

Lesson Forty-Three

The War Of 1812

LESSON IDEA

To show how our nation struggled to win respect and steer a course independent of Europe during the 1800's, and how a lack of leadership nearly cost us our nationhood during the War of 1812.

PREPARATION

Read the "During The Week" section and prepare the suggested project on the Star-Spangled Banner in a way appropriate for your family. Familiarize family members with the term "impressment" as it applied to naval problems during the War of 1812.

THE AMERICANS, wrote British Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane in 1814, "are a whining, canting race much like a spaniel and require the same treatment — must be drubbed into good manners."

Cochrane hated Americans, even though (or perhaps because) he knew little or nothing about them. His hatred was fed, in part, by British newspapers. Day after day, the London Times and the National Register told their readers that Americans were savages" and that their president, James Madison, was "an ambitious madman," as well as a "liar," "serpent," "impostor," and "traitor." American military officers were described as "a strange, uncouth set." Britain must, in the opinion of the Times, "not only chastise the savages into present peace, but make a lasting impression of their fears."

Strange reasoning underpinned such insults, born primarily of arrogance and self-righteousness. England, the self-appointed champion of justice and virtue, had gone to war with France to save the world from Napoleon Bonaparte. Every nation was expected to smile kindly on that heroic British effort. When America refused, choosing instead to do business as usual with all nations, including France, England reacted with outraged indignation. She dispatched ships to police the American coastline and prevent cargoes from leaving or entering U.S. harbors. She forbade European trade with America. She seized our pri-

vately owned brigs and schooners, some while anchored and others on the high seas. She confiscated whatever cargoes she wanted, made prisoners of American sea captains (who were sentenced to dungeons in the foulest British prisons), and impressed American sailors to man her ships. [Explain the term "impressment" to family members. If necessary, have someone it up in a dictionary.]

The French navy, though less powerful, was equally guilty of violating America's neutrality. Protests, threats, embargoes, and acts of Congress had no effect. Without a large, well-equipped U.S. Navy riding shotgun for merchant ships, America was continually kicked from stem to stern by both European bullies. Unwilling to take the abuse any longer, on June 18, 1812 the United States formally declared war on Great Britain. Why do you suppose war was not also declared on France, since she was equally culpable? [Encourage discussion and point out that a nation as small and as unprepared for war as was ours at that time could not afford to challenge both European bullies at the same time. One was more than enough, and England, with her immense sea power, had been the chief offender.] A declaration of war was a bold step for a country barely out of its cradle and still learning to govern itself. To compound the problem, America had no money to finance the war, the little means of borrowing funds. Her army, still largely dependent on volunteer militia, was disorganized. Its commanders were weak and vacillating.

As a result, American forts along the Canadian frontier in 1812 collapsed before the British onslaught like cardboard houses. Accounts of the defeats read like a comedy of errors, with officers stumbling over their own troops and issuing contradictory orders that included camping when they should have marched, and marching when they should have camped. One often wonders if they knew which way to face their horses when riding into battle, or if they had enough sense to care.

Historian John Clark Ridpath concluded that the string of Canadian and western defeats was the "logical result of the neglect of the army." The officers were inexperienced, the troops undisciplined, communications were severed, and Indians were entirely under British control. Yet even those fact, Ridpath concluded, "did not atone for the lack of personal courage, nerve, and daring, which would have rallied ... the turbulent Western militia and might have turned back, for a time at least, the British advance."

SMALL WONDER that the British newspapers belittled American commanders. Or that the House of Commons rocked with cheers when an English major called for a new Canadian frontier at least 100 miles below the Great Lakes, a new Indian boundary, the exclusion of Americans from Canadian fisheries and from trade with the British West Indies, and the ousting of Americans from New Orleans and Florida. Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane, who was appointed overall commander of the British forces in 1814, had even greater ambitions. "I am confident," he wrote Lord Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, "that all the country southwest of the Chesapeake might be restored to the dominion of Great Britain, if under the command of enterprising generals."

The defeat of Napoleon in May 1814 had released thousands of seasoned English troops for battle in America. As Cochrane waited for their arrival, he began finalizing his battle plans. Of the many cities vulnerable to attack (New Orleans, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Richmond, and Washington), he chose the latter. Since Washington was the U.S. capital, its capture would render a devastating blow to American morale. Also, it would be easier to take Baltimore and Annapolis once Washington had fallen.

In August 1814, as the British sailed up the Potomac toward the capital city, The American militia was being figuratively led in circles by commanders who lacked both military know-how and decisiveness. The result was inevitable: a rout at Bladensburg (north of the city), which scattered soldiers and civilians like buckshot in all directions. The conquerors then marched unopposed into Washington itself, which seemed as deserted as a western ghost town. The British goal was to

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

For a more detailed account of the burning of Washington and the U.S. victory at Baltimore, *The Dawn's Early Light* by Walter Lord is highly recommended. Meticulously researched, yet immensely entertaining, this 259-page history lesson should be available in a local library.

destroy every symbol of American independence.

The Capitol building proved to be virtually impervious to the British attack. With walls of limestone and a roof of sheet metal, the legislative edifice defied rockets, cannon, gunpowder, and fire. The British troops eventually settled for burning its contents, such as the Senate's red morocco chairs, the secret House journals, the elegant gold eagle and clock above the Speaker's chair, the Supreme Court law library, and the budding Library of Congress book collection. Throughout the building, squads of soldiers chopped woodwork into kindling and piled mahogany chairs, desks, and tables in the center of the rooms, then set the piles on fire with rocket blasts.

As flames surged through the doors and windows, and through the roof, a small force of soldiers led by a British admiral moved up Pennsylvania Avenue to the President's mansion. Finding it deserted, they roamed the house, both curious and amused. They were startled, for instance, by the dining room. The table was perfectly set for 40 persons. The wine stood in the coolers packed with ice. Cold cuts were on the sideboard. President Madison had planned to dine that evening with his cabinet and a few "military gentlemen." The call to evacuate the city had come just as the servant boy had finished setting the table. The only item that seemed out of place was an elegant picture frame on the west wall, hacked apart during the frantic moments of Mrs. Madison's departure to remove the full-length canvas of George Washington. It had been the mansion's showpiece, and the one thing that Dolly Madison had vowed would never fall into British hands. The frame, screwed to the wall so tightly that it could not be loosened, had been split with an ax and the canvas, still on its stretcher, carried to safety.

