Indians* (Cincinnati: E. Morgan and Co, 1841), 207 – 209.

President, and over the next four years, became more and more the evident successor to Jackson's presidency. In turn, the need for a strong military identity to counterbalance Van Buren's political machinations, had grown fully: it was found in Richard Johnson.

Johnson's closest friendships and political partnerships, formed in the first few years of 1830, would play obvious roles in the rapid popularization of a purposeful memory. Again, in contrast to Jackson, we can determine as few as four people who aided Johnson's ascendancy to the Vice President through deliberate use of memory. The first, Amos Kendall, was Postmaster General during Jackson's term, and likely aided Johnson in his second crucial acquaintance: Obadiah Bruen Brown, most famous as a Chaplain to Congress but also a government appointee to the Post Office. In the process, Johnson also became acquainted with undoubtedly his two most effective allies, Richard and William Emmons. Between the writings of Brown, Emmons, and Emmons, we can trace the emergence of a deliberate (that is, not new, but repurposed) memory of Richard Johnson.<sup>53</sup>

By 1834, this process was well underway. Up to this point, Johnson's life had been characterized by moments of brilliance, such as his proposition of using Kentucky's mounted riflemen as shock troops in battle or his advocacy for the separation of church and state, that had been offset by moments of scandal, such as his proposal to increase the compensation of Congressmen by allowing them a salary rather than merely a *per diem* payment for time spent in residence during sessions or his aforementioned marriage. William Emmons's biography, published in 1833, minimized this messy reality by its focus on just one thing: the killing of Tecumseh.

---

<sup>53</sup> For the most thorough account of Johnson's life, particularly his politically advantageous connections, see Leland Winfield Meyer, *The life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

Col. Johnson did not know [Tecumseh]; but observing his intrepidity, and the effect which his example had upon the others... he considered it necessary to dispatch him in order to secure victory. The Colonel had already received four wounds, and was greatly weakened by the loss of blood... At the distance of a few yards, the Colonel's horse stumbled, but providentially, did not entirely fall... the Chief was raised with the habiliments of war, clad in the richest savage attire, and his face painted with alternate circular lines of black and red from the eye downward... apparently indifferent to every danger, [Tecumseh] seemed confident of his victim, and he raised his tomahawk, with a fierce look of malicious pleasure... at this moment, the Colonel raised his pistol, and discharging its contents into the breast of the Indian chief, laid him dead upon the spot.<sup>54</sup>

The author followed up shortly thereafter with a 30-page poem memorializing the scene. Much of the poem details the arrangements prior to battle, such as when Harrison thanks Johnson and bids him to claim his rightful honor, saying, "Thine every thought is to thy country given / Now lift thy glory to the light of heaven."<sup>55</sup> Additionally, elements that are completely baseless seem to be added to the story for the first time in a manner dissimilar to the biography, such as his brother James Johnson's apparent near-death experience and resuscitation by Richard Johnson.<sup>56</sup>

Richard Emmons, who was known for his 1827 epic poem of 1812, "The Fredonaid; or, Independence Preserved" was recruited around the same time to champion the Johnson cause.<sup>57</sup> Just as Jackson's victory at New Orleans had become a tool for entertainment, Richard Emmons published a five act play commemorating the death of Tecumseh. Emmons transformed the encounter between Johnson and Tecumseh into a duel, in which Tecumseh repeatedly injured the unshaken Richard Johnson, finally crying out in disbelief, "will death wounds not bring

---

<sup>54</sup> William Emmons, *Authentic Biography of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York: Henry Mason, 1833), 33-34.

<sup>55</sup> William Emmons, *The Battle of the Thames: or the Death of Tecumseh* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Author, 1840), 147. Note that while this edition of the poem was published in 1840, Emmons records writing it and circulating it years before.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>57</sup> Note that while it seems that William Emmons and Richard Emmons were either cousins or brothers, their exact relationship eludes discovery. It seems (at the very least) that Richard Emmons was born in 1788 and William Emmons was born in 1789, that they both spent time in Kentucky toward the end of their lives, and that William Emmons printed material for Richard Emmons.

death?” before a single shot of Johnson’s pistol kills Tecumseh. As the Indian hero is dying, he observes, “the Red man’s course is run--I die, the last of all my race.” The play ended with everyone returning to the stage, and with a fictional British captive identifying the body as Tecumseh’s, cementing Johnson’s previously disputed deed as historical fact. As in Richard Emmons’ account, James Johnson miraculously lived despite the wounds he sustained (it was, in fact, unclear if he was actually injured in the battle). Obadiah Bruen Brown rounded out the elaborate story in letters to others about Johnson, which added vivid, realistic detail to the idealistic portrayals of the Emmonses.<sup>58</sup>

The transformation of this memory had occurred at a pace even more quickly and abruptly than Jackson’s gradual shifting after New Orleans. For 20 years, the Battle of the Thames was a rout of British regulars, Tecumseh not even having been mentioned in Harrison’s original report. By 1834, the “Battle of the Thames” and the “Death of Tecumseh” were virtual synonyms, fused through artistic and historical representations of the memory. Johnson had achieved some status through the 1820’s through merit as a Jackson loyalist, but his newfound fame on the brink of his nomination for Vice President was the conscious creation of men who manipulated his past for political purposes. Van Buren, the “Little Magician,” indeed needed a heroic counterpart, but this counterpart was one that was built rather than discovered.

Removed from the first Jacksonian political attempt at memory shaping by about a decade, Johnson proved that the strategy was even more effective in the new democratic era Jackson had forged. Direct memory of the war was fading into the past, but the public memory, created for political ends, was growing and developing. In this age, the war hero became more and more an ideal candidate for the country’s leadership. This was not a trend limited to the

---

<sup>58</sup> Drake, *Life of Tecumseh*, 207 – 212.



Democratic Party, as the Whig William Henry Harrison would prove against Martin Van Buren in 1840. Harrison's campaign harped relentlessly on his wartime heroics as "Old Tippecanoe," the true mastermind behind America's northern success in the war and the true hero of the increasingly important (and almost completely fabricated) Battle of the Thames. The Battle of Tippecanoe itself, far more substantial in reality than the Battle of the Thames, was absorbed into the War of 1812 even though it had preceded that conflict by a year and was fought against a solely Native American force. While his contemporaries in 1811 would have been puzzled as to why honor was ascribed to a victory over "savages," the passage of three decades created a demand for heroes with politically useful pasts. So salient was this demand that reputation for rough-hewn heroism in Old Tip recreated him, a Whig, into a plausible successor to Old Hickory himself.

Victory of any degree is a foundation from which its memory can build on infinitely. While Winston Churchill claimed, "history is written by the victors," with the War of 1812, history *was* the victors. In the wake of a muddled war with ambiguous conclusions, Jackson became the country's savior and Johnson the slayer of a giant. These consciously forged memories—a synthesis of the war's early historians, political writers with a flair for the dramatic, and partisan newspaper accounts—left a powerful imprint, not only in the collective consciousness of the voting public, but of later Americans, as well. John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay signed the Treaty of Ghent, but it was Jackson who became the politically defining figure of the coming years, and it was Jackson who would become more associated with the war's conclusion. Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry won the defining naval battle that prevented British success in further northern expeditions, but the apolitical Perry would never become a

symbol of the war in the same way as Johnson and Harrison. Such strong, positive, victorious memories were created in the 1820's and 1830's, and they have fooled historians ever since.

Is it worth studying the military pasts of political giants who had their beginnings in the War of 1812? Certainly. But is it likely that events involving those that would later become politically relevant were in fact those most crucial to the war's outcome? Such a coincidence would be implausible. Nonetheless, the attention of scholars from the 1820's onward has emphasized New Orleans and the Thames and other events involving persons of significance in the political arena of the 1820's and 1830's. The memorialization of these persons, overemphasized by their peers and in turn lionized as the protagonists of the public memory of the War of 1812, did not come without a cost: some of the war's truly imperative victories and defeats have been lost as casualties in the political wars of the decades that followed the Treaty of Ghent. As we growingly become removed from the viewpoints that forged this public memory, conclusive historical analysis of the War of 1812 also becomes increasingly challenging.

## PART TWO: DEFEATS

### CHAPTER THREE: DETROIT

“Gracious God! Is this the spirit of an enlightened country? Is this an emanation from the Genius of Columbia? which violates the fundamental maxims of the law of the land, those sacred principles of legal, moral and political justice which guarantee to every member of the body politic, a fair hearing, an impartial trial, before conviction or condemnation?... General Hull is not only prejudged by the credulous multitude... the blood hounds of faction are hunting down... this hero of seventy-six.”

- *The Albany Register*, Sep. 25, 1812

“It seems extraordinary that there has not been a witness examined on the part of the prosecution, who has not been promoted since he was under my command... I must say, it appears to me my expedition was more prolific of promotion than any other unsuccessful military enterprise I ever heard of.”

- William Hull during Court-Martial of 1814

Thus far, the deliberate framing of memories surrounding military victories has proven itself to be a mechanism for political and social success. From even the smallest victory a hero may in due time be born, the fruits of successful military labor being abundant political reward. The pattern already examined—a successful military operation followed within a couple of years by the construction of a preliminary narrative, followed in turn by years of evident silence as the narrative takes root, and finally succeeded by the rebirth of the memory in a popularized form with political utility, and an afterlife in popular culture—could have been applied to countless figures beyond Jackson and Johnson and other conflicts than the War of 1812. Military defeats, which are highly sensitive topics to be memorialized by the generation which witnesses them, follow a different, although related, pattern. As Americans in the War of 1812 would find, defeats as well as victories could be utilized for a political end.

Americans, hurried into conflict with Britain by the rhetoric of the War Hawks, faced a disheartening opening to the war in August of 1812. Debates to declare war on congress were characterized by their rapidity; John Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Felix Grundy stirred up such a

frenzy that even the temperate James Madison was unable to resist a declaration of war. Yet the war's opening events contrasted greatly with this speed, especially at the sluggish pace Americans received information from the war's northern frontier. Not only would newspapers consistently report on events a full month after they had occurred, but developments that happened overnight would take an extra week to reach publication. Thus, while the war's unpromising opening for General William Hull's army in Detroit was an almost instantaneous disaster, a product of only a few days gone wrong, Americans were forced to watch it unfold in the newspapers over the course of weeks, each letter printed seeming more desperate than the one before.

The British Siege of Detroit (or more commonly for Americans, the "Surrender at Detroit") was preceded by a successful American maneuver into the Northwest Territory and across the Canadian border. The Northwest Territories' Governor, William Hull, was appointed to Brigadier General and placed in command of a force of 1,500 Ohio militiamen as it made its way to Fort Detroit. His orders were to defend the Michigan territory and liberate nearby Native American and Canadian settlements in Canada from British control if his judgment perceived the opportunity existed. Hull, a mild-mannered lawyer and an honorable veteran from the American Revolution, found himself in command of a force that lacked an understanding of "the necessity of strict discipline and obedience to orders." He would further have to address the "open[ing] [of] the northern hive of Indians" into the Michigan frontier when his army intruded into Canada.<sup>59</sup>

Hull's force benefitted from his methodical approach and was successful in early skirmishes, but his caution quickly became a liability by the end of July when he halted the

---

<sup>59</sup> McCarty, *History of the American War of 1812*, 12-14.

army's advance at Sandwich (modern Windsor, Ontario). The army's morale plummeted at what they saw as timidity: many of the local Native Americans had been driven out of the territory occupied by Americans and many pro-French Canadians were happy to express pro-American sympathies. Almost unanimously, Hull's field officers advised an attack further into the Canadian interior, targeting Fort Malden (today's Amherstburg, Ontario). Hull disagreed; he refused to approach the fort (manned by British regular troops) without siege artillery and disciplined soldiers. He instead commanded a retreat back across the Detroit River into American territory, which the army complied with in a state of "sullen procession and indignant contempt." Mutiny seemed moments away.<sup>60</sup>

The war was only days old, and yet the generational divide between the general, a 60-year old veteran of the Revolution, and subordinate officers half his age, was fully evident. Perhaps nothing could have been worse for early morale. Disagreement worsened, manifesting itself tangibly in threats of insubordination and a confused, indecisive opening to the war. It had none of the "energy" that the leading War Hawk Henry Clay repeatedly invoked on the floors of Congress and lacked the crusading sense of the "just and righteous war" that America's favored author Mason Locke Weems had called for in justifying the war.<sup>61</sup> America, thirsting for expansion and now in a militarily advantageous situation, was retreating; Hull's decision on the grounds of military might have seemed virtuous to some, but was pusillanimous to others, especially the less-experienced officers.

---

<sup>60</sup> McAfee, *Late War in the Western Country*, 89-90.

<sup>61</sup> Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). Watts discusses pro-war public figures such as Clay and Weems and how the justification for war was imperative to the generation of Americans that was growing increasingly distant from the Revolution.

One of Hull's field officers, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Cass of the Ohio militia, emerged as a leading voice among the latter. On August 12, Cass wrote indignantly to the Governor of Ohio, Return J. Meigs, suggesting, "the precious opportunity [at Amherstburg] has fled; and, instead of looking back, we must now look forward." The implication, McAfee suggested, was that Governor Meigs should come as soon as possible and "divest General Hull of the command," as Meigs still held "the confidence of the army."<sup>62</sup> Even if Meigs agreed, the opportunity never came: the British force, led by Major General Sir Isaac Brock, followed Hull's force closely, arriving directly opposite Fort Detroit just two days after the letter was sent on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August. Instead of targeting the British who were vulnerable and on the move, Hull focused on reopening communications with the rest of the country through sending Cass and Colonel Duncan McArthur to regain control of the River Raisin, some 60 miles south; they and 300 other men would be absent when Brock's force laid siege to Detroit.

As was accepted by military convention, Brock sent Hull a letter announcing the size of his army (which was exaggerated) and demanding Hull's surrender on account of his "numerous body of Indians, who have attached themselves to my troops, [and] will be beyond my control the moment the contest commences." Hull refused, and Brock began shelling the walls of Fort Detroit immediately. Hull's force was never outnumbered, and his remaining officers continually advised against surrender. Nonetheless, the General, intimidated by Indian war cries and the movement of British regular troop up the river, was by now "stupified and torpid with fear," and raised the white flag of surrender just a day after the firing had begun.<sup>63</sup> Hull's subordinate officers were outraged: the Americans had suffered fewer than ten casualties and had successfully silenced two British artillery pieces; the British were in no position to attempt to

---

<sup>62</sup> McAfee, *Late War in the Western Country*, 97.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

storm the walls of the fort. Still, the opening clash of the War of 1812 had ended in American shame.

The early historians of the war, including McAfee, McCarty, and other commentators, wrote abundantly on the event, uniformly condemning Hull for his hesitation and surrender, which they called a “disaster.” Indeed, the sense of objective restraint that had driven McAfee, McCarty, and others to note that the Battle of New Orleans technically occurred after the conclusion of Ghent and caused them to treat the so-called Battle of the Thames in a single paragraph was not afforded to Hull. He was forthrightly denounced as an enemy of American interests and a squanderer of opportunity. Particularly McCarty, who began his work with the Surrender at Detroit, seemed to make it his goal to contrast the failed methods of Hull, the aged Revolutionary veteran, with the vigor of more youthful leaders and their exploits.

These histories, written in the immediate wake of war, do not represent the immediate response of Americans to the events of August 1812; the historians, after all, wrote with full knowledge of the war’s outcome. But news of the unfolding shame at Detroit did not arrive in the hands of Americans quite so linearly or continuously. Note the *Columbian’s* response to Hull’s notification that the army was returning across the Detroit River, published August 29<sup>th</sup>:

It is peculiarly unfortunate that gov. Hull has been obliged to abandon the position he had taken in Canada... instead of being completely prepared to make an immediate attack upon Fort Malden, they have been obliged to remain inactive until gun-carriages can be made... if the army should be unsuccessful, and the expedition eventually defeated, no blame can attach to gov. Hull and his patriotic army—it must be solely attributed to those men who hurried the country into war.<sup>64</sup>

American readers must have been perplexed at what they read. The first week of August brought news of rumors that Hull had obtained a fortified position in entering Canada, the second week’s news posited that Hull had auspicious numbers of troops and the trust of local Canadians, and

---

<sup>64</sup> “Hull; Canada,” *The Columbian*, August 29, 1812.



even the third week's updates, which were fewer in number, maintained positive sentiment. Only in the following week, in the final days of August, did the news arrive (and it did so suddenly) that Hull had retreated to Fort Detroit. By September 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, word of the embarrassing surrender would be published across the entire country.

Perhaps Hull truly believed, as he wrote in his August 26<sup>th</sup> letter, that attempting the defense of Fort Detroit would have been foolish due to the lack of provisions (he would hold this position through his court-martial and in his later memoirs). But even in publications where tactical blame was attributed to Hull, the country did not initially condemn him in the manner in which he would be later treated. In Delaware's *American Watchman*, Hull's surrender was noted as "disgraceful," but said to have "done more for the success of the war than the capture of 10,000 British regulars" due to the renewed vigor it incited in the country.<sup>65</sup> Taking into account that the war was by this point less than four months old, the need for vigor to be renewed by a major defeat might be questioned. Nonetheless, some degree of grace, if not acquittal, was afforded to Hull in the days following his surrender, likely a product of hawkish optimism. The Republican war cry was as strong as ever; a Philadelphia newspaper jokingly maintained that the anti-war Federalists were still traitorous, stating that, "On hearing the report of gen. Hull's surrender, a federalist in this city said to a republican—well, Mr. B it seems your party is going down : 'why yes, replied the republican, if reports are true, your party has gained an advantage over us in Detroit.'"<sup>66</sup>

Hull had not defended Fort Detroit, and pro-war sentiment paired with simultaneous events meant he perhaps would not need to defend his honor, either. Just as the American public laughingly struggled to fathom the news of Hull's surrender, they received joyous reports (in

---

<sup>65</sup> "Hull; British; Americans," *American Watchman*, September 12, 1812.

<sup>66</sup> "Progress of the War," *Weekly Aurora*, September 8, 1812.

some cases, just a day later) of the victory at sea by the USS *Constitution*, under the command of Captain Isaac Hull, the general's son, over the HMS *Guerriere*. The son had perhaps atoned for the sins of his father through a demonstration of naval brilliance, and the country rejoiced at the destruction of a British vessel. Once again, the modern American memory has emphasized the singular moment of dramatic showdown, in particular highlighting 30 minutes of a four hour naval brawl in which the *Constitution* destroyed the *Guerriere's* masts, their dramatic tumble sweeping dozens of British sailors overboard. For Americans of 1812, the victory of the *Constitution* had been a product of months rather than minutes, with particular emphasis and excitement being placed on the earlier, thrilling escape of Captain Isaac Hull from five British ships in July.

William Hull had not achieved success in the War of 1812 as his son had, and likely would have been content for the surrender to be conveniently forgotten. Indeed, it appeared in early September that the country might have agreed. Had William Hull merely avoided surrender, his contemporaries, energized by the early war, would have likely viewed it as a victory. We would expect, as shown by Jackson and Johnson, the familiar pattern of a brief lionization followed by years of dormancy for the memory. Indeed, Captain Isaac Hull experienced this same pattern, as Samuel Williams recorded that "all the principal towns" from Halifax to Boston welcomed him with "every demonstration of joy."<sup>67</sup> Hull and his crew became momentarily, international paragons of bravery: "Pray Capt Hull, is your crew composed of *men*, or *tigers*?" asked a French Captain, to which Hull wittily replied, "They are in the *shape of men*."<sup>68</sup> Such fame was short lived, and followed by the event's temporary removal from the fore

---

<sup>67</sup> Samuel Williams, *Sketches of the War*, 100.

<sup>68</sup> "Latest from the Frontier," *Independent American*, October 27, 1812.

of public memory. The true memorialization—for instance, the nicknaming of the USS *Constitution* as “Old Ironsides,” was still a few years away.<sup>69</sup>

As it would appear, the political application of the memory of defeat was not quite so patient.

\*\*\*

By mid-September, the tone towards General Hull had completely shifted. The co-conspirator colonels, Lewis Cass and Duncan McArthur, appalled by the possibility that Hull might escape blame for his surrender of Detroit, appealed to the government for prosecution and to the people for execration. Perhaps no single document was as influential to the understanding of the surrender of Detroit—then and now—as Lewis Cass’s letter, written September 10, 1812:

We were far superior to the enemy; that upon any ordinary principles of calculation we would have defeated them, the wounded and indignant feelings of every man there will testify... A few days before the surrender, I was informed by Gen. Hull that we had 400 rounds of 24 pound shot fixed, and about 100,000 cartridges made. We surrendered with the fort 40 barrels of powder and 2500 stand of arms... The state of our provisions has not been generally understood. On the day of the surrender we had fifteen days’ provisions of every kind on hand....<sup>70</sup>

Cass certainly obsesses over the quantifiable ability of the militia at Detroit’s ability to withstand the British siege, but even more important was his emotional appeal to the American honor that he believed Hull had betrayed in his surrender:

But had we been totally destitute of provisions, our duty and our interest undoubtedly was to fight. The enemy invited us to meet him in the field. By defeating him the whole country would have been opened to us, and the object of our expedition gloriously and successfully obtained. If we had been defeated we had nothing to do but retreat to the fort, and make the best defence which circumstances and our situation rendered practicable. But basely to surrender without firing a gun.... Tamely to submit without

---

<sup>69</sup> See, for instance, “Constitution; Old Iron Sides,” *Delaware Gazette*, December 22, 1814, which indicates that the crew was referring to the ship by the nickname a few years after the events near Halifax; “Old Ironsides” does not seem to appear in written documents prior.

<sup>70</sup> “Letter from Colonel Cass to the Secretary of War,” *National Intelligencer*, September 15, 1812.

raising a bayonet.... Disgracefully to pass in review before an enemy as inferior in the quality as in the number of his forces, were circumstances which excited feelings of indignation more easily felt than described.<sup>71</sup>

Cass's letter, which totaled almost 2000 words and unequivocally blamed for the defeat on Hull's cowardice rather than his calculations, was reprinted widely throughout September. The meaning surrounding the Surrender of Detroit had instantly changed. It is worth noting, again, that neither Cass nor McArthur was present at the siege, as both were on the mission southward on the River Raisin. This manifests itself throughout the letter; for instance, it is not true that Hull had surrendered "without firing a gun" in the most technical sense, and Cass qualifies matters on which he has no direct knowledge (he noted, for example, that he can only *assume* that "Hull... magnified [in his report] their [the British] regular force nearly five fold"). Nonetheless, Cass's narrative would come to be the most accepted retelling of the Surrender of Detroit. Qualified or not, his numbers would be the basis for McAfee's claim that Hull's force was twice as strong as the combined forces of the British and Native Americans.<sup>72</sup>

By the end of September and early October of 1812, editorial opinion had completely rejected General Hull, placing blame on him for not only Detroit but also the resulting Native American momentum. One paper maintained that, "The pusillanimity of Gen Hull... has exposed a frontier of *three hundred thousand* miles and 400,000 families to the rapine and scalping knife of the savages. I grant that Hull is inexcusable; because he ought to have preferred 'death before

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> McAfee, *Late War in the Western Country*, 107. This claim—that the American force thoroughly outnumbered the British and Indian combined—is heavily disputable, most sources today suggest that in total the forces were almost equal, and that Hull would have had a slight advantage approximately equal to the 300 men sent with Cass and McArthur were kept at Detroit. That being said, it is virtually impossible to ascertain this as there is no clear way to identify the total number of Native Americans at the British disposal.

dishonor.”<sup>73</sup> Even attempts at dispassionate analysis relied on Cass’s narrative for their facts, such as a widely reprinted *National Intelligencer* article which attempted to offer “perhaps the last word, on the Surrender of Detroit,” and statistically supported the presence of the provisions enumerated by Cass that would have allowed for a successful defense of Detroit against the British.<sup>74</sup>

The degree of intentionality with which the surrender was cast on Hull was clear. A later biographer of Lewis Cass would suggest, “the administration and its feeble generals” were “quite willing to secure a victim for the sacrifice.”<sup>75</sup> *The Albany Register* had noted such sentiment by September 25<sup>th</sup>, proposing that “instead of waiting for the original dispatches of gen. Hull, [the Government’s] organ, the *National Intelligencer*” raced to publish “denunciation of [Hull’s] character” supported by “letters from subordinate officers,” particularly Cass’ letter as having “violated the principles of justice.”<sup>76</sup>

Many interpreted this “sacrifice” to be a politically motivated one. Almost a week later, the *Connecticut Journal* would republish the same article, adding to the end an additional statement listing the number of electoral votes each state would have in the coming election of 1812 so “our reader can make their own calculations as to the probable result.”<sup>77</sup> The *Journal’s* open declaration at first seems out of place, but is greatly significant in the context of the coming election. The result of the surrender by Hull (who had been born in Connecticut) illustrated one of the greatest fears of the fiercely anti-war Federalists: Madison and his party represented

---

<sup>73</sup> “By an indignant affecter of intrigue at Washington, and of delusion elsewhere,” *Middlesex Gazette*, October 8, 1812.

<sup>74</sup> “One Word More,” *National Intelligencer*, September 29, 1812.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew C. McLaughlin, *Lewis Cass* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 81.

<sup>76</sup> “From the Albany Register of Friday Last: General Hull,” *Connecticut Journal*, October 1, 1812.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

corruption, and their war represented corrupt expansionism. Federalists in Connecticut would have seen the blasphemies against Hull as both a personal attack and growing evidence of the departure by the Democratic Republicans from the Revolutionary ideal. In the coming months, Connecticut would back the Federalist candidate Dewitt Clinton, and despite a national popular vote that was closer than any the country had ever seen (50.4% for Madison, 47.6% for Clinton), Madison would win re-election by a margin of almost 40 electoral votes.

The election represented the end of any serious chance for the anti-war camp, and it quickly became clear that the frenzied country did not see the problems in “sacrificing” Hull that Federalist editors did. We therefore see the same political utility present in the reframing of the memory of defeat that had been present in victory.

The political utility of such a defeat did not need to be limited to the tearing down of Hull, as Cass himself would prove. Cass and McArthur’s fiery, derogatory letters and reported patriotic indignation (McAfee would write that they had tears in their eyes upon learning of the surrender) propelled them into the national spotlight.<sup>78</sup> They were released from parole against fighting the British by early 1813, and were immediately both appointed to army ranks of Brigadier General, the same rank that had been by Hull. Cass enjoyed virtually unparalleled popularity throughout Ohio, gaining further military ranking in the militia by vote of the legislature. What had Cass in actuality accomplished? Andrew C. McLaughlin, writing in 1891 with the knowledge of Cass’ eventual prominent role in Andrew Jackson’s cabinet and the federal government beyond, would suggest that Cass was the first American to step into Canada during the war and that he became popularly hailed as the “Hero of Tarontee” after securing an

---

<sup>78</sup> McAfee, *Late War in the Western Country*, 105-106.

important bridge for Hull.<sup>79</sup> No newspaper account published at the time supports these claims, and both points go similarly unmentioned by even the historians writing immediately after 1815. The British historian William James actually mocked Cass and McArthur, portraying them as clueless figures dawdling back to Detroit after it had been surrendered.<sup>80</sup>

Still, a star had been born, and its light was perhaps too blinding for the populace to notice any lack of credentials. Cass's letter eviscerated Hull at the price of restoring American faith in a fearless patriotism. It was a different type of memory formation than we have examined, but its utility during the early months of the war cannot be overstated. In turn, Cass was rewarded by his people and by his government. As Brigadier General, Lewis Cass would serve under William Henry Harrison, who quickly became the Northwestern foil to Hull (brave, quick, and aggressive in terms of his intrusions into Canadian territory). This would lead to Cass's presence at the Battle of the Thames, and while Cass was only minimally involved, he would be rewarded again via promotion. This time, it was as William Hull's replacement: in November 1813, Cass was recommended by Harrison and then appointed by Madison to be the new Governor of the Michigan Territory. Perhaps no political appointment could have been more direct in terms of what it implied, the young conspirator replacing the elderly Revolutionary as the second governor of Michigan.

Hull, stripped of his command and governorship, was tried by a court-martial in January 1814. He faced three charges—treason, cowardice, and neglect of office—and an enraged prosecution including Lewis Cass himself and led by Martin Van Buren. The growing divide between the young War Hawks and Democratic Republicans and the late Revolutionaries—by now, a gap that was more than just generational—had never been more evident. The role of the

---

<sup>79</sup> McLaughlin, *Lewis Cass*, 66-71.

<sup>80</sup> James, *Military Occurences Vol. 1*, 71.

memory of the Surrender of Detroit was evident, even before the war had ended. Hull's sentence: dishonorable discharge and death, with the recommendation that he be pardoned by President Madison on account of his age and Revolutionary service. He remains the only American General ever to be condemned to death.<sup>81</sup>

In understanding the mindset of these feverish supporters of war, it is helpful to understand what General Hull was on trial for. Many modern historians have emphasized only surrender, but all three charges also named as equally important his refusal to attack Fort Malden. This changes the definition of honor as we may associate it with his trial; even attempting a defense at Detroit, it would seem, would not have been enough to save Hull. Honor was now associated with expansion and relentlessness; Hull's cautious and calculating mindset itself was not tied to prudence but cowardliness. This self-perpetuating memory (self-perpetuating in that the deliberate "sacrifice" of Hull led also to his heavily one-sided trial, which furthered the narrative of Hull as a disgrace) served its purpose well in defining what nineteenth-century American values were perceived to be. It is not difficult to see the effects of rampant Democratic-Republicanism, and later, Jacksonianism, on such a perception.

Historical accounts of the war written in its immediate aftermath perpetuated the anti-Hull message. It would become clear that Hull had not magnified the numbers of the enemy troops "fivefold," and even the British William James was forced to admit the forces were relatively equal once all reinforcements and Native American forces were totaled. It did not matter; Hull's reputation as a fearful general had been cemented in history.

Hull attempted to combat this perception with an account of his own, without overwhelming success. Hull's memoirs, published in 1824 with the intent of proving, "the

---

<sup>81</sup> "Trial of Gen Hull," *Boston Gazette*, May 12, 1814.



misfortunes of that campaign ought not to rest on [Hull],” mainly emphasized that Hull’s methodical approach even to the point of his soldiers’ mutiny was in keeping with his orders and that there were not provisions to sustain a defense of Detroit. For Hull, the pendulum swung opposite the claim of McAfee, suggesting that the “effective” British force was twice as strong as his at Detroit. The truth is found somewhere in the middle. Some newspaper editors saw the validity in Hull’s argument, although public sentiment prevented them from saying it outright: “it still appears that Gen. Hull did not receive... the support[s] which were necessary... to give a successful result to the first campaign of the late war,” wrote the *Columbian Centinel*, “whether the failure of that support justified the *surrender of Detroit*, is a question which men will decide on differently.”<sup>82</sup>

The most telling allegations in Hull’s memoir centered on the promotions of Cass and McArthur, subordinate officers whose advancement depended on his disgrace. Hull had initially suggested the prosecution’s selection of witnesses, composed entirely of his one-time subordinates who now held even higher office than he had, was suspicious at the trial, ten years earlier, but the one-sided nature of the proceedings meant that these claims were almost completely unpublished by newspapers at the time. His memoirs extended this idea further, suggesting that “the principal witness” (Cass) had treacherously received the position of Governor, a position which Hull had only held with the unanimous “approbation of the federal government.” The implication was that not only were these officers complicit in the trial, but that they were rewarded for their willingness to sacrifice Hull from the beginning. Josiah Snelling, one of the men criticized by Hull, took to the papers to defend himself and his peers, suggesting, “it cannot be possible that the American people will believe so extravagant an assertion... that

---

<sup>82</sup> “General Hull’s Campaign,” *Columbian Centinel*, October 14, 1824.

we have had, at one time, thirty or forty officers who were willing to incur the guilt of perjury for an grade [sic] of rank, and an administration corrupt enough to offer them the price.”<sup>83</sup> Perhaps Hull’s claims were overly conspiratorial, but his open question at trial, “by what services many of these generals merited such rapid promotion, I have not learned,” remained unanswered.<sup>84</sup>

While many still popularly referred to the surrender as “disgraceful,” the 1820s and 1830s would see more debate on the responsibility of Hull than any period since. A growing anti-Jackson faction in congress would through committee in 1842 grant payment to Hull for his “service” between the surrender and the time of the trial, an amount which had not at the time been paid (this same committee would ceremoniously deny a \$1,000 payment to Jackson to help cover a suit he had received for putting New Orleans under martial law). So outraged was one New Hampshire editor at the positive treatment of Hull, someone still perceived by many to be a traitor, that he wrote “the next step of the federal leaders may be to settle pensions on the members of the Hartford Convention—and denounce the signers of the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>85</sup> Still, even this “federal whiggery” was happy to utilize the popular image of Hull as a fearful and unpopular leader, such as when one 1839 biography of William Henry Harrison appearing in the *Essex Gazette* suggested Hull’s mutinous troops demanded Harrison (rather than who they had actually demanded, Governor Meigs and Colonel McArthur) to be granted leadership.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Josiah Snelling, “Remarks on Gen. Wm. Hull’s Memoirs of the Campaign of the Northwestern Army, 1812,” *Rhode-Island Republican*, October 13, 1825.

<sup>84</sup> William Hull, *Memoirs of the campaign of the North Western Army of the United States, A.D. 1812 : in a series of letters addressed to the citizens of the United States, with an appendix, containing a brief sketch of the revolutionary services of the author* (Boston: True and Greene, 1824), 160.

<sup>85</sup> “Hull vs. Jackson,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, August 2, 1842.

<sup>86</sup> “William H. Harrison,” *Essex Gazette* (Haverhill, Massachusetts), September 20, 1839.

Perhaps there was something prophetic in the claim that the early surrender had been more effectual than the “capture of 10,000 British regulars.” Lewis Cass’s promotions rallied volunteers from Ohio to his side, even while he was still under parole. The American public achieved a greater degree of unity in moving forward with the war in intrepidity rather than letting fear, the element of treachery, characterize the wartime approach. The only necessary cost was Hull’s honor, something that could be pardoned when offset by his Revolutionary service. As far as his War of 1812 contributions, it was this categorically negative imagery that would be the memory that survived beyond the age of Jackson. Historians today, still influenced by the earliest narratives, hesitate to defend Hull’s actions or reputation. Even the success of his son, Captain Isaac Hull, is distinctly disconnected from his father: the *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812* describes him as “the son of a Revolutionary General” rather than connecting him by name to General William Hull.<sup>87</sup>

The utility of remembering a military defeat represents a shift from the lasting utility the previous two victories have provided their heroes. Just as defeats are an inevitability in war, the manipulation of the response to that defeat—and in turn, the memory which is produced surrounding it—is a crucial element of maintaining and expanding the support of the war. The unintended consequence of this process is that we are in many ways still crucifying the convenient martyrs of the War of 1812, and may well be doing so unwittingly throughout history as a whole.

---

<sup>87</sup> David Stephen Heidler, “Isaac Hull,” *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1997).

## CHAPTER FOUR: WASHINGTON, D.C.

“George Washington laid the foundation of this city, after a war with England of seven years duration—James Madison lost the capital in two short years war with England.”

- Graffiti inscription on the wall of the  
burned Capitol building, October 1814

“If Tyranny and Oppression come to this land, it will be in the guise of fighting a foreign enemy.”

- Quote Attributed to James Madison, 1787

Thus far, the “creators” have played a larger role in the story of the formation of memory than the public who accepted it. This was largely because the events lacked a clear meaning without the formation of a narrative that provided it. The Battle of New Orleans, as we have noted, occurred after the war’s conclusion. The Battle of the Thames was more of a pursuit than a battle, and the key target, the British General Procter, escaped up the river. And Detroit was arguably strategically an insignificant location, and Hull’s motives, debatable. In each case, writers with a politically salient message naturally were able to inscribe their attributed meaning on even recent historical events, in the process creating the memory that has persisted until modern times. It is not that the views of the public were irrelevant, but merely that ambiguous events needed “creators.” In the case of Hull’s surrender, a defeat that demanded explanation, this was effective in the immediate days following the event. The leaders of the U.S. government were perhaps too prone to believe that their own perceptions of events were accurate and definitive, and would be shared by the American people because the implications were obvious—until a large British force burned much of Washington, D.C. on August 24, 1814.

The records purport that on July 1, 1814, President James Madison and his Cabinet met to discuss intelligence received from France that Britain might consider attacking the capital. Modern historians view the buildup to the second half of 1814 as the steps towards the end of the

war, but the middle of 1814 brought with it for the contemporary public and government not necessarily a sense of the war's approaching closure but a sense of heightened urgency. The British had successfully exiled Napoleon Bonaparte and now seemed to be maneuvering their troops across the Atlantic; the question was not whether they would strike, but where. Secretary of War John H. Armstrong, Jr. maintained that an attack on the capital would be tactically foolish, as Baltimore was militarily more significant and Philadelphia was more economically significant. Madison and Secretary of State James Monroe insisted that preparations should be made to defend Washington, but their warnings were to no avail.

On August 19, 1814, Major General Robert Ross landed at Benedict, Maryland on the Patuxent River with his force of approximately 4,000 soldiers. They marched more than 40 miles over the next three days, seeing almost no sign of the Americans. General William H. Winder, who had been appointed just a few months earlier by President Madison, hoped to intercept the British at Bladensburg, 6 miles Northeast of Washington, D.C., with a militia force of approximately 15,000. He was only able to assemble a force of less than half that size. Initially, the Americans effectively held the bridge across the Potomac, but the relentless attempt to cross by General Ross was effective. Winder's force outnumbered the British by about 2,000, but virtually all of them were untrained men, and it quickly began to show. While the British suffered heavy casualties at the bridge, a choke point, they soon began forcing the American frontline back. General Winder ordered the first line of militiamen to fall back, intending for them to withdraw toward their third reinforced line held by Commodore Joshua Barney's marines, the only non-militia unit on the American side of the battle. From there, Winder reasoned, the entire force could hold as long as possible before falling back to defend Washington. Instead, the militia, failing to understand their orders and confused by the

unexpected arrival of President Madison and his Cabinet during the fight—the President even briefly found himself caught between the two armies after riding past Winder on his horse—became panicked and quickly scattered (some of them retreating back to their families).

Commodore Barney was forced to hold his position at the third line with only 100 men.<sup>88</sup> Before evening, the American forces had failed to regain their order and abandoned any attempt to obstruct the British advance toward Washington. Ross's force occupied the city for a day, burning the Capitol, the White House, and the Library of Congress.

As with the brief moment of grace afforded Hull, America's newspapers hesitated to pass immediate judgment on the incident. As always, uncertainty of the exact events also characterized the papers' reports. In Dedham, Massachusetts, the report came in a week later:

It is impossible exactly to ascertain the truth in the midst of a thousand reports which arise almost every hour, respecting the late battle near Washington—we can, however, ascertain... that [the troops] bore so hard upon the enemy's columns with their musketry and artillery, as twice to stagger their progress, but, being overpowered, our brave countrymen were at length obliged to give way... we have reason to fear that the city of Washington has been taken by the enemy—that the Navy Yard is destroyed, and some say, the Capitol and the President's House.<sup>89</sup>

The state of contemporary print communication had paved the way for a positive retelling of Bladensburg, especially as the reports of Washington's burning were still considered conjectural. Even once the smoke literally and figuratively cleared and reports of the burning of Washington

---

<sup>88</sup> It is well documented that President Madison and Secretaries Monroe and Armstrong were all in the field on the day of the battle. This was, contrary to what the *National Intelligencer* and other pro-administration papers would suggest, of no benefit practically and may have directly led to the confusion associated with the first volunteers' retreat. When asked to fall back, many sources document with noticeable frustration that they headed in the wrong direction. John Meloy Stahl, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century historian on the battle, perhaps summed up the problems associated with such an unfolding of events with his chapter title, "Three Commanders Too Many." See John Meloy Stahl, *The invasion of the city of Washington: a disagreeable study in and of military unpreparedness* (Wisconsin: Van Trump Company Publishing, 1919), 143 – 157.

<sup>89</sup> "Washington; Bladensburg; Wednesday; Baltimore; Navy-Yard," *Dedham Gazette*, October 2, 1814.

confirmed, it was still the tendency for the papers to assume the best of its country's militia. In the absence of specific numbers relating to the size of each force or respective number of casualties, it was foolish to cast stones.

As with Hull's surrender, the military and the federal government turned to the papers to fix the meaning of British actions at Bladensburg and Washington, but without necessarily fixing the blame, as was the case with Lewis Cass's attack on Hull. Instead, as Major John S. Williams would write in his history of the event published near the end of his life, "the public were permitted to pass so familiarly behind the scenes as to see what passes among the several actors before they have prepared themselves to appear on the stage in their respective and appropriate disguises."<sup>90</sup>

Secretary of War John Armstrong wrote a letter to the "Editors of the Baltimore Patriot" announcing his resignation and detailing the events leading up to the burning of Washington, but unfortunately the contents of the letter seemed to add confusion rather than clarity as to the circumstances of his departure. He maintained that there were two reasons for the American failure at Bladensburg: first, that General Winder had been authorized to call for and had called for 15,000 militia volunteers but that these numbers utterly failed to show up; second, that the volunteers that had shown up had failed to do their duty. "Had [they] been faithful to themselves and to their country," Armstrong asserted, "the enemy would have been beaten, and the Capital saved."<sup>91</sup> Why, we must ask, had Armstrong resigned if blame for the loss was "extraneous from the Government" and instead the result of an undisciplined militia? The letter claimed Madison

---

<sup>90</sup> John S. Williams, *History of the Invasion and Capture of Washington* (Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1857), 96.

<sup>91</sup> John H. Armstrong, "Letter to the Editors of the Baltimore Patriot," *Baltimore Patriot*, September 3, 1814.

had respectfully requested the resignation on account of reports that the militia would refuse to obey further orders from Armstrong. Such claims remain unsubstantiated.

The *National Intelligencer*, an official organ of the federal government, its office in Washington nearly a casualty of the occupation, attempted to quell such queries. Their review of Armstrong's resignation suggested the following: "On this subject we have only one [re]mark to offer: *This* is no time for denunciation or even recrimination. It is a moment requiring all true friends to the country to support the constituted authorities in the execution of their duty."<sup>92</sup> Federalist politicians and newspaper editors did not find this suggestion compelling.

The public, similarly, was already suspicious of political ambition and even corruption in the resignation. It probably did not help that they almost invariably supported the idea of the militia as the main line of defense against invasion, even though military figures as far back as George Washington questioned the prudence of relying on such an undisciplined force. Still, this was more than just a poor choice in attempted blame shifting, especially given the longstanding public knowledge that Madison's cabinet was suffering from division and in-fighting. As early as January 6, 1814, the *Federal Republican* (based in Georgetown) had predicted that upon any unfortunate military occurrence, the Madison administration would be quick to appeal to the public by hearing their "shouts" and in turn proclaiming "DOWN GOES SECRETARY ARMSTRONG."<sup>93</sup> General Wilkinson would later state that Armstrong was "in his [Madison's] cabinet at a thousand miles distance."<sup>94</sup> The Federalists, in their critiques, struggled to balance their disgust for Madison's administration and their particular detestation of Armstrong himself. The *Connecticut Mirror* was content to publish sweeping criticisms of both simultaneously,

---

<sup>92</sup> "General Armstrong has Resigned," *National Intelligencer*, September 1, 1814.

<sup>93</sup> "John Armstrong's Downfall Predicted," *Federal Republican* (Georgetown, District of Columbia), November 11, 1814.

<sup>94</sup> Stahl, *Invasion of the city of Washington*, 176.



suggesting it had long been known Armstrong was a traitor since Revolutionary times, and that “without him our risque is lessened perhaps one third, if we can disengage ourselves from two more we may be saved.” “The liberties and Constitution have enough to struggle with,” the paper went on, “when only Madison and Monroe are in power.”<sup>95</sup>

It would seem, to some extent, that Armstrong had unwittingly played into the hands of Madison and Monroe. Armstrong’s historians tend to suggest that he resigned out of a “disgust” for the administration and a belief that dissociating from them could lead to a chance at defeating Monroe for the nomination in 1816 for the presidency.<sup>96</sup> This would not come to fruition, and Armstrong’s letter was instead a political suicide note. To the common reader, it must have seemed an exculpation of the government but an implicit acceptance of personal responsibility through resignation. When Secretary Monroe would be appointed to Secretary of War and his Secretary of State seat left vacant, allowing him to occupy both roles, the desired outcome of the political maneuver would be clearly visible.

It is clear that that message caught on with the public. In Washington, D.C., graffiti on the walls of the Capitol passionately denounced him from the shadows: “John Armstrong is a traitor! Weep oh Americans over the ruins of your departed glory.” But simultaneously, the *Mirror* and the *Republican’s* suggestions of doubt on a higher plane were catching on. Graffiti could also be seen on the walls that read, “This is the City of Madison”; another observed “George Washington laid the foundation of this city, after a war with England of seven years’ duration—James Madison lost the capital in two short years war with England.” Reporting on

---

<sup>95</sup> “Retiring from Office,” *Connecticut Mirror*, reprinted as “From the *Connecticut Mirror*: Retiring from Office,” *Newburyport Herald* (Newburyport, Massachusetts), September 23, 1814.

<sup>96</sup> See, for instance, C. Edward Skeen, “John H. Armstrong Jr.,” *American National Biography Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), accessed March 5, 2015, <http://www.anb.org/articles/03/03-00014.html?a=1&n=john%20armstrong&d=10&ss=3&q=4>. Currently, Skeen is the only historian to have published a biography of Armstrong.

the “remarks” left by visitors, the *Vermont Mirror* suggested, “our rulers may in these inscriptions written under cover of night, read what the people will soon speak aloud.”<sup>97</sup>

A combination of more auspicious timing and political maneuvering prevented the anti-Madison cry from gaining momentum. Taking again to the papers, to both the typical weapon of the *National Intelligencer* and the more reputable *Niles’ Register*, the government was able to restore the public’s favorable view in the Democratic Republican party by December. On December 17, the *Register* published a report from a congressional review committee assigned to investigate the events and causes of the defeat at Bladensburg. The report, running 29 full page length columns, determined that the ultimate causes were a threefold combination of unenthusiastic militia turnout, the fact that a letter from Armstrong authorizing General Winder to recruit 5,000 volunteers from Pennsylvania was never delivered, and the fact that Colonel Minor’s Virginia militia showed up to Washington unarmed and was not at Bladensburg for the battle. The report called the events the “intervention” of “unfortunate circumstances,” but each cause had a clearly responsible party: the volunteers’ lack of enthusiasm, Armstrong’s poor organization, and the militia’s lack of discipline were all to blame. The report in effect explicitly and implicitly confirmed the claims of Armstrong’s letter from three months earlier. Always apt to include a dose of cynicism, Niles’ editorial lamented that the “age of documents” meant that his newspaper’s “pages [were] again almost monopolized by a single report laid in front of congress.”<sup>98</sup>

The government could not have dreamed the effect that this dismissal would have in conjunction with the events Niles reported on just one week later: the Hartford Convention.

---

<sup>97</sup> “Extract of a letter from one formerly attached to the administration, dated Washington, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1814,” *Vermont Mirror*, October 12, 1814.

<sup>98</sup> Hezekiah Niles, “The Investigation. Report,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, December 17, 1814.

Twenty years later, *Niles' Register* would be firmly anti-Jackson, but for now, the paper made a passionate stand with the Democratic-Republicans, suggesting that the days of the Federalists' (and indeed, perhaps those of the entirety of the North) were numbered:

“I think the most hardened will feel a little awkward hereafter when he shall speak of the ‘GREAT COMMERCIAL STATES OF NEW-ENGLAND!’ That bubble has burst—truth has divested it of the thin covering it had, and dissolved it in air.”<sup>99</sup>

In the immediate aftermath therefore, the Madison administration received perhaps all it could have hoped for. With Armstrong removed, Monroe had a clear path to the nomination for the Presidency in 1816. With the Federalists embarrassed, that would certainly not be a difficult election. By December, the war appeared far more promising, and Madison perhaps could feel some assurance that peace was only days away. The immediate manipulation of the burning of Washington, it seemed, was as successful as the Surrender of Detroit: Armstrong, like Hull, had been sacrificed to preserve the war cause.

\*\*\*

Armstrong, politically destroyed, was not content to wait a decade, as Hull did, before publishing his version of the story. In fact, there were almost no similarities between the temperate Hull and the venomous Armstrong. The historian Major John S. Williams found the contrarian Armstrong virtually impossible to converse with, “his arsenal or arguments consisting in too great parts of oaths, sneers, and sardonic smiles.”<sup>100</sup> A later analyzer of the battle suggested that Armstrong’s political ambition was so evident it tended towards blocking the administration from making safe maneuvers, which would not feed into his Presidential

---

<sup>99</sup> Hezekiah Niles, “New-England Convention,” *Niles' Weekly Register*, December 24, 1814.

<sup>100</sup> Stahl, *Invasion of the city of Washington*, 172

aspirations.<sup>101</sup> He had been brought into the position not out of qualifications or agreeableness, but because the administration needed support in Pennsylvania and New York.<sup>102</sup>

When Armstrong next wrote, it was not so conciliatory as his first run in the presses. In 1816, the year Armstrong would have made an attempt at the presidency, he worked with General James Wilkinson, contributing to his memoirs. The British historian James was quick to put the result, a scathing personal critique of James Madison, into his 1818 history of the war:

Not all the allurements of fame, not all the obligations of duty, nor the solemn invocations of honor, could excite a spark of courage: the love of a life which had become useless to mankind, and served but to embarrass the public councils... and, at the very first shot, the trembling coward, with a faltering voice, exclaimed:—‘Come, general Armstrong, come, colonel Munro; let us go, and leave it to the commanding general.’ And in place of seeking death, in a blaze of imperishable glory, he ignominiously turned his back upon his enemy, and his country.<sup>103</sup>

That Armstrong was now writing alongside Wilkinson, a failed general and a failed conspirator, testified to the degree of ruin of his political career.

With the 1816 elections’ result almost a foregone conclusion, others began casting doubt on the dominant narrative of Bladensburg, as well. Commodore Barney, who was perhaps the only American hero in the battle and who would eventually die as a result of complications from wounds he received there, took particular issue with the partisan nature of the framing of the battle. He wished to recast the emphasis on the problems of the militia when leadership was ineffectual, suggesting that he “never knew democrats and federalists to agree but in one instance—to run away at *Bladensburg!*”<sup>104</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>103</sup> James, *Military Occurrences Vol. I*, 291-292.

<sup>104</sup> Joshua Barney, “Bladensburg Races,” *The Union* (Washington, Kentucky), September 20, 1816.

More abrasive attempts at memory arrived that year, such as the anonymous, mock-heroic poem, “The Bladensburg Races.”<sup>105</sup> The poem ridicules James Madison, referring sarcastically to him as “Generalissimo” capable only of running away faster than his entire cabinet. Even his wife, Dolly, was not safe, presented as pitiful for wanting to preserve his “honor” even as he fled. Interestingly absent from the account is any reference to the militia; the entirety of the poem focuses on the flight of Madison and his Cabinet. Borrowing Armstrong’s name for Madison, “Little Man,” the poet cleverly emphasizes a sword that Madison keeps at his side that he never unsheathes, a horse that is quick to run away whenever it hears a gun, and the fact that James Monroe is always but one step behind President Madison. The poem’s conclusion offers the most vehement derision:

Now long live Madison the Brave!  
 And Armstrong, long live he!  
 And Rush! And Cutts! Monroe! and Jones:  
 And Dolly, long live she!

And when the country’s cause at stake,  
 Our General and Monroe  
 Next take the field to lead our troops  
 Against th’ invading foe

But fly their posts—ere the first gun  
 Has echo’d o’er the wave,  
 Stop! Stop! Potowmac! *stop thy course!*  
 Nor pass Mount Vernon’s Grave!<sup>106</sup>

The early histories written in the coming years are as useful as they are contradictory in illustrating how drastically understandings of the battle diverged. McAfee, focusing principally on the war on the frontier, chose not to discuss Bladensburg at all, perhaps as this would be an

---

<sup>105</sup> Papers such as the *National Intelligencer* and the *Federal Republican* indicate that the poem was in circulation locally in D.C. by 1815, but it is not clear that it was ever published before 1816. See, for instance, “Bladensburg; National; Shakespeare,” *The Federal Republican*, July 27, 1815.

<sup>106</sup> Unknown Author, *The Bladensburg Races: written shortly after the capture of Washington City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1865), 6-16.

implicit acknowledgement of the militia's failures, a difficult admission for a Kentucky political figure to make. McCarty, on the other hand, praises the conduct of the troops at Bladensburg in a manner similar to the initial reports in the days following the event, praising not only Commodore Barney's marines, but also the militia, who McCarty suggested "rather gained than lost honour at the field at Bladensburg."<sup>107</sup>

By 1820, the dominant American understandings of the burning of Washington had emerged. The first was the politically expedient memory, the sacrifice of Armstrong to end factional disputes and promote the common cause of war. This memory, created in the same manner as the vilification of Hull, reflected the political utility of scapegoating. Interestingly, however, Armstrong has not suffered the lasting scorn to the same degree as Hull; the contemporary American public clearly understood the events that had transpired at Bladensburg and could appreciate their significance without having the memory created for them. The second understanding was the most critical: the placing of blame on the administration. The Federalists would fade after the close of the war, but lampoons such as "The Bladensburg Races" preserved the Federalist tradition of satire. This approach, too, seems to have largely faded. Today, many modern sources suggest that "The Bladensburg Races" refers to the flight of Winder's militia, who were quick to flee from British regulars, whereas the poem was written to emphasize the cowardice of Madison and his Cabinet.

The third understanding was of the shortcomings of the American overreliance on the militia. As historians have since pointed out, the coming victories, especially at New Orleans, should have settled most of these worries. Still, many suggest today that Madison had the opportunity to witness firsthand the disorganization of the militia, and that this influenced

---

<sup>107</sup> McCarty, *History of the American War of 1812*, 170-177.

military policy in America going forward. The fourth understanding is the political rhetoric sometimes heard in today's Maryland: that Bladensburg is merely misunderstood and that Americans should in fact be proud of the stand they attempted there against the British. The designers and sculptors of a 2013 memorial to the event (all residents and politicians from Maryland) told its story almost as if it was the War of 1812's Saratoga: "It galvanized the nation... the Americans might not have had the victory at Baltimore if not for the Battle of Bladensburg."<sup>108</sup> The difference was of course that the Revolutionary turning point of Saratoga was a great victory, halting British progress from the North, while the immediate result of the defeat at Bladensburg was the onward march of the British and eventual conflagration of the nation's capital. Victories such as New Orleans, fodder for the creation of memory, and Baltimore, which we shall examine shortly, would restore the valor associated with American troops and militias, and both followed the burning of Washington chronologically. In combination with the modern superficial understanding of the War of 1812, this fourth, most optimistic understanding has been able to persist, at least in the mind of historically minded Marylanders.

The memory's most beneficial political application, similar to Detroit's, was over by the time the war and the 1816 election had concluded. Unlike New Orleans, the Thames, and Detroit, however, one dominant understanding based on this utility was not the only outcome. Rather, this battle was clear in its proceedings and implications. The American militia failed to repel a ferocious and professional British force from laying waste to the capital. While blaming the militia or Armstrong, would have utility in the immediate aftermath, it would not exculpate

---

<sup>108</sup> Miranda S. Spivack, "Memorializing defeat at Bladensburg that led to eventual victory," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/memorializing-defeat-at-bladensburg-that-led-to-eventual-victory/2013/01/06/de57dfe4-5823-11e2-88d0-c4cf65c3ad15\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/memorializing-defeat-at-bladensburg-that-led-to-eventual-victory/2013/01/06/de57dfe4-5823-11e2-88d0-c4cf65c3ad15_story.html).

the fleeing Madison or restore incinerated volumes to the shelves of the first Library of Congress. The events were clear, and the American public did not need anyone to provide them with their meaning. They were free to draw their own conclusions, as they have done so continuously—but not always consistently—in the years since.

It is interesting, then, that even the very survivors of Bladensburg were able to eventually reach a positive memory of the defeat. Samuel Davidson was one such survivor, who moved with his family and a number of others from Maryland to Ohio in the 1830's. A product of grit formed in those militia days, their desire for western land likely meshed well with the now fully-grown Jacksonian government. Davidson and those around him likely had only been a part of one battle in the War of 1812, and despite its unfortunate results, the War of 1812 as a whole had by then become proof that untrained Americans had the bravery to attempt a defense against British regulars. Certainly, they were not always successful, but at times, they were, and the country united moved forward into an era which celebrated the participation of the common man—now, in democratic government and not just the military—in an unprecedented way. When Davidson and his family found where they would land in Ohio, they had little difficulty determining what their settlement would be named. They called it “Bladensburg.”<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> For a contemporary viewpoint on the “rediscovery” of Bladensburg, Ohio see Christina Davidson, “Wherefore art Thou Bladensburg? [Commentary]” *Baltimore Sun*, September 9, 2014. The historical basis for the understanding of Bladensburg, Ohio (and other war memorial cities like it) is derived by Davidson from Henry C. Peden, *Marylanders to Ohio and Indiana Migration prior to 1835* (Delaware: Colonial Roots Publishers, 2006).



## CONCLUSION: BALTIMORE

As the confusion and emotional frenzy after the burning of the capital subsided, Americans rallied to action instead of freezing with panic. The British had taken a politically important victory, but strategically, America's military officials judged, the next movements by the enemy would be crucial to the war's outcome. Perhaps the British might try, as they had in the first war for independence, to move south and separate that half of the country and the West from the Atlantic states, severing America along a line of division both geographic and political. Logically, this would require a target more strategically important than the symbolic victory at Washington, D.C. Henry M. Brackenridge, a later historian who published a relatively thorough narrative of the war in 1844, recorded both the events and the mood that developed next:

The next object of attack, it was rightly conjectured, would be Baltimore; and the cities of Philadelphia and New York awaited the result with much anxiety as if their fate depended upon its successful issue. After the first moments despondency occasioned by the capture of Washington had subsided in Baltimore, and it was discovered that the place would be assailed immediately, the inhabitants set out making preparations for its defense... No one could imagine to himself a just picture of the state of anxious feeling in which fifty thousand people awaited the issue of the event which would determine the safety or destruction of their city.<sup>110</sup>

When the battle itself arrived on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September, the U.S. Army and Maryland militia were prepared to withstand a British offensive by land and sea. The British had neither the numbers nor the recklessness to march against a force of thousands of American troops holding the advantageous position at Fort McHenry, and instead opted to bombard the fort from the Chesapeake, an attack they continued throughout the night of the 13<sup>th</sup> from extreme range. The Americans suffered fewer than 10 casualties within the fort, and once dawn broke after a

---

<sup>110</sup> Henry M. Brackenridge, *History of the late war between the United States and Great Britain: comprising a minute account of the various military and naval operations* (Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1844), 266-267.

night in which they had fired some 1500 cannonballs, the British departed. Baltimore had been saved.

The bombardment of Baltimore, similar to other events examined, soon generated a poem in its memory, “The Defence of Fort McHenry,” eventually set to music as “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Written by Maryland lawyer Francis Scott Key, who had been held aboard a British ship during the bombardment, the poem was purportedly written on the same day as the battle’s conclusion after a thunderous night of cannon fire. The concluding line of the poems’ opening verse reflects the insecurity Francis Scott Key would have held as dawn began on the morning of September 14<sup>th</sup>: “O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave / O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” Today, the phrase is still a question, but the answer is implicitly understood rather than a representation of uncertainty.

Numerous historians have studied “The Defence of Fort McHenry,” both as an event and as a poem: it was a pivotal moment in the War of 1812 and provided the most tangible and most frequently invoked memory of the entire conflict. It is not just a song that retells events; it is a song that promotes national unity, and summons up, in general terms, a specific military instance that had broad implications for America as a nation and Americans as a people. Given only cursory thought, it would be easy to suggest that we hold these tangible representations of memory as sacred.

Even in today’s American society, which contemporaries of the War of 1812 would surely find deeply licentious, ceremonial respect is still held for “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In most recent years, this has manifested as intense nationalistic negativity towards singers at sporting events who stumble over the lyrics or take too many liberties with the song’s tune. For example, at a game against the Denver Broncos on December 5, 2010, Kansas City Chiefs fans

boisterously derided Mike Eli, lead singer of the Eli Young Band, for his mistake-ridden rendition of the national anthem. After an anxious pause and the omission of several lines, he eventually stumbled to the buildup of the culminating lines of the songs. But by the time Eli had the chance to croon the closing couplet, it was unclear whether the fans were distressed by a violation of reverence for a sacred national memory or by the possibility that the singer would have stopped short of the song's ending. When it came time, the Chiefs' fans briefly paused from their deafening jeers to conclude, as they always do at home games at Arrowhead Stadium, with their own ritual violation of Francis Scott Key's memorialization: "O'er the land of the free / And the home of the Chiefs."<sup>111</sup>

The other most tangible representation of the memory of the War of 1812 is Captain Isaac Hull's victorious *Constitution*, still technically commissioned as a U.S. Naval warship, thanks again in no small part to a poem, Oliver Wendell Holmes' "Old Ironsides." According to the USS *Constitution* museum and restoration project, which today opens the ship daily as a national museum, only 10% of the ship's timbers can be dated to its construction, but that is a detail irrelevant to the preservation of the *idea* of the ship and of the memory of her victories over four British frigates—the "perfect battle record" celebrated by the Naval History and Heritage Command.<sup>112</sup> The survival of so little of the vessel's original woodwork is perhaps metaphorically telling as to what kinds of conclusions we can draw about the relationship between Americans' collective memories of the War of 1812 and the reality of its events.

---

<sup>111</sup> Elke Mermis, "The Eli Young Band screws up the National Anthem at the Chiefs game," *The Pitch*, December 6, 2010. See also Mark Ferris, *Star-Spangled Banner: The Unlikely Story of America's National Anthem* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 243-244.

<sup>112</sup> "USS Constitution's Battle Record," <http://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/uss-constitutions-battle-record0.html>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

The battles examined here—at New Orleans, the Thames, Detroit, and Washington, D.C.—created memories less tangible than Old Ironsides, and perhaps more apt to transformation. We might demonstrate the increasingly great lengths to which the creators of the memories we hold today had to go in order to make their narratives convincing. For instance, the comparison of Andrew Jackson to George Washington required an emphasis on the most obvious components of Jackson’s national fame, as both led military careers in which they led troops victoriously against battle-hardened British regulars. New Orleans, Jackson’s most notable victory against the British, naturally became the defining moment of his career and crucial to the American understanding of the war as a whole; however, the comparison made it essential to minimize Jackson’s destructive character, which was the complete antithesis to the rigorously self-controlled Washington. As Jackson prepared to leave office, the politically important move was to defend his highly un-military successor, Martin Van Buren, by pairing him with a second Jackson. Richard Johnson resembled Jackson’s populism mingled with recklessness, but he was fundamentally a westerner who lacked any national credibility. Unlike Jackson, Johnson could not point to any victory over a British army; hence, his supporters ascribed boundless importance to his allegedly personal defeat of Tecumseh, the most honorable “savage” enemy in the War of 1812.

An examination of the defeats represents in greater detail the degree to which memory distorts, or even reverses, past realities in the interest of political utility. William Hull’s embarrassing opening to the war, a surrender of a location that he as a general deemed was not worth defending at the cost of his men’s lives, was a strategy Americans relied on throughout the Revolutionary War era. But in the War of 1812, this surrender, on the heels of a demonstrable unwillingness to champion the imperialistic ideal by refusing to launch an invasion deep into

Canadian territory, amounted to the cowardice for which he was tried and convicted. On the floors of Congress, Representatives and Senators argued that war was an opportunity for the rebirth of the American patriotic idea outlined in the Constitution. Particularly significant, then, is the shameful remembrance in the aftermath of the British burning of government buildings and documents in Washington, accompanied by the flight of the man known as the “Father of the Constitution” himself. In championing the second war of independence, Americans increasingly distanced themselves from the first.

\*\*\*

The United States was changing fast in the early nineteenth century, and the differences between the memories we hold today of the Revolution and of the War of 1812 reflect this transition. The Revolution’s historians have forged a linear narrative that tracks political events and morale alongside troop movements, using battles along the way to demonstrate the shifting tides of military advantage and popular support for independence. The Revolutionary narrative has a definite beginning and end. Conversely, the historians of the War of 1812 have continuously struggled to form a cohesive narrative of its events. The emphasis has instead fallen on a few individual moments sometimes uncharacteristic of the war as a whole. In turn, the war does not have even a clear beginning and end: crucial battles such as Tippecanoe (1811) and New Orleans (1815) fall outside the prescribed period of hostilities bookended by Congress’ Declaration of War (1812) and the Treaty of Ghent (1814).

As was clear in the burning of Washington, the creation of memory required the consent of the public. The changing approach to wartime memory from the Revolution to the War of 1812 was a precursor to, and perhaps even played a role in the transition in the United States from a republic to a functioning democracy. Perhaps we might go as far as to say that in an age

of ever-increasing communication and white male suffrage, the events of the war had their importance determined not just by respected elites, but by the growing number of American men, who, as citizens, had the potential to become involved in politics. We may view this as a unique junction in time: as it was an age that served as a precursor to the democratic transformation of the country, before the war, ordinary citizens were still excluded from the process of creating *meanings* of events, instead merely demonstrating which events and ascribed meaning they perceived to hold the most *value*. But in the decades that followed the war, this democratic process of ascribing value to its competing moments and personages played out literally on the ballot. For instance, would the 1836 voter choose to ascribe greater merit to the ticket that listed Colonel Johnson, the heroic westerner who slayed Tecumseh, or the one headed by General Harrison, who defeated the Indians at Tippecanoe led by Tecumseh's brother and led the invasion of Upper Canada? The politicization of the early memory of the war in a growingly democratic nation had practical implications when voters were asked to choose not just between candidates but also between multiple memorializations of past events. It is unlikely that voters would have even recognized that they were engaging in the process of creating not just memory, but history.

One activity above all others that demonstrated changing American ideals on manhood and bravery in the early nineteenth century was dueling. Dueling was illegal to everyone and at least tacitly dishonorable to many, but Jackson, embraced as the champion of the country's people (particularly by 1828), embodied in his person the capacity for violence and personal need to defend one's honor that characterized dueling. As New Orleans became an increasingly politically relevant moment in his life, the play written in its memory chose to essentially recast it as a duel for Jackson—both a strategic and physical one—against British Major General Sir

Edward Pakenham. So too were the events at the Thames transformed from a brief pursuit of the British and the Native Americans up the river: in Emmonds's play, Johnson and Tecumseh confront one another in a personal confrontation—effectively a duel—where Johnson displays supernatural powers as he defeats and kills the champion of the Native Americans. Similarly, we may identify the refusal to confront an enemy (a demonstration of cowardice, a lack of masculinity, and dishonor) as the essential element in the construction of the lasting negative image of Hull after his retreat from Canadian territory and of Madison after his flight from Bladensburg. For both, a refusal to confront the enemy was a strategically wise decision in the moment—Hull saw the potential for a massacre within the walls of Fort Detroit, and it would have been foolhardy for the Commander in Chief of the American armed forces to risk capture on the battlefield—but these prudent judgments had consequences for the memory of each figure that lasted centuries beyond the moment. Americans of the time spoke clearly: they valued confrontation as evidence of courage, and a willingness to use violence as the epitome of masculinity and honor.

\*\*\*

Modern historians consistently demonstrate Pierre Nora's critique, that "history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it."<sup>113</sup> In a digital era abundant with unexamined primary materials, an understudied conflict such as the War of 1812 might seem an opportune target for the suppression of memories still unverified by history. But we should take pause before attempting to engage in such a critical form of historical analysis, however well intentioned.

---

<sup>113</sup> Nora, "Between Memory and History," 9.

We noted Commander Oliver Hazard Perry for his glorious naval victory on Lake Erie on September 10, 1813. On that day, he flew a striking blue flag stitched with words from a fellow member of the U.S. Navy: Captain James Lawrence. Lawrence had been handily defeated three months earlier near Boston after the ship under his command, the *Chesapeake*, was disabled at sea by a smaller British vessel, the *Shannon*. Members of the British navy then boarded Lawrence's ship, and one such seaman fired upon Lawrence, ingloriously inflicting the wound that would kill him three days later. Perry commissioned the stitching of a stark blue flag laced with the words of Lawrence's dying command to those on board. The flag was therefore not a memorial to James Lawrence, vanquisher of the British at sea. It was a memorial to James Lawrence, his friend.

Perry's intention was to create an honorable memory of a compatriot he identified with on a personal level, not to create a lasting public inscription in history. Yet, we can examine the extent to which that is precisely what has occurred in years since: today, Captain James Lawrence's famous last words, an ironically clear symbol of defeat, serve as a sort of unofficial motto for the United States Navy: "don't give up the ship."

History, as many disciplines, tends towards empirical analysis as it grows in complexity, and has in turn focused on the quantifiable number of deaths or victories as opposed to individual hurt and pain caused by war. We must acknowledge that Commander Perry was not the only person in and of the era of the War of 1812 who lost a friend. Indeed the war's early historians likely suffered the same fate: maybe McAfee lost a loved one fleeing from the British in chaos at Bladensburg, and perhaps James wrote of the British victory at the same location and thought of a family member who died crossing the bridge, one of thousands meant to absorb American artillery fire. In turn we see why the public had a thirst for the establishment of a decisive



memory rather than an ambiguous one, even while they understood they did not have the entirety of the facts: they wanted to know that such sacrifice had been worth something. Those emerging from war and those studying war centuries later in turn dig endlessly for the same thing: a factual basis for a narrative of some utility. But these two types of people study war with the goal of creating different products; modern historians seek a factual basis for the narrative that fits tangible outcomes of the war—that is, history—whereas the emergent generation seeks the factual basis for a narrative that offsets the tangible pain they felt from the losses it caused—that is, public memory. In each case, we have seen that those in the political realm prey upon this strong desire for a narrative, including both the conspicuous rise of Johnson at the behest of his friends' imaginations and the relatively harmless optimists from Maryland today.

The establishment of public memories of the War of 1812—a product of the machinations of the political elite that were afforded legitimacy by the public—should be understood not as a natural process but rather as a problematic one. The young nation had already developed the practice of making public memory a servant of political expediency that exists today as it did in 1812. Unlike the Revolution, politicians and their publicists used the War of 1812 to discredit political enemies rather than to forge national unity. Unlike Washington, the hero of the Revolution and an ardent preacher against factional politics, Jackson, the hero of the War of 1812, became the first overtly partisan political leader in American history, and one of the most divisive of all American presidents. By electing Jackson president in 1828, the majority of American voters endorsed the combination of honor, bravery, and political principle that his supporters identified as his essential qualifications for the office. They could not have realized that they also were also validating the carefully constructed memory of his past that got him there, and conferring a legitimacy that would persist for two centuries.

No war will ever impact those who study it as profoundly as those who emerge from it. Those who emerge from wars are compelled to make value judgments about the conflict's meaning on the basis of imperfect understandings of the events they have experienced. Such was the case with the War of 1812. Historians have so far been content to approach these judgments contemporaries made of it critically, but have not systematically attempted to grapple with the motivations or the utility that spawned such memory. Perhaps historians' understanding of wars will not progress until they find ways to understand memory for its significance rather than suppress it for its inaccuracies.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Primary**

*The Bladensburg Races: written shortly after the capture of Washington city.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1865.

Eaton, John Henry. *The Letters of Wyoming.* Philadelphia: Simpson and Conrad, 1824.

Emmons, William. *Authentic Biogrpahy of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky.* New York: Henry Mason, 1833.

Emmons, William. *The Battle of the Thames, or the Death of Tecumseh.* Philadelphia, Printed for the Author, 1840.

Gales, Joseph and William Winston Seaton. *National Intelligencer.* Washington, D.C., 1810-1829.

Grice, C. E. *The Battle of New Orleans, or Glory, love, and loyalty: historical and national drama, in five acts.* New York: Printed for the Author, 1814.

Hubbard, R. *Norwich Courier.* Norwich, Connecticut, 1809-1845.

Hull, William. *Memoirs of the campaign of the North Western Army of the United States, A.D. 1812 : in a series of letters addressed to the citizens of the United States, with an appendix, containing a brief sketch of the revolutionary services of the author.* Boston: True and Greene, 1824.

James, William. *A full and correct account of the military occurrences of the late war between Great Britain and the United States of America : with an appendix, and plates, Volumes I and II.* London, Printed for the Author, 1818.

King, Rufus. *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King.* Edited by Charles R. King. New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1895.

- McAfee, Robert B. *History of the Late War in the Western Country*. Ohio: Historical Publications Company, 1919.
- McCarty, William. *History of the American War of 1812, from the commencement, until the final termination thereof, on the memorable eight of January, 1815, at New Orleans, Third Edition*. Pennsylvania: McCarty and Davis, 1817.
- McLeod, Alexander. *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes, and Ends of the Present War*. New York: Eastburn, Kirk and Co., 1814.
- Niles, Hezekiah. *Niles' Weekly Register*. Baltimore, Maryland, 1811-1849.
- Reid, John and John Henry Eaton. *The Life of Andrew Jackson, Major General in the Service of the United States: Comprising a History of the War in the South, from the Commencement of the Creek Campaign, to the Termination of Hostilities Before New Orleans*. Cincinnati, Ohio: W. M. & O. Farnsworth Jr. Printers, 1827.
- White, George. *National Advocate*. New York, New York, 1813-1829.
- Williams, Samuel. *Sketches of the war, between the United States and the British isles: intended as a faithful history of all the material events from the time of the declaration in 1812, to and including the treaty of peace in 1815, interspersed with geographical [sic] descriptions of places, and biographical notices of distinguished military and naval commanders, Volumes I and II*. Vermont: Fay and Davidson, 1815.

## Secondary

Brackenridge, Henry M. *History of the late war between the United States and Great Britain: comprising a minute account of the various military and naval operations.*

Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1844.

Calvert, Jo. "Forging a Nation: Triumph Through Diversity Sculpture." *University of Toronto Magazine*, Autumn 2015. Accessed December 9, 2015. <http://magazine.utoronto.ca/all-about-alumni/forging-a-nation-triumph-through-diversity-sculpture-adrienne-alison/>.

Cayton, Andrew and Fred Anderson. *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000*. New York: Penguin Group, 2005.

Davidson, Christina. "Wherefore art thou Bladensburg? [Commentary]." *Baltimore Sun*, September 9, 2014. Accessed March 9, 2016.

Drake, Benjamin. *Life of Tecumseh, and of his Brother the Prophet: with a Historical Sketch of the Shawanoe Indians*. Cincinnati: E. Morgan and Co, 1841.

Earle, William. "Niles' Register, 1811-1849: Window on the World." *Journal on the War of 1812* no. 5 (Fall 1996).

Eustace, Nicole. *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2012.

Ferris, Mark. *Star-Spangled Banner: The Unlikely Story of America's National Anthem*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Heidler, David Stephen. *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1997.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Kammen, Michael. *The Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. New York: Vintage Press, 1991.

Mclaughlin, Andrew C. *Lewis Cass*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1891.

Meyer, Leland Winfield. *The life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1932.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*." *Representations* no. 26 (Spring, 1989). 7-24.

Perkins, Bradford. *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations Volume I: The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Skeen, C. Edward. "John H. Armstrong Jr." *American National Biography Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Accessed March 5, 2015.

<http://www.anb.org/articles/03/03-00014.html?a=1&n=john%20armstrong&d=10&ss=3&q=4>.

Spivack, Miranda S. "Memorializing defeat at Bladensburg that led to eventual victory." *The Washington Post*, January 6, 2013. Accessed March 9, 2016.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/memorializing-defeat-at-bladensburg-that-led-to-eventual-victory/2013/01/06/de57dfe4-5823-11e2-88d0-c4cf65c3ad15\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/memorializing-defeat-at-bladensburg-that-led-to-eventual-victory/2013/01/06/de57dfe4-5823-11e2-88d0-c4cf65c3ad15_story.html).

Stahl, John Meloy. *The Invasion of the city of Washington: a disagreeable study in and of military unpreparedness*. Wisconsin: Van Trump Publishing, 1919.

Talarico, Jennifer M. and David C. Rubin. "Confidence, Not Consistency, Characterizes Flashbulb Memories." *Psychological Science* vol. 14 no. 5 (2003), 455-461.

Vance, Mildred Ethel. *Tennessee Politics in the Jackson Era*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1908.

Vogel, Steve. "The War of 1812, still seeking a little respect." *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2012. Accessed March 9, 2016.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-war-of-1812-still-seeking-a-little-respect/2012/06/07/gJQAblrwLV\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/the-war-of-1812-still-seeking-a-little-respect/2012/06/07/gJQAblrwLV_story.html).

Watts, Steven. *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Williams, John S. *History of the Invasion and Capture of Washington*. Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1857.