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# A Select Examination Of the Historiography Of The Causes of the War of 1812

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State University of New York  
College at Buffalo  
Department of History

A Select Examination Of the Historiography Of  
The Causes of the War of 1812

A Thesis in  
History

By  
Shiva Czuba

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
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The War of 1812 can be a puzzling historical event for scholars to study. Its monikers have included both “the forgotten war” as well as the “Revolutionary War Part II.” Donald Hickey argued that “the average American is only vaguely aware of who our enemy was in the War of 1812 or why we fought.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most confusing aspects of the war continues to be what precisely caused the United States to ultimately declare war on Great Britain. A consensus has yet to be unequivocally reached with some historians citing maritime conflicts as the cause, while others blamed emerging nationalism some blame nefarious intentions and manifest destiny, while others prefer an explanation that involves parts of every theory combined. Coincidentally, a pattern emerges when we examine the historiography of this topic. At the start of the examination of the causes of the war by various scholars, many were quick to blame obvious maritime conflicts as the cause of the war. Those next generation of historians that followed sought to paint a larger picture by examining evidence related to economics, expansionism, as well as ways the political landscape at the time could have paved the road to war. This work will attempt to briefly analyze the research that currently exists on the causes of The War of 1812, as well as to explain the shift in the historiography concerning those causes. While the literature on the War of 1812 and its causes are vast, for the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on a limited stable of historians.

Chapter 1, entitled “Early Interpretations: Maritime Grievances” examines the works of Alexander James Dallas, Henry Marie Brackenridge, Richard Hildreth, Gilbert Auchinleck, and Henry Adams. This chapter also examines how President James Madison attempted to control the narrative of the war before the Treaty of Ghent had even been signed. Chapter 2, entitled “Changing Interpretations” looks at the works of Theodore Roosevelt, Howard T. Lewis, Julius

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<sup>1</sup> Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Short History* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1.

Pratt, George Rodgers Taylor, Warren H. Goodman, and A.L. Burt. The Third Chapter, entitled: "The Sixties Renews interest" looks at the works of Bradford Perkins, Reginald Horsman, Roger Brown, Harry Coles, Clifford Egan, J.C.A. Stagg, and Donald Hickey. Chapter 4, entitled "Bicentennial Anniversary Renews Interest" examines some of the most recent studies on the War of 1812 by Jeremy Black, Paul Gilje, Noah Feldman, and Richard Maass.

## **Chapter 1: Early Interpretations: Maritime Grievances**

The first text to emerge concerning the War of 1812 was written by the then current Secretary of Treasury, Alexander James Dallas. Dallas's text *An Exposition of the Causes and Character of the War*, was in fact mostly written in November and December of 1814 while diplomats were still discussing the terms of the Treaty of Ghent that eventually ended the war.<sup>2</sup> Dallas continued to make changes to his work into early 1815 while some pages had already begun the production process. This was because the full text from the Treaty did not reach Washington until February 13, 1815.<sup>3</sup> Dallas' full text was then sent to former President Thomas Jefferson by the then current President James Madison on March 12, 1815, with a letter requesting his assistance concerning a decision about the book's publication.<sup>4</sup> Madison wrote that he had originally hoped that by commissioning an "expose of the causes and character of the war between the United States and Great Britain should remedy the mischief produced by the declaration of the Prince Regent and other misstatements which had poisoned the opinion of the world on the subject."<sup>5</sup> What Madison was referencing was a declaration given by the Prince regent in January 1813, in which he "described the United States as the aggressor in the War."<sup>6</sup> Madison specifically noted a desperate need for the text because the "pacification in Europe" with the ending of the Napoleonic Wars had caused the "turning [of] attention" towards the

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander James Dallas and Howard G. Callaway, *An Exposition of the Causes and Character of the War* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> James Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 334.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander James Dallas, p. 76.

United States.<sup>7</sup> Madison explained to Jefferson that Congress determined a “correct and full view of the War, should be prepared and made public in the usual Demi official form.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite every effort made by Dallas, the text had not been finished before terms were reached in Ghent and Madison had feared the “spirit and language” of the text may be seen as “unbecoming” and upset the newly found peace.<sup>9</sup> His decided on only a few possible solutions. Either rewrite the text entirely, add a “prefatory notice” making the reader aware that the text had been written before the details of the treaty emerged, or as Madison pushed, to suppress the work entirely and burn the few hundred copies that had already been produced. Madison explicitly noted in his letter to Jefferson that the text either needed to be returned to him or locked away where there would be “no danger of it escaping.”<sup>10</sup> Ever the decisive mentor Jefferson returned the book, explaining that he had read it with “great pleasure...but with irresistible desire that it should be published.”<sup>11</sup> The decision had been made with the work released to the public quickly, with a prefatory note, noting what Madison had explained in his letter to Jefferson.

As a Jeffersonian Republican who had been appointed as the U.S. District Attorney for eastern Pennsylvania in 1801 by then president Thomas Jefferson, and later appointed secretary of Treasury by President Madison in 1814 one may rightly question Alexander James Dallas ability to remain unbiased. While keeping this in mind when examining Dallas’ text, it is obvious that Dallas’ Jeffersonian Republican ideals shaped what he believed to be the causes of war. Dallas began his work giving a thorough history of the policy of impressment in the eighteenth century. He wrote that the British believed every one of their subjects “was bound by

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James Madison, p.333.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Dallas, p.ix.

a tie of allegiance to his sovereign, which no lapse of time, no change of place, no exigency of life, could possibly waken, or dissolve...the British Sovereign was entitled, at all periods, and on all occasions to the services of his subjects.”<sup>12</sup> Dallas explained that in order to “discover and impress” British subjects who were attempting to escape from their duties, British naval leaders and their representatives believed they were “lawfully” permitted to forcibly enter and search American merchant ships. Dallas argued that this practice became somewhat difficult as the British claimed the “tie of allegiance” between a sovereign and their subject “cannot be severed or relaxed.”<sup>13</sup> Dallas, expressing common sentiment and the time, wrote that United States citizens were not obligated to “accommodate the British maritime policy” as they had acquired independence “by the glorious revolution of 1776.”<sup>14</sup>

While arguing for complete independence from all British maritime policy, Dallas also brought up the argument of naturalization. If the allegiance between a sovereign and their subject could never be severed, than what about American citizens who had been naturalized? Dallas charged the British with violating the “contract of naturalization” as well as the “reciprocal obligations of allegiance” it created. He concluded that as long as the naturalized citizen “continued within the territory and jurisdiction of his adoptive government, he cannot be pursued, or seized, or restrained, by his former sovereign.”<sup>15</sup> Dallas asserted that the practice of naturalization had been a respected practice throughout Europe, however, at this time Great Britain was claiming “dominion over the seas” through “the coarse and licentious hand of [the] British press gangs” who had been charged with the task of stopping and searching ships in order

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<sup>12</sup> Dallas, p.40.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander James Dallas, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



to discover and impress British subjects.<sup>16</sup> Dallas argued that the citizens of the United States, outraged at the continuance of impressment practices, “with one mind and one voice, called loudly upon their government, for redress and protection” while the United States sought to “soothe the exasperated spirit of the people.”<sup>17</sup>

Dallas continued his explanation of events that he believed led to the War of 1812, with a relatively short discussion on the Berlin Decree, The Embargo, The Non-Importation Act, The Milan Decree, and the Orders-In-Council. He concluded that every action taken by the United States was to obtain “just” and “honorable” agreements from the former motherland, with every action to “appeal to the justice and magnanimity of Great Britain was now...fruitless and forlorn” as she “contemptuously disregarded the neutrality of the American territory...usurp[ing] and exerciz[ing] on the water, a tyranny.”<sup>18</sup> According to Dallas, the war was inevitable, and declared by Congress as they “could pause no longer...under a deep and afflicting sense of national wrongs.”<sup>19</sup>

Alexander James Dallas spent the remainder of his text decrying his outrage for the “lies” the Prince Regent had spread across the world concerning the causes of the declaration of the War of 1812, and what nation held the blame. He dismissed the war as one for “conquest” by writing that the instigation of the natives had been conducted by the British, and the “military occupation of Upper Canada, was, therefore deemed indispensable to the safety of the frontier” due to the need to “restrain the violence of the enemy.”<sup>20</sup> As for the Orders-In-Council being the cause of the war, with the Prince Regent announcing to the world their repeal days before the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p,43.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup>Alexander James Dallas, p.74.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.77-78.

declaration of war should have appeased the United States government, Dallas asserted it would have only “been the subject of renewed negotiations” as impressment was announced a “principal cause” with the only way to obtain peace being the “express abandonment of the practice.”<sup>21</sup> Dallas explained that while the United States “never lost sight of the object of all just wars, a just peace” they “had no choice but to invigorate war.”<sup>22</sup>

In the last twenty odd pages of his text Dallas sought to unquestionably explain to the rest of the world the context of the war that had been fought, what the author described as “solemn appeal to the rest of the civilized world.”<sup>23</sup> Dallas continued to lobby against Britain’s wartime behavior as a way to demonize British character itself. Dallas wrote about a “striking contrast” between United States war time policy and the “insidious” policy of war that the British held. He went on to describe in detail some of the atrocious “war crimes” committed by the British, including their burning of the villages of Lewiston, Manchester, Tuscarora, Buffalo, and Black Rock “lay[ing] waste the whole of the Niagara frontier, leveling every house and every hut” in attempts to again describe how the British had “upset the social order...violated the principles of social law” by forming an alliance with “savages” and “selecting these auxiliaries in its hostilities.”<sup>24</sup>

After examining the content of this text, it becomes glaringly clear why President Madison was reluctant to publish it, and instead seriously contemplated whether he could destroy every copy in existence before it reached the press. The Anglophobia was apparent on every page with Alexander James Dallas clearly hoping to persuade the world that the United States was forced, both by her citizens cries for help as well as the “unrelenting” “aggressive” policies

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.84.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.85.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander James Dallas, p. 89.

that had been adopted by the British government. Mentioned often throughout the text, the words of the Prince Regent clearly had a large impact on the rest of the world's perception of the narrative that surrounded the war. Dallas and the United States Congress, along with President Madison had completed what they initially intended to with the publication of this exposition, as impressment being perceived as the main cause for the declaration of the War of 1812 would not be questioned until the end of the nineteenth century.

In Henry Marie Brackenridge's *History of the Late War, Between the United States and Great Britain*, published in 1817, Brackenridge not only felt that the British policy of impressment was the main grievance and cause of the war but his accusations about the "ultimate aim" of the British was even more insidious. Brackenridge was born in 1786, the son of a prominent Pennsylvanian Judge. His family sent him off at an early age to Louisiana in order to fulfill family requirements and receive a "proper French" education.<sup>25</sup> He later became a judge and returned to Louisiana in 1811 as a District Attorney General. After the state of Louisiana was admitted to the union as the eighteenth state in 1812, Brackenridge played a large role in creating the state's legal code.<sup>26</sup> During the War of 1812, Brackenridge played a vital "intelligence" role by reporting any events of importance directly to his very close friend, President James Madison.<sup>27</sup> His book on the war was published in 1817.

Impressment, explained Brackenridge, was simply one way that the British were "attempting to exercise their power without right over her American brethren."<sup>28</sup> Brackenridge

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<sup>25</sup> Guide to the Henry Marie Brackenridge and Family Papers (University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections), accessed May 2, 2021, <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:US-PPIU-dar193703/viewer>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> H. M. Brackenridge, *The History of the Late War Between the United States and Great Britain: Containing a Brief Recapitulation of the Events Which Led to the Declaration of War, Its Progress, and an Account of the Various Brilliant Land and Naval Victories, Including the Battle of New-Orleans* (Wheeling W. Va.: A. & E. Picket, 1831), 13.

claimed that Great Britain feared the United States would become “formidable rivals” so they set out to “eat away” at the “cement of our union” in the hopes of “seeing us divided and engaged in civil broils.”<sup>29</sup> Impressment was seen by Brackenridge as an “odious and almost obsolete” practice, and while the Orders-In-Council may have caused American merchants “a thousand vexations,” Brackenridge asserted that the “intolerable outrage” and “universal clamor for war” from the citizens was directly related to impressment.<sup>30</sup> Brackenridge wrote that when questioned, the British argued that they were “contending for their existence” as the British had been desperate for men to fill their ships in order to fight back Napoleon’s armies. However, Brackenridge argued that the United States, a new nation dependent on trade for their growth, was also fighting for their existence and they “were no more bound to consult [England’s] interest, than she considered herself bound to consult ours.”<sup>31</sup>

The incident that occurred between the American ship *Chesapeake*, and the British ship *Leopard*, in which the *Leopard* fired on the *Chesapeake* when refused the right to board and search for British deserters, was the “true” start of the War according to Brackenridge. He claimed that “although hostilities were not declared, the feelings of America were from that day at war with England.”<sup>32</sup>

Brackenridge did also address trade restrictions and native hostilities in his text when he considered other causes of the War. He claimed that the trade restrictions were simply the British attempting to again assert her “control” over the United States, angered that we could not be “kicked into her war” with the French.<sup>33</sup> When the British claimed to be “fighting for their

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.27.

existence” Brackenridge argued that this was not at all the case. Instead, Brackenridge concluded “If it had been true, why did she continue, at such a time, to insult and abuse us in every possible shape?”<sup>34</sup> Instead, Brackenridge claimed it had all been a “stupendous scheme” and the Napoleonic Wars were not a fight for Great Britain’s existence, but “only a contest between two great nations for the mastery of the world.”<sup>35</sup>

When it came to the topic of native hostilities, Brackenridge again claimed it was all a part of a British plot to undermine the United States government. He argued that British “instigation” could be the only possible reason the native population was upset with the Americans. While acknowledging that they had been “encroach[ing] upon their hunting grounds” it had been a “necessary consequence” due to the “increase in our population.”<sup>36</sup> Because the United States had “endeavored to obtain them by fair purchase” and “had been the first to respect [native] territorial rights,” Brackenridge believed there was no possibility that the Native Americans could be angered by their treatment by the United States (an idea that will be revisited later in this essay) and therefore the British had to have been to blame.<sup>37</sup>

In his conclusion, Brackenridge asserts that the War of 1812 was somewhat of an inevitability, noting that the continuation of impressment practices had forced Congress into a corner. He referenced a quote from Benjamin Franklin, in which Franklin had rejected the naming of the Revolutionary War as the “war of independence.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, Franklin noted that he

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<sup>34</sup> H. M. Brackenridge, p.27.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.23.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.298.

believed they had only experienced a simple revolution, writing that the “war for independence is yet to come.”<sup>39</sup>

In *The History of the United States of America: From the Discovery of the Continent to the Organization of Government Under the Federal Constitution*, published in 1852, journalist and historian Richard Hildreth addressed what he believed to be the causes of the War of 1812. At one point holding positions at the both the *Boston Atlas* and the *Tribune* papers, Hildreth was best known for his abolitionist writings, and even then his work was for the most part ignored during his lifetime.<sup>40</sup> His *History of the United States* was almost completely overlooked and would not be referenced by most historical scholars till the next century.<sup>41</sup> The problem with Hildreth’s work was twofold. First, it was considered extremely biased with many referring to him as “the federalist historian.”<sup>42</sup> Second, Hildreth’s work was considered “frigid” and “dry” with many concluding that Hildreth had “sacrificed readability to a theory of history.”<sup>43</sup> What made Hildreth’s work notable, however, was the vastly different viewpoint he held as to what had caused the War of 1812. Rather than accepting impressment as the main cause as other American historians had at the time, Hildreth sought to lay the blame squarely on then President Thomas Jefferson.

Hildreth instead blamed an ingrained “feeling [in the United States] of indignant hostility to England, the still glowing embers of ancient hate having been kindled into flame.”<sup>44</sup> Hildreth continued, arguing that Washington and Adams knew that peace came at a cost, causing them to

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, “The Problem of Richard Hildreth,” *The New England Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1940): pp. 223-245, <https://doi.org/10.2307/360753>, 223.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.232.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 232.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Hildreth, *The History of the United States of America: From the Discovery of the Continent to the Organization of Government Under the Federal Constitution* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1849), 315.

make concessions at times which Hildreth wrote was how Jay's Treaty came about, as well as the ratification of the convention with Napoleon.<sup>45</sup> However when it came to Jefferson, Hildreth argued that his hate for Great Britain was so "deeply rooted" agreements with the nation felt far too "utterly abhorrent" for him to even consider, which is what he argued led to his opposition of the ratification of Jay's Treaty.<sup>46</sup> According to Hildreth, it was also this sentiment that led to Jefferson's refusal to consider any of Greenville's offers on changing (but not eliminating) impressment on behalf of Great Britain as well as his complete rejection of Monroe's treaty without consulting with any members of Congress.<sup>47</sup> Hildreth did make sure to clearly explain that he did not believe Jefferson intentionally acted in any way that he believed would have caused a war, as this would have been contrary to many of his beliefs, however he believes it was inadvertently caused by what he criticized as Jefferson's great "inflexibility" as a President. While Hildreth's work was all but ignored at the time it was published, it did show a completely different viewpoint from other American historians at the time. Later American historians in the early nineteenth century as well as historians from Canada and England attempted to expand on the ideas presented by Hildreth.

Gilbert Auchinleck, a Canadian historian, began his 1855 work *A History of the War Between Great Britain and the United States of America During the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* with an attempt to reassure his reader that he intended to study of the War of 1812 with a fair and balanced approach. To show his readers his dedication to truthful writing, Auchinleck wrote "An historical narrative which willfully offends against truth or distorts it against party purposes

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 316.

is an imposture...we write, jealously observant of truth.”<sup>48</sup> Examining this text, it quickly becomes clear why Auchinleck prefaced his work with this statement as his interpretations of the causes of the War of 1812 were completely contrary to what other historians were writing at this time. According to Auchinleck, the war was ultimately provoked by the French Emperor Napoleon with his declaration of the Berlin Decree on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November in 1806. Auchinleck criticized American politicians and historians for writing the Berlin Decree off, believing it to be a “dead letter.”<sup>49</sup> He instead argued that while “the extinction of British trade was greatly beyond [Napoleon’s] power” his decree still caused a vast amount of “extremely severe losses.”<sup>50</sup> To support this argument, Auchinleck referenced a payment that English merchants in the Hans Towns received in the amount eight hundred thousand pounds from the English government in order to prevent them from becoming completely insolvent, proof of the severe damages caused by the Berlin Decree.<sup>51</sup>

Gilbert Auchinleck used this argument to support the British decision to issue the British Orders in Council on January 7, 1807. He continued, arguing that while many had criticized the British for this move, they had been incorrect for assuming the Order was the result of a “bias Tory Ministry,” as the Order was the result of a “Whig Cabinet headed by Mr. Fox” a man Auchinleck concludes could “hardly be charged with any bias.”<sup>52</sup> In his final argument it is clear that Auchinleck hoped to absolve the British of any blame for the cause of the war, in particular to divert the blame from the British Orders in Council. For this, Auchinleck turned to James Monroe who at the time had been serving as the United States minister to Britain. He wrote that

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<sup>48</sup> Gilbert Auchinleck, *A History of the War Between Great Britain and the United States of America During the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* (Toronto: W.G. Chewett, 1862), 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Gilbert Auchinleck, p.6.



Monroe had expressed “concurrence and satisfaction” with the Orders, confident that “the spirit of the Orders was to deprive the French and all nations subject to their control, which had embraced the Continental system” concluding that it was essentially a “mild and lenient measure of retaliation” when compared to the much more “violent and extensive character of the Berlin Decree.”<sup>53</sup> Instead Gilbert Auchinleck charged the United States in his text with the crime of empowering Bonaparte with their “deplorable silent acquiesce” of the Berlin Decree, a move that the author boldly argued could have stunted Napoleon’s destruction.<sup>54</sup> Instead Auchinleck blamed the “President of the United States” conspicuously omitting Jefferson’s name, for being “gentle, plaintive, and supplicatory [towards Napoleon Bonaparte], compared with the strong and angry language frequently addressed from [the President] to ministers and plenipotentiaries of Great Britain.”<sup>55</sup>

When it came to discussing the events of the *Chesapeake* affair that occurred on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1807, Auchinleck again attempted to absolve the British from any wrongdoing. Instead, the author asserted that the British ship *Leopard* attempted a simple enforcement of their legal “right to search” the frigate *Chesapeake* and had they simply been allowed to fulfill their right to search for deserters, the entire situation could have been avoided. Auchinleck instead blamed Commodore Barron of the *Chesapeake* for the resulting entanglement that “contributed still further to agitate the public mind.”<sup>56</sup> Again, deliberately omitting Jefferson’s name from the conversation, Auchinleck charged “the President of the United States” with purposely using “language calculated to inflame the public mind in a very high degree” making the situation

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

“vastly worse.”<sup>57</sup> Auchinleck continued to drive home his point, explaining that “the President” acted hastily when he had ordered the immediate departure of all British ships from all of “the harbors or waters of the United States” a move he argued was a deliberately “hostile measure.”<sup>58</sup> Auchinleck instead commended the British government for their “frank and honorable spirit” who “before one word of complaint...promptly and spontaneously testify their concern at the mistaken proceedings of their offer, and their cordial desire to make reparation.”<sup>59</sup> What Auchinleck referred to here was the immediate recall of British, of the Captain of the *Leopard* that had fired on the *Chesapeake*.<sup>60</sup>

To further show how American policies and actions resulted in the War of 1812, Auchinleck addressed the impressment problem, an issue he believed to be heavily mischaracterized by the Americans. While he acknowledged that some Americans may have been wrongfully impressed he insists it was a problem that only occurred “now and then,” and was not done with “willful disregard of ascertained origin.”<sup>61</sup> He again took aim in his text at “the President” whom he charged repeatedly with misrepresenting the situation, writing that mistaken impressment never “occurred so frequently as to involve anything like the wrong and the suffering depicted in a proclamation” given by Jefferson.<sup>62</sup> Auchinleck continued, writing that the American government could have “put a stop at once to the grievances” by taking steps to prevent British seaman from being hired by American merchant ships. He painted a picture of a desperate Britain who “was striving to rally round her standard all the stout heart and stalwart

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<sup>57</sup> Gilbert Auchinleck, p.7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.9.

arms she could bring together of her own sons in a struggle for existence” while American states “were employing...three foreign seamen to one native American.”<sup>63</sup>

Auchinleck concluded his interpretation of the causes of the War, and wrote that “the attitude” the American had adopted “must be remembered” and that their “interposition” during the enactment of the Berlin degree “might possibly have checked Bonaparte, and perhaps have recalled him within the limits of international law.”<sup>64</sup> Writing that this was the “original cause of their subsequent misfortunes” and that it is “impossible to say how far they had themselves to blame for those misfortunes.”<sup>65</sup> Auchinleck then wrote about Jefferson’s “retirement” from the presidency, writing that while he was a man of “great ability” he had done a disservice to both his country and Great Britain by being unable to cast aside his “strong anti-British prejudice” and instead “nourishing the war-spirit.”<sup>66</sup> In Auchinleck’s text, Jefferson’s successor, Madison, simply “inherited” the “embarrassment” Jefferson had left him, and while he doesn’t believe Madison’s views differed greatly from Jefferson’s, he simply feels the fourth President was a passive figure, influenced by his predecessor and party, lacking any real opinions of his own.<sup>67</sup>

America history was forever changed by the release of Henry Adams’ painstakingly researched *History of the United States 1801-1817*. Adored by many and even called “one of the greatest histories ever written in English” this nine-volume text was described as “remarkable for its fullness of detail, its penetrating insight, and above all its strong, lively, and ironic style.” Adams’ text not only dominated the historiography of the War of 1812 for nearly a century, but essentially every piece of American history during 1801-1817, leading historians to declare

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Gilbert Auchinleck, p.12.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.22.

nearly a century after its publication that “Probably no other period of American history has been so long dominated by the work of a single historian.”<sup>68</sup> As one may expect, this led to certain conflicts when attempting to divide fact from Henry Adam’s biased personal opinion of historical figures that he attempted to portray in his text.

Understanding the man Henry Adams was, is essential to understanding Adams’ work. Despite its bias, the text was so well researched it quickly grew in popularity, causing it to influence many and leave a lasting effect on how modern Americans perceived many events that occurred during this time period.<sup>69</sup> Biographer David S. Brown explained in his 2020 biography of Henry Adams, that by understanding the person Adams was, a man he described as a “transitional figure who bridged the chasm between colonial and modern” we can understand much about the “movement in the late nineteenth century toward an imperial, industrial identity, one both increasingly beholden to technology and concerned with the fate of the white race.”<sup>70</sup> Brown was also sure to emphasize often to his readers that Adams was a “significant, yet flawed American thinker.”<sup>71</sup>

According to Brown, Henry Adams did not initially set out to follow the path of a scholar, instead he had hoped to follow the path set for him by previous Adams men, into a lifelong career in public service. Adams benefited greatly from his family’s political dynasty, believing he possessed an almost aristocratic type right to his own political greatness. However, Adams unpopular stance on the rights of former slaves along with his openly antisemitic views, caused an impassable fracture between him and the Republican party. Brown asserted that

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<sup>68</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, “Henry Adams on Jefferson The President.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 39, no. 2 (1963): 187–201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26440302>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> David S. Brown, in *The Last American Aristocrat: The Brilliant Life and Improbable Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 2.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Adams had been “curiously incapable of recognizing the humanity of the former slaves,” and in fact noted that Adams had written that it was “unconstitutional to award citizenship or civil rights to freedmen.”<sup>72</sup> Brown concluded that Adams’ “inability to read congressional Reconstruction as a moral struggle rather than a political blunder testified to a deeper private indifference in regard to race.”<sup>73</sup>

Adams’ reputation is still tarnished by his racist beliefs today, with a recent article in the *New York Times*, concluding that “dynastic burden shaped the personality and career of the brilliant, bitter and thoroughly unlikable man who brought the prominence of the Adams family, and expectations for the endurance of political legacies, to an ignominious end.”<sup>74</sup>

Adams’ interpretation of the cause of the War of 1812 was unique in that he seemed “to have been the first to recognize that an interpretation of the causes of the War of 1812 almost exclusively on the basis of maritime matters was an oversimplification” which ultimately resulted in a “distortion” on the current interpretation of events.<sup>75</sup>

Understanding Adams’ interpretation of Thomas Jefferson as a man was essential in understanding the conclusions he came to concerning the decisions that were made within the Jefferson presidency. Adams described Jefferson as follows: “[his] nature was feminine; he was more refined than many women...he was sensitive, affectionate, and, in his own eyes, heroic. He yearned for love and praise as no other great American ever did. He hated the clergy chiefly because he knew that from them, he could expect neither love nor praise, perhaps not even

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<sup>72</sup> Amy S. Greenberg, “The Brilliant, Bitter, Unlikable Scion of an American Political Dynasty,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 24, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/books/review/the-last-american-aristocrat-henry-adams-david-s-brown.html>.

<sup>73</sup> David S. Brown, p.98.

<sup>74</sup> Amy S. Greenberg, “The Brilliant, Bitter, Unlikeable Scion of an American Political Dynasty”.

<sup>75</sup> Warren H. Goodman, “The Origins of the War of 1812: A Survey of Changing Interpretations,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 28, no. 2 (1941): p. 171, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1896211>.

forbearance.”<sup>76</sup> Adams’ disdain for Jefferson’s (what he believed) to be inappropriate “feminine” ways prove Adams’ was firm in his belief that Jefferson possessed severe character deficits which prevented him from being an effectual leader. Adams also wrote that at least in the onetime presented, Jefferson’s character flaws prevented him from performing his presidential duties.

To support this accusation, he referenced a letter from Jefferson to Monroe in which Jefferson expressed that “the six months’ session has worn me down to a state of almost total incapacity for business.”<sup>77</sup> Further criticizing Jefferson, Adams’ explained “he had brought the country to a situation where war was impossible for want of weapons, and peace was only a name for passive war... for the first time in seven years American democracy, struck with sudden fear of failure, looked to him in doubt and trembled for its hopes.”<sup>78</sup> Hoping to solidify his accusations against Jefferson, Adams quoted the former Speaker of the House, Nathaniel Macon who wrote of Jefferson “every able diplomatist is not fit to be President,” after learning of Jefferson’s second presidential win. Adams criticized Jefferson’s supporters as well and argued that they gave Jefferson “warmth and undisputed regard” no matter what the matter at hand may be.<sup>79</sup>

Adams’ work was also unique in that for the first time the impact that Jefferson’s embargo had on causing the war was thoroughly examined. Before this time, historians and politicians who examined and wrote about the war often ignored just how large a part the embargo had played, mostly due to the fact that those originally writing the histories had been

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<sup>76</sup> Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America 1801- 1817*, ed. Earl N. Harbert (New York, NY: Library of America, 1986), 324.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p.1082.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1083.

somewhat influenced by personal relationships they shared with Jefferson, Madison, and even Monroe. The initial response by American historians was a regurgitation of James Madison's war message, and the initial response from British historians was to immediately defend the actions that had been taken by the British government. Adams attempted to explain what exactly went wrong with Jefferson's embargo plan. Adams asserted that although Jefferson's "intriguing" new policy of peaceable coercion, the withholding of America's neutral commerce as a means of enforcing justice on the warring powers of Europe had been Jefferson's most "famous experiment in statescraft" with Adams noting that "he was a theorist prepared to risk the fate of mankind on the chance of reasoning, far from certain of its details"<sup>80</sup>

Adams did not seem to find fault with Jefferson's embargo, in theory. In fact, he likened it to the Berlin and Milan Decrees of France, as well as compared it to England's Orders in Council. Where Henry Adams did find fault was in the "ending" of the embargo. Adams then concluded that a resolution from his grandfather, Senator Adams, that sought to "appoint a committee to consider and report when the embargo could be taken off and vessels permitted to arm" had been "silently rejected" by congress.<sup>81</sup> However, Adams was sure to detail in his text how Jefferson's government completely failed at enforcing the embargo with its own citizens, with Adams specifically detailing the extent of illegal trade on Lake Champlain. In the hopes of increasing adherence to the embargo's restrictions, the administration did eventually resort to using military power against its citizens.<sup>82</sup>

While Adams made sure to thoroughly detail each and every fault he found with Thomas Jefferson as both a leader and a man, Henry Adams did still manage to acknowledge several

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<sup>80</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, "Henry Adams on Jefferson The President." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 39, no. 2 (1963): 187–201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26440302>.

<sup>81</sup> Adams, p.1054.

<sup>82</sup> Adams, p.1099.

aspects of Jefferson's vision for the young nation that he admired. Adams wrote that "Jefferson aspired beyond the ambition of a nationality and embraced in his view the whole future of man. That the United States should become a nation like France, England, or Russia, should conquer the world like Rome, or develop a typical race like the Chinese, was no part of his scheme."<sup>83</sup> Adams continued, noting that Jefferson "wished to create a new era" envisioning "a time when the world's ruling interest should cease to be local and should become universal; when questions of boundaries and nationality should become insignificant, when armies and navies should be reduced to the work of police" and concluded that Jefferson had been "eager to put his vision into reality."<sup>84</sup> Adams briefly addressed issues that historians covered later in this essay focused on, such as expansionism and native relations, however they were quickly dismissed with the author concluding that "nothing warranted a belief that Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin would ever seek a quarrel with England."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 344.



## **Chapter 2: Changing Interpretations**

The Twenty sixth President of the United States Theodore Roosevelt, at the time a young scholar, became perplexed at the currently available historical accounts of the War of 1812 and attempted to offer an “impartial account of the war.”<sup>86</sup> Roosevelt described what he saw as the “almost hopeless task” of “reconciling the many and widely contradictory statements” that had been made concerning various aspects of the war. Roosevelt specifically referenced the work of British author William James, and his *Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812*. Roosevelt argued that James’ work was both “an invaluable work, written with fulness and care” as well as “a piece of special pleading by a bitter and not over-scrupulous partisan.”<sup>87</sup> While Roosevelt appreciated the depth of James’ research, he found some difficulties accepting some of the glaring impartialities that plagued James’ text.

Newly graduated from Harvard, Roosevelt hoped to establish himself as a military historian by producing a text that examined “much of the material in our Navy Department that has never been touched at all.”<sup>88</sup> Arguing that “In short, no full, accurate and unprejudiced history of the war has ever been written.”<sup>89</sup> While Roosevelt’s interest was in detailing the naval battles that had occurred during the war, he also spent a significant amount of time addressing what he believed to be the cause of the war.

Roosevelt concluded that the entirety of fault lay on England, with impressment being the main reason in his mind. In an attempt to stay true to his original promise of providing an unbiased account of the events, Roosevelt sought to support his theory of maritime grievances causing the war by quoting prominent Englishmen who supported his theory, that England had

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<sup>86</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812: A Complete History* (New York: Putnam, 1902), iii.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p.iv.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p.v.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*.

indeed violated sovereign nations trading rights. Roosevelt first turned to British Admiral Cochrane's "Autobiography of a Seaman" in which the admiral wrote "our treatment of America's citizens was scarcely in accordance with the national privilege to which the young Republic had become entitled... and generally treating them as though they were engaged in contraband trade."<sup>90</sup>

Roosevelt added an interesting grievance onto his list, when he wrote that he believed the United States should have "undoubtedly" declared war against France as well, noting that none of the British "acts were more offensive than Napoleon's Milan decree."<sup>91</sup> As Roosevelt interpreted the situation, he believed that maritime grievances had undoubtedly been the cause, but he also concluded that the United States had simply been used as a pawn between England and France, a weapon that could be used by one belligerent European nation to cause harm to the other. However, Roosevelt concluded that rather than adopt a measure that had initially been proposed in Congress to declare war on both nations, we "chose a [single] foe, the one that had done, and could still do us the greatest injury."<sup>92</sup> Historian Nicole Eustace explained "Centennial anniversaries provide unique opportunities for commemorating the past while characterizing the present."<sup>93</sup> This adage proved to be true, as the centennial of the war drew the interest of new historians who hoped to make sense of what the causes of the war had been.

In 1911 Howard T. Lewis was the first to look outside maritime disagreements as the main cause of the war and published his brief article "A Reanalysis of the Causes of the War of 1812." Puzzled by the strong southern and western support for the war, Lewis argued that the

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<sup>90</sup> Roosevelt, p.4.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Nicole Eustace, Paul Gilje, Matthew Rainbow Hale, Cecilia Morgan, Jason M. Opal, Lawrence A. Peskin, and Alan Taylor. "Interchange: The War of 1812." *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 2 (2012): 520–55.

maritime causes did not directly affect southern and western citizens and concluded the “maritime theory” failed to explain why these two groups led the fight in Congress to declare war on England.<sup>94</sup> Historian Warren H. Goodman wrote that Lewis “sought the reason for the bellicose attitude of that section.”<sup>95</sup> Howard T. Lewis concluded that the war “was carried out when the West began to covet Canada’s agricultural land reserves.”<sup>96</sup> Lewis’ article was criticized by his colleagues as it was brief and lacked detail, however Lewis’ conclusion that “the key to the situation was to be found in the imperative demand for more territory into which the western immigrant might go and still be within the jurisdiction of the United States” proved to make its mark within the historiography of the war.

In 1925 Professor Julius Pratt from Rutgers University sought a new, fully developed perspective, influenced by the questions raised in Howard T. Lewis’ article. Pratt saw a disconnect when he attempted to explain why certain regions of the United States supported the war while others opposed. In what he described as a paradox Pratt explained “If the real grievances which caused the war were interferences of Great Britain with American commerce and the rights of American sailors, why was war to redress those grievances opposed by the maritime section of the nation and urged by the inland section, which [England] scarcely affected?”<sup>97</sup> Pratt credited F.J. Turner’s 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” as the muse for his theory on the causes of the war. Pratt argued that prior to Turner’s publication, historians has regarded the frontier “as little more than a picturesque phase in the national development” and after reading it they saw that the “West has come to be

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<sup>94</sup> Gurston D. H. Goldin, “Causation of The War of 1812,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 48, no. 163 (1950):<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23372774>.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Julius W. Pratt, in *Expansionists of 1812* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), p.9.

recognized as the source of many aspects of American character and the determining factor in many American policies.”<sup>98</sup>

Inspired by Turner, Pratt set the following parameters for his study: “to examine the development in the Northwest of the demand for the conquest and annexation of Canada; to trace the rise in the South and Southwest of the plan to annex the Floridas and possibly Mexico; to discover the relations of these two proposals to each other and to the question of war with Great Britain; to determine the position of the executive branch of the United States government (especially of Madison and his Secretary of State, Monroe) towards the plans for expansion.”<sup>99</sup> What Pratt concluded in his study was that the war had presented a unique opportunity for both the North and South to grow somewhat proportionally at the same time. This would theoretically then prevent a political imbalance that could potentially threaten one political party and would therefore hopefully obviate any objections in Congress. In theory this would have solved the problems being faced by members from both sides of the political aisles, allowing them to answer the calls of their constituents to increase land without sacrificing any imbalances to their political opponents.<sup>100</sup>

Pratt’s work also focused the spotlight on what he described as the “savage tribes” and the difficulties faced by Americans because of the benefits the native tribes received from their relations with the British.<sup>101</sup> During debates in the House, Thomas Hartly of Pennsylvania attempted to convince his colleagues of the seriousness of the native “problem”, exclaiming “The American is convinced, that she [Britain] has supported the Indians in their war against us.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>101</sup> Pratt, p.20.

Ammunition and arms they certainly obtained from British agents or factors.”<sup>102</sup> Pratt continued, arguing that at the time Americans were fearful of what he described as an “Indian Menace” emerging from out west.

Two Native American brothers by the name of Tecumseh and The Prophet had recently become very successful in their endeavor to create an Indian Confederacy, or rather an agreement between several large tribes to ban together to save their lands, creating fear and panic amongst American settlers. Pratt argued that the rise of the “Indian Menace” out west caused a “general conviction on the part of the whites that the plans of Tecumseh and the Prophet were really hostile to the United States.”<sup>103</sup> Pratt continued, arguing that this growing problem along with the “strong suspicion that the British were lending sympathy and support to these Indian leaders who sought to make their resistance to land sales a dam in the progress of the great waters of the white advance ”would ultimately result in a war, whether Americans liked it or not.”<sup>104</sup>

While he had acknowledged that Indiana Governor William Henry Harrison, the “representative of American justice and benevolence towards the Indians” had a respectful friendship with General Sir Isaac Brock, the Major-General of Lower Canada, Pratt also noted that the British had simply fooled the Indiana Governor with a false friendship. Pratt explained that while General Brock wrote to Harrison that he had “implicitly told [the native tribes] not to look for assistance from us” it had simply been a part of a particularly evil British policy, its purpose being to “allow time for the consolidation of [Tecumseh’s Confederacy] that the aid of

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid, p.21.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p.42.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

the Indians might be more effective when needed.”<sup>105</sup> The Battle of Tippecanoe in November of 1811, a Battle waged by Governor Harrison on Tecumseh’s Prophetstown home, was what brought the “West to an eagerness for war,” Pratt explained.<sup>106</sup>

While Harrison was able to obliterate the village, and deliver a temporary blow to Tecumseh’s Confederacy, the soldiers’ blood that was shed there enraged Americans. Future President and soon to be War of 1812 hero, Andrew Jackson angrily scolded Harrison, demanding that “the blood of our murdered countrymen must be revenged! I do hope that Government will see that it is necessary to act efficiently and that this hostile band which must be excited to war by the secret agents of Great Britain must be destroyed.”<sup>107</sup>

While Pratt presented several interesting points in his text, it is important to emphasize that Pratt himself explained in his introduction that he wanted to approach the causes of the War of 1812 specifically through the lens of F.J. Turner’s work, placing a particular focus on westward expansion as the cause of the war. Pratt also explained that his work made “no effort to give a full account of the causes of the War of 1812 but deals with one set of causes only.”<sup>108</sup> He continued noting “the exclusion from all but briefest mention of the maritime grievances against Great Britain is with no wish to belittle them. Without them, it is safe to say, there would have been no war.”<sup>109</sup> It is important to also note that Pratt’s work was the first to place expansionist ideals on the inhabitants of the Southern United States.

In 1931 George Rogers Taylor responded to Pratt’s article, offering another answer to the question of why westerns and southerners “led the charge” for a war against England in 1812. In

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.48.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Pratt, p.48.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

his article “Agrarian Discontent In the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812” Taylor concluded that historians had not fully understood the issue at hand. Taylor wrote “the attitude of the western settler can hardly be evaluated without an understanding of his economic position. He was, after all, typically an ambitious farmer.”<sup>110</sup> Taylor continued, explaining that the Louisiana purchase had made the western lands a “veritable promise land” however, the trade disagreements between England, France, and the United States forced prices of produce so low that when these farmers went to market they saw their “venture was a failure.”<sup>111</sup> These market conditions had been the result of Jefferson’s Embargo and Non-Intercourse acts, but Taylor explained that these “peaceful methods” were viewed by many as necessary weapons against “the European belligerents”<sup>112</sup> Taylor concluded when peaceful methods failed “the hopeful settlers of earlier years became the War Hawks of 1812.”<sup>113</sup>

Unsatisfied with where the historiography on the causes of the war of 1812 was heading, historian Warren H. Goodman wrote “The Origins of the War of 1812: A Survey of Changing Interpretations” in 1941. Goodman’s work focused on the effect that Henry Adam’s work had on the interpretations of what caused the war. Goodman asserted that “the two decades following the publication of Adam’s work form[ed] a period of confusion in the history of the interpretation of the War of 1812.”<sup>114</sup> Quoting Roosevelt’s take on the interpretations of the cause of the war, “The grounds of the war were singularly uncertain” Goodman argued that the main fruits of Adam’s efforts were “a feeling of insecurity on the part of those historians who

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<sup>110</sup> George Rogers Taylor, “Agrarian Discontent in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812,” *Journal of Political Economy* 39, no. 4 (1931): p.471.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Warren H. Goodman, p.184.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

took their stand on the maritime rights interpretation.”<sup>115</sup> While Goodman noted that Henry Adams’ work was “sufficiently influenced by the traditional interpretation” explaining that Adams argued “had Great Britain revoked the Orders in Council in March 1812, no war could have taken place, unless it were a war with France” Goodman also shone a light on the fact that “Adams was the first to imply that the plan for the conquest of Canada had been a contributing cause of the war rather than a method of carrying on a struggle undertaken for other reasons.”<sup>116</sup> Goodman continued, writing that “Adams seem[d] to have been the first to recognize that an interpretation of the causes of the War of 1812 almost exclusively on the basis of maritime matters was an oversimplification and, consequently, a distortion....his own treatment of the subject was rather a modified acceptance of the orthodox thesis than abandonment of it.”<sup>117</sup> Specifically, Goodman wanted to show the glaring faults he saw within Howard T. Lewis, Julius Pratt and George Rodger Taylor’s work.

Goodman asserted that “in 1911 historians came to a fork in the hitherto single road to an understanding of the cause of the war of 1812. Howard T. Lewis set out in a direction which had not been travelled before when he declared that the war had been fought mainly because the West coveted the agricultural land reserves of Canada.”<sup>118</sup> As suggested in this essay, Lewis argued that the maritime rights explanation failed to explain why the war was supported by southerners and westerners. Lewis concluded that “the key to the situation was to be found in the imperative demand for more territory into which the western immigrant might go and still be within the jurisdiction and protection of the United States.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Goodman, p.174.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.



While Goodman acknowledged that “it cannot be denied that the War of 1812 was less popular in New York and New England...to consider the struggle [for war] solely a project of the West is laboring the point...that section alone could not have mustered the 79 votes cast in the House of Representatives.”<sup>120</sup> Goodman also argued that historians treating the conquest of Canada as a newly adopted idea that had originated in the west failed to note that “the conquest of Canada was widely discussed and openly advocated in the South as early as the summer of 1807,” using a toast from Richmond on July 4, 1807 in which a man toasted “the memory of General Montgomery who nobly perished under the walls of Quebec. Equal glory and better fortune to these heroes who man soon have to follow in his footsteps.”<sup>121</sup> Goodman’s footnotes on the matter show that the toast had been printed in the *Enquirer* on July 24, 1807, with one editor who “went so far as to present a detailed plan for military operation against Canada.”<sup>122</sup> Goodman’s conclusion showed that there was proof such an idea had already permeated throughout southern society years before westerners had expressed any desire to expand territory.

Next, Goodman set out to disprove Julius Pratt’s theory that the southern and western support for the war was due to expansionist efforts and fears concerning the potential threat from Tecumseh’s confederacy, believed to be instigated by British agitators. For this, Goodman firstly conceded that these were generally understood to be “contributing causes.”<sup>123</sup> However, he argued that those praising Pratt’s work failed to heed Pratt’s own warning, that the text “ma[de] no effort to give a full account of the causes of the War of 1812, but deals with one set of

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p.176.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p.177.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.179.

causes only.”<sup>124</sup> Goodman continued, writing “granting the tenability of Pratt’s conclusions in their entirety, the quest for a well-integrated presentation of the causes of the war is not ended. A long step in the right direction has been made, but the task of fitting Pratt’s one set of causes into the whole picture remains to be done.”<sup>125</sup>

In response to George Rogers Taylor, Goodman recognized the value of Taylor’s contribution to the historiography of the causes of the war. He wrote “Taylor had shown that the British orders and French decrees caused a contraction of the market for western staples and, consequently, a decline in prices and an economic depression. The westerner believed his economic hardship could be alleviated by forcing a repeal.”<sup>126</sup> While Goodman did not dispute Taylor’s work, he concluded that like Pratt “Taylor’s conclusions must be considered in the light of his own statement that he was dealing with but one set of causes and that factors other than those emphasized in his study undoubtedly played a part in bringing on the war.”<sup>127</sup> In fact, Goodman noted that Taylor’s argument proved how westerners were, contrary to what many historians had written before, directly affected by the maritime issues that existed at the time.<sup>128</sup>

Goodman ended his article abruptly, almost angrily, clearly showing his frustrations and calling for a “complete reexamination of the sources.”<sup>129</sup> Goodman concluded that “the foregoing survey hardly explains the genesis of the War of 1812. Until a definitive study of the sources is made, historians will have to be content with [Woodrow] Wilson’s statement that the grounds of the war were singularly uncertain.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Goodman, p.179.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p.180.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p.183.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p.185.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p.186.

Professor Alfred Leroy Burt, a Canadian historian, emerged challenging the “departure from maritime causes.”<sup>131</sup> Burt vehemently opposed the emerging viewpoints of the time, such as Julius Pratt’s, that blamed Native Americans and western aims for the war. Burt’s work had been in publication, being released right around the time as Goodman’s article, but the fact that the two historians came to similar conclusions at the same time, shows not only the merit their theories held, but also confirms the trend that occurred in the historiography of the causes of the war during this time period. Burt primarily argued that theories such as Pratt’s did not give enough weight to the events that were occurring between France and England during this time period.<sup>132</sup> A.L. Burt wrote “Issues and the Evolution of Causes of the War of 1812” with the mission of refuting Pratt’s thesis, that Western aims and “native aggressors” were what caused the war. Instead, Burt returned to a more classic view, arguing that impressment and trade aggressions were the cause. His approach focused on examining a larger world view. Burt explained “To understand the French decrees and the British Orders-in-Council we should remember that they accompanied the approach of the supreme crisis in the life and death struggle between the two powers which were then by far the greatest on earth.”<sup>133</sup> In essence, Burt argued the United States was caught in the middle with both “belligerents coercing neutrals to serve its own end.”<sup>134</sup> A.L. Burt’s text attempted to remain neutral, hoping to explain how certain events could have felt as if belligerent nations were attempting to take advantage of the United States’ neutrality. Burt’s text supplied his readers with a variety of primary sources with a focus on British primary sources.

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<sup>131</sup> Clifford L. Egan, “The Origins of the War of 1812: Three Decades of Historical Writing,” *Military Affairs* 38, no. 2 (1974): p. 72.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> George Rogers Taylor, *The War of 1812: Past Justifications and Present Interpretations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 69.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p.69.

Burt wrote quite bluntly that the fault, in fact, lay squarely on Napoleon's shoulders. His "fantastic" inverted blockade, which was ordered to seize all British goods "and also under pain of confiscation, the exclusion of every ship that touched at a British port" effectively denied Britain access "to the European market on which her economic life depended."<sup>135</sup> Burt asserted that this "Continental System" Napoleon created was sure to destroy the British nation as they were completely dependent on the manufacturing of goods and trading them to survive, noting that "the Orders-In-Council were her desperate reply."<sup>136</sup>

The Orders-In-Council, Burt charged, made "the position of neutrals impossible."<sup>137</sup> Burt explained that the "real issue was the Continental System. Would they cooperate with Napoleon in upholding it, or with Britain in undermining it?"<sup>138</sup> Neutral American merchant vessels "could not approach any European port that was under Napoleon's sway without being liable to seizure, either outside by a ship of the Royal Navy or inside by Napoleon's officials; inside, if it had touched at a British port, or had procured British papers; outside, if it had not."<sup>139</sup> Burt explained the impossibility of the situation, writing "It was a choice between the devil and the deep sea."<sup>140</sup>

Burt continued, explaining that while "both belligerents this time flouted the United States" with both being "equally oppressive; but practically, legally, and psychologically they were not. Britain's control of the sea, being greater than Napoleon's control of the land, gave her greater power of enforcement."<sup>141</sup> Until this point, Burt placed both belligerents at fault with the

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p.71.

majority of fault falling on Napoleon. However, Burt wrote that there were significant legal differences in the search and seizure of neutral ships. Burt claimed that England's "seizures were made at sea and therefore, according to her own admission, were a violation of neutral rights under international law."<sup>142</sup> Napoleon's search and seizures, on the other hand, occurred almost exclusively in ports "within the undoubted jurisdiction of his own or a subordinate government."<sup>143</sup>

Burt wrote that "Americans were convinced that Britain was abusing her temporary belligerent rights to serve her permanent economic interest and that in doing so she was furtively dealing a dangerous blow at their country. They saw her trying, under cover of the war, to monopolize the commerce of the world."<sup>144</sup> Burt attempted to explain some of the decisions that came out of Britain, noting that the British were "exasperated by the paradox of their position" in hopes of reminding readers that the British did not act out of aggression.<sup>145</sup> He continued, writing "Never had they possessed such complete control of the sea, yet more than ever the sea-borne trade of the enemy was escaping from their grasp."<sup>146</sup>

The Americans, however, did not share Burt's perspective. Burt argued that the "Royal Navy was supreme...and she held the world in fee. It is not surprising, therefore, that non-British eyes saw in the orders-in-council a new and ruthless protection of old and selfish British design." This was where the cause of the war truly fell, in Burt's eyes. The Orders-In-Council "were particularly offensive. The reason for their peculiar sensitiveness lay in their own history:

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p.71.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p.71

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p.71.

they were being forced back into the dependence of colonial days.”<sup>147</sup> Burt summarized what he believed the cause of the War of 1812 was in one succinct sentence: “American Independence was at Stake!”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p.72.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p.72.

### **Chapter 3: The Sixties Renews Interest**

Bradford Perkins published his text *Prologue to War* in 1961. As noted in his preface, Perkins wrote that he sought to answer Warren H. Goodman's call for "a comprehensive work on the subject ...to correlate and synthesize the various sets of causes."<sup>149</sup> Perkins succeeded in his work, which was hailed by other scholars as "the most sweeping monograph published in decades".<sup>150</sup> A Harvard graduate, Perkins was an American historian whose father was also a historian who studied the same time period.<sup>151</sup> Perkins criticized his predecessors, and claimed that "notably, no scholar since Henry Adams has examined more than the most obvious English materials."<sup>152</sup> Perkins argued that this had been a fatal flaw in historical interpretations and that he had "therefore devoted much of [his] attention to the development of British policy, virtually caricatured by too many American historians."<sup>153</sup> Perkins described where he found holes in the previous historiography, arguing "previous interpretations...seem to me inadequate. I believe scholars have overemphasized the tangible, rational reasons for action and, while not ignoring, have given too little heed to such things as nation pride, sensitivity, and frustration."<sup>154</sup>

Perkins continued, noting that his work centered around one common thesis, that "the American search for national respectability and true independence from Europe" noting that "relations with Britain form[ed] the most important part of this theme" and also explaining that "relations with Spain and many parts of Franco-American relations, which would have

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<sup>149</sup> Perkins, vii.

<sup>150</sup> Clifford L. Egan, "The Origins of the War of 1812: Three Decades of Historical Writing." *Military Affairs* 38, no. 2 (1974): 72–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1987240>.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), vii.

<sup>153</sup> Bradford Perkins, vii.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

complicated the main story.”<sup>155</sup> Perkins spent a large portion of his preface detailing the sources used for his work, which most notably included the use of materials from the Royal Archives, something that Perkins noted had not been done before.<sup>156</sup> Perkins wrote that the two of the most important historical studies were those of Henry Adams and Alfred L. Burt.<sup>157</sup> Perkins also explained where he believed his predecessors fell short. While acknowledging that “no student of these years can fail to owe a great debt to Henry Adams” Perkins exquisitely explained Adams’ shortcomings, noting that “Adams is almost unreservedly hostile toward the Republican leaders and, as Irving Brant has shown, is not above shading the evidence in a fashion modern historians would consider improper.”<sup>158</sup>

Acknowledging the contribution Adams had made with his examination of British manuscripts, Perkins wrote that Adams’ “attitude toward England is colored with the nationalism of the period in which he wrote.”<sup>159</sup> As previously written about in this essay, one may also safely come to the conclusion that Adams’ beliefs were most likely not only shaped by the time in which he wrote, but also by the beliefs of his ancestors. As far as Burt was concerned, Perkins explained that “his work, with a few exceptions on the British side, rests primarily on printed materials, both primary and secondary. His judgements are judicious, but Burt perhaps fails to capture the emotional fire of the period.”<sup>160</sup> In fact, Perkins criticized most of his colleagues, arguing that “historians of Anglo- American relations have far less frequently exploited British manuscripts.”<sup>161</sup> Perkins also noted that “the position of Spencer Perceval and his allies has

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p.viii.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, p.439.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>160</sup> Perkins, p.440.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, p.443.



recently become much more understandable with the gathering of the premier's papers" which Perkins had been granted access to through the Queen.<sup>162</sup> Perkins discussed the "War Hawks" a clique of young republicans who repeatedly and loudly called for war, however Perkins concluded that "national honor was the War Hawks' central concern."<sup>163</sup>

Perkins explained that the "war came, not because of the President, but despite him... The war came, not for any single reason, but from the interplay of many. The nation did not want war, and surely it did not embark gleefully on a great crusade. Tired of the self-flagellation and the disgrace that had marked the yeards since 1805, propelled by the fear of ridicule for inconsistency and by an honest interest in the nation's honor, a sufficient number of congressmen allowed themselves to support war."<sup>164</sup> After extensive examination of primary sources from both nations, Bradford Perkins concluded that while "neither side sought the War of 1812, in the short run it was tragically unnecessary."<sup>165</sup>

While examining the current historical trends of the 1960s, historian Irwin Unger explained how "social sciences have profoundly influenced complex views of the past...enabling the new generation of historians to obscure conflict in America by psychoanalyzing it."<sup>166</sup> Unger argued that this "shift in analysis of conflict reduced the emotional charge of past historical events" making it more difficult to separate the "heroes" from the "villains."<sup>167</sup> When examining the context of Perkins' conclusion, it is clear that the trends in 1960s American historiography

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p.444.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p.347.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Perkins, p.426.

<sup>166</sup> Irwin Unger, "The 'New Left' and American History: Some Recent Trends in United States Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (1967) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1847792>, 1240.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

influenced how Perkins interpreted the actions of the British, forcing him to see their side of the conflict and the struggle for England's existence against Napoleon.

English born historian Reginald Horsman's 1962 text *The Causes of the War of 1812* was also critical of the historiography that so far existed concerning the causes of the war. Horsman believed that one fatal atrocity had been committed by the American historians, they had failed to look outside their own shores, and he continued the trend of post Goodman scholars hoping to find the cause of the war outside of the United States. Horsman charged "previous historians" (a statement that appears to be directed at Julius Pratt and his *Expansionists of 1812*) with placing far too large of an overemphasis on western expansion as a cause for the War. While noting the "considerable effort" previous authors had put forth to "differentiate between a number of possible American causes," Horsman asserted that the true cause had been completely passed by.<sup>168</sup>

Horsman thoroughly examined many sources from both United States politicians, as well as British diplomats and came to one conclusion. While Pratt had been correct that "a bitter anger arose in America at Indian hostilities" and he had also been correct that "the idea of conquering Canada had been present," Horsman argued that "the conquest of Canada was primarily a means of waging war, not a reason for starting it."<sup>169</sup> Horsman continued, concluding his work with the following bold statement: "British policy, though influenced by jealousy of American commercial growth, stemmed primarily from the necessity of waging war against France. Had there been no war with France, there would have been no Orders in Council, no impressment, and, in all probability, no War of 1812."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 263.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, p.267.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*.

While Horsman's argument reflected many of the same sentiments that had recently been written by Gilbert Auchinleck, Horsman's work did reflect the pattern of change at the time that was also seen in Bradford Perkin's work. Both historians seemed to have been set on attempting to reconcile both American and British actions, and also sought to severely decrease the emphasis on western aims as the cause, reminding historians to heed the warning Pratt had placed in his own work.<sup>171</sup>

In 1964, Roger H. Brown's *The Republic in Peril: 1812* was published. Brown's work had not only been inspired by the recent trend called for by Goodman to re-examine the sources on the cause for the war, but also by another trend in historiography. In his preface, Brown acknowledged a recent article from historian Cecelia Kenyon, "Republicanism and Radicalism in the American Revolution: An Old-Fashioned Interpretation." Brown wrote that Kenyon's article had inspired his thoughts in his text by "suggesting the importance of republicanism in the American Revolution."<sup>172</sup> Through this new lens, Brown argued that his text worked in conjunction with Kenyon's, "reinforcing" one another and that they "form a coherent pattern of new interpretation in the history of the Revolutionary and early national periods."<sup>173</sup> As for Brown's belief on what led to the declaration of war in 1812, Brown noted that his work "shows for the first time how republicanism and concern for the republican experiment led to the American decision to declare war on Great Britain in 1812."<sup>174</sup> Brown also cautioned his readers that his work did "not attempt to be a full account of the diplomatic controversy that led to war nor of the political and parliamentary maneuvering that produced the final war declaration."<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Roger H Brown, *The Republic in Peril 1812* (New York: Norton, 1971), viii.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

While using his “republicanism” lens, Brown claimed that Jeffersonian republicans “felt a heavy responsibility in challenging British and French maritime practices.”<sup>176</sup> Brown continued, declaring that “In their eyes the prestige of the Republic and of their own party depended on protection of American commerce against the restrictions and seizures of the European belligerents. They could have imagined no more momentous a task.”<sup>177</sup> As Brown saw it, President Jefferson, and the current Secretary of State at the time, James Madison, “were confidant” that their embargo would “instill respect for [America’s] maritime rights.”<sup>178</sup>

Brown also devoted his conclusion to illustrate the many ways the nation had been so divided along party lines during its formative years. He described what he called a “party conflict” that was a “very different phenomenon from today’s political contests between Democrats and Republicans...spirit of part ran high, divided families, neighborhoods, towns & states” with Brown even describing weddings and funerals that were boycotted due to mixing of people with differing political beliefs.<sup>179</sup> While Brown’s work may not have entirely been focused on refuting the specific trends of historiography that were occurring amongst those studying the causes of the War of 1812, his work does an excellent job on focusing his reader on the political animosity that existed at the time.

In 1965, military history professor Harry L. Coles published his text *The War of 1812*. Following the path of recent historians, Coles opened his work with the following statement “the War of 1812 resulted from the unsuccessful efforts of the United States to maintain its interests and its honor in a world divided into two-armed camp. Both in its origins and in the way it was fought, the war was an outgrowth of a General European conflict that raged from 1793 to

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Brown, p.179.

1815.”<sup>180</sup> Coles continued, writing that although the reasons for the coming of the war were “many and complicated,” his also noted that while “historians are by no means in agreement on the relative weight to be attributed to various factors, they have in general discussed two sets of causes: maritime grievances and western aims.”<sup>181</sup> Like Perkins, Coles reframed the Napoleonic wars, declaring that the British saw their fight as one between good and evil. Attempting to convey the feelings of the British at the time, Coles explained “since Britain fought for the right, it was plainly the duty of other nations, particularly the United States, which owed its very existence to Britain, to subordinate national goals to the interest of the struggle which was being waged on behalf of mankind.”<sup>182</sup> Again, echoing the work of those before him, Coles concluded that the United States became a weapon that one European superpower hoped to wield to attack the other, writing “unable to get at one another directly, each side attempted to bring the enemy to terms by means of economic strangulation.”<sup>183</sup>

What set Coles work apart from the other historiography of this time period was his thoughts on President Thomas Jefferson’s embargo. Coles asserted that “all the founding fathers, whether Federalist or Republican, agreed on a policy of non-involvement in European conflicts.”<sup>184</sup> Coles charged that the politicians at the time believed it extremely likely that they would be pulled into a conflict between the two European nations despite their best efforts to avoid conflict. As such, Coles argued that “they felt that a period of isolation was desirable in order that the United States achieve and maintain freedom of action, freedom to choose, as

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<sup>180</sup> Harry Lewis Coles, *The War of 1812* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

<sup>182</sup> Coles, p.3.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*.

Washington put it, war or peace as their interest might dictate” at least giving them the appearance of having the ability to make their own choice as an independent nation.<sup>185</sup>

Coles also explained why President Jefferson did not adequately prepare for war. To Coles the answer was simple, his “doctrine demanded an alternative to war.”<sup>186</sup> While Federalists called for the nation to ready for war, Coles noted “the Republicans could not accept this because armies and navies meant encouraging militarism, contracts for private business at public expense, and high taxes, all of which they loathed.”<sup>187</sup> While agreeing with previous historians (such as Henry Adams) that the notion of peaceable coercion through an embargo was a “noble experiment” Coles argued that Jefferson’s embargo “accomplished nothing diplomatically but nearly succeeded in turning the American people against one another.”<sup>188</sup> Coles’ work was favored by educators for decades due to its depth of research and readability.

Sensing a need to refocus the historiography, in 1974 Clifford L. Egan published his article “*The Origins of the War of 1812: Three Decades of Historical Writing.*” Egan wrote that his paper had three goals in mind: “to provide a guide to the work that has accumulated since Goodman’s essay, to present the major and minor issues that historians believed figured in the origins of the second Anglo-American conflict, and to suggest further research opportunities.”<sup>189</sup> Egan most importantly acknowledged how Burt’s book had been published at the same time as Goodman’s article, and credited Burt for accomplishing just what Goodman had called for, a full refutation of Pratt’s thesis set forth in his 1925 *Expansionists of 1812*. Egan also praised and criticized Perkins’ work. While acknowledging the depth of Perkins’ British research, Egan

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>189</sup> Clifford L. Egan, “The Origins of the War of 1812: Three Decades of Historical Writing.” *Military Affairs* 38, no. 2 (1974): 72–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1987240>.

noted that western and southern sources were lacking. Egan also claimed that author accepted partisan Federalist views of Jefferson and Madison.<sup>190</sup> As for Reginald Horsman's text, Egan called it "judicious and concise."<sup>191</sup>

A bit before his time, Egan wrote that he had been excited for the attention Madison had been recently receiving for his role in the start of war, explaining that although historians had not been able to "reach a general agreement on Madison," the examination of sources on that subject would prove interesting.<sup>192</sup> Egan noted that the historiography had specifically fallen short in examining Franco-American relations during the Napoleonic era, and called for historians to conduct such a study, one he believed would "place the events prior to 1812 in a new perspective."<sup>193</sup> Nine years later, Egan answered his own call.

Clifford L. Egan's 1983 book *Neither Peace Nor War: Franco-American Relations, 1803-1812* hoped to fill a hole the author saw in the current narrative, and explain France's role in the decision to call for war. Egan concluded that "some observations are in order about the decision for war. A declaration of war was not the miraculous event some historians have portrayed it to be rather the miracle was that American patience with the belligerents lasted so long."<sup>194</sup> Egan continued, explaining that "the primary causes of the War of 1812 were the issues of American national honor, the sense of humiliation suffered at the hands of Great Britain in the forms of impressment and the violation of neutral rights."<sup>195</sup> Egan's work does a brilliant job in explaining how the Americans got caught up in "commercial warfare" between France and

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p.74.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Clifford L. Egan, *Neither Peace Nor War: Franco-American Relations 1803-1812* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 174.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

England, absolving all politicians of any wrongdoing and claiming that no matter what had happened “the longer Anglo-French hostilities endured, the greater the risk became for America because the cross-channel foes would enforce ever more Draconian and confusing economic measures to crush each other.”<sup>196</sup>

In 1983 J.C.A. Stagg published *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic 1783-1830*. This study was unique in that for the first time the focus was heavily turned to Madison, and his involvement in British relations since 1783. Stagg wrote that initially he had hoped to produce a study that examined “the operational histories of [the war's] various military and naval campaigns.”<sup>197</sup> However, the author explained that he soon became “preoccupied with conflicting theories of causation” describing this existing historiography as a “tangled matter.”<sup>198</sup> Stagg wrote that he then decided to research two topics he believed desperately needed to be further explained. Stagg noted the following two questions that inspired his work, “first is why James Madison believed he could win a war against Great Britain, and win it, moreover, by seizing Canada. The second deals with why the war occurred when it did.”<sup>199</sup> Here, Stagg was referencing critics of the maritime theory as the cause of the war of 1812. Many of them argued that if impressment of American sailors had been the main cause of the war, then why had war not been declared when the *Chesapeake* incident had occurred several years prior to the start of the war, especially when many felt the situation had not been properly settled? Stagg's work explained both of these issues thoroughly.

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid, xvi.

<sup>197</sup> J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), ix.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.



Stagg charged Madison with wanting to bring Great Britain to heel by “invading and occupying Great Britain’s Canadian possessions” referencing a letter James Monroe wrote to John Taylor on June 13, 1812, in which Monroe informed Taylor that Canada was seen “not as an object of the war but as a means to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.”<sup>200</sup> The author continued, asserting that Madison had established diplomatic goals for the young nation in the 1790s, writing that his “single most important diplomatic goal” was “American entry into the carrying trade of the British West Indies.”<sup>201</sup> Stagg continued, noting that Madison referenced the effectiveness of a brief embargo passed by Congress in 1794 in letters at the time, relaying his elation that the embargo had quickly led to “very different language from Britain,” as the embargo had caused scarcities of essential supplies in Britain’s West Indies colonies.<sup>202</sup> Stagg wrote that the sugar trade in the West Indies was far too valuable for the British to not concede to the Americans, noting that as this had worked so successfully in 1794, Madison and Jefferson had no reason to believe that their embargo would be any less effective. Stagg concluded that Madison believed he had discovered what could finally destroy the British empire and elevate the position of the Americans in the world, “Madison concluded that Britain could only remain prosperous so long as its navigation could constantly enlarge its markets, monopolize the trade routes of the world, and the rely on the Royal Navy for protection.”<sup>203</sup>

Stagg wrote that “Madison did not want the embargo to give way to war” however, the author also acknowledged that Madison “seriously miscalculated both the unpopularity of the measure in the northern states and the problems of enforcing it.”<sup>204</sup> This, is what the author

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, p.14.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, p.23.

concluded to be behind the cause of Madison's desire to invade Canada. As far as the timing of the war, the author argued that it was merely Madison's hopes that war would never have to be an option. The years that followed the *Chesapeake* incident had been filled with negotiations in an attempt to avoid war at all costs, Stagg argued, noting that Madison even explained to "the British minister that the United States was in no position to commence hostilities."<sup>205</sup> Cementing his argument, Stagg referenced a letter Madison wrote almost a month before his death, to Congressman Charles Jared Ingersoll. The former president, thrilled with recent political events wrote that "Britain could no longer hope to continue [to be] mistress of the seas...the trident, must pass to this hemisphere where it may be hoped it will be less abused than it had been on the other."<sup>206</sup>

Donald R. Hickey's *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, was first published in 1989. Hickey noted in the preface of his text, that he had become interested in the history of the war during the late 1960s when the historiography from the field was being published at a significant rate. Dr. Hickey wrote that his book was an attempt to provide a "needed...broader treatment of the war- one that dealt with politics, diplomacy, economics, and finance as well as battles and campaigns...a study, in other words, that more fully explored Republican politics and their impact on the nation."<sup>207</sup> What made Hickey's work particularly special, was the audience the author had in mind. Hickey wrote that he had hoped the text would serve as a "short, comprehensive study" that would be suitable for "students and others interested in a general overview of the war. Hickey had also hoped his work would prove to be an important study that

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, p.24.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, p.517.

<sup>207</sup> Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), xi.

“reexamines the sources and contains new material...in short, this work is designed to be both a textbook and a monograph and to appeal to generalists and specialists alike.”<sup>208</sup>

As for the causes of the war, Hickey wrote that the reason the War of 1812 remains “our most obscure war” is partly due to the fact “that its causes are shrouded in mystery.”<sup>209</sup> Hickey explained that despite this obscurity, we should not be blinded to the war’s “significance” as he believed the war to have been “an important turning point, a great watershed, in the history of the young republic.”<sup>210</sup> When writing about the cause of the war, rather than present any new ideas, Hickey simply reiterated the current prevailing causes, maritime concerns. As this monograph was intended to be a text that would be accessible to a those from a variety of educational backgrounds, Hickey concisely presents an account of the various decrees and orders that infringed on American trading rights. In the end, Hickey’s work simply echoed what had already been presented by other historians. Criticizing the Americans, Hickey wrote “not only did Republicans misread British intentions, but throughout this turbulent era they consistently overrated America’s ability to win concessions.”<sup>211</sup> As for Hickey’s opinions on the actions of the British, he wrote “her aim was not to subvert American independence but to win the war in Europe. Once this objective was achieved, her infringements on American rights would cease,” again echoing the findings of other historians from two and a half decades earlier.<sup>212</sup>

In an article entitled “The War of 1812 Revisited” War of 1812 historian Reginald Horseman not only revisited his text *The Causes of the War of 1812*, but he also offered an interesting critique of Donald Hickey’s *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. After over three

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid, p.xii.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, p.300.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

decades studying the War, Horseman explained that he had “sometimes wondered if the flow of books and articles on the War of 1812 can possibly be never ending.”<sup>213</sup> He continued, explaining that “the causes of that strange little war have been interpreted, reinterpreted, and reinterpreted by a variety of historians.”<sup>214</sup> His major critique with Hickey’s work was that it lacked any “striking new interpretation” but rather seemed to simply fill the hole Hickey believed to be existing in the historiography at the time, a “modern, broader treatment of the war.”<sup>215</sup>

Horseman critiqued what he called the “least satisfactory part of the book,” the two chapters where Hickey had examined the coming of the War of 1812. Horseman scolded Hickey for his failure to place “his own imprint” when discussing the causes of the war and argued that Hickey had simply “[tried] to achieve a balance between [explaining] the various arguments advanced by earlier historians.”<sup>216</sup> After his critique of what he described as Hickey’s “smorgasbord” approach in analyzing the causes, Horseman noted that he believed Hickey had supported the same argument that Bradford Perkins popularized, which had been that the cause of the war was due to the way the Republicans responded to various foreign affairs crises, specifically the Monroe-Pickney Treaty, Horseman explained.<sup>217</sup> Horseman continued, writing that Hickey had a “problem of perspective” which was “particularly noticeable in the omission of any general attempt to integrate” British perspective in his “American-oriented” research.<sup>218</sup> The only thing that Horseman seemed to have appreciated about Hickey’s monograph, was that it was

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<sup>213</sup> Reginald Horsman, “The War of 1812 Revisited,” *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 1 (1991): pp. 115-124, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1991.tb00122.x>, 118.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

“up to date” with the arguments, while also being accessible to readers of any educational background.

Perhaps a more interesting topic in this article was Reginald Horsman’s reexamination of his own 1960s work, *The Causes of War of 1812*. Horsman explained that “since that time, I have altered some of my views.”<sup>219</sup> Horsman wrote that because “Pratt’s arguments were so persuasive and influential that for forty years historians overreacted in their efforts to place the causes of the war back within the context of the European wars and British maritime policies.”<sup>220</sup> After taking several decades to reflect, Horsman concluded that “I now believe that there were many politicians in the United States who saw the invasion and retention of Canada as a useful side benefit of a war that had become necessary largely because of British maritime policies” showing a meshing of the ideas that had emerged in the 1960s along with the arguments presented by Pratt.<sup>221</sup> Horsman also acknowledged the influence Stagg’s work had on his opinion, writing that his arguments convinced him that Madison and Jefferson found value in the acquisition of Canada. As for the future, Horsman declared that “a regional approach to the war of 1812 era would seem to offer more chances for a new contribution than the Sisyphean labor of constantly reappraising and rearranging the causes.”<sup>222</sup> As time would have it, Horsman was somewhat correct, as the works that were released in the next decades did begin to examine other aspects of the war.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, p.121.

#### **Chapter 4: Bicentennial Anniversary Renews Interest**

While historians in the end of the twentieth and early twenty first century did produce some studies on the War of 1812, these works tended to examine topics that focused on naval and military strategy, rather than attempting to decipher the causes of the war.<sup>223</sup> However, the nearing of the anniversary of the War of 1812 drew fresh perspectives from a new generation of historians. Works in the twenty first century have provided a plethora of new topics concerning the War of 1812. From the involvement of women in the war, to the involvement of slaves vs. freed men, to the involvement of differencing religious groups such as the Baptists, historians seem to be answering Reginald Horsman's call to contribute something "new" to the conversation on the war.

While the new generation tended to focus less on reassessing the causes, a few works that have emerged over the last decade have tended to agree with the idea that "maritime grievances" were at the root of the conflict. These historians seemed to follow a pattern of focusing less attention on Jefferson's involvement, and more starting to scrutinize James Madison's every move for more than a decade before the war. Historians at this time also seem to agree that to some extent "American exceptionalism" played a role not only the declaration, but also the ability of the war to gain popularity and traction with the masses.

In Jeremy Black's *The War of 1812 in The Age of Napoleon*, Black attempted to place the confusion concerning the cause of the war within a larger context. Black noted "in particular, it is necessary to look at the character of American society and public culture, because these explain much about the drive to war and about the nature of the conflict."<sup>224</sup> Black argued that

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<sup>223</sup>Lawrence B.A. Hatter, "Party Like It's 1812: The War at 200," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2012): 90–111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42628248>.

<sup>224</sup>Jeremy Black, *The War of 1812 In The Age of Napoleon* (Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 10.

the cause of the war, while “a matter of historical debate,” was due to “a key element.”<sup>225</sup>

According to Black “Jefferson and others overestimated American power after his success in acquiring Louisiana from France in 1803.”<sup>226</sup> Black continued, noting that “while Jefferson understood the potential of the West and was correct in his long-term appraisal that the USA would become a world power, he mistook Americas marginal leverage in the bipolar dynamic between Britain and France for a situation in which all three were major powers,” a mistake that Black believed caused the embargo disaster, and eventually the war.<sup>227</sup>

As many historians before him had done, Black argued that Jefferson’s student and successor, Madison, “followed his reasoning reflexively.”<sup>228</sup> Black asserted that Jefferson and Madison “saw little reason to compromise,” with both European belligerents, with the men falsely assuming “Britain would back down in the face of American anger and preparations for war.”<sup>229</sup> Black argued that it was at this point that the two men learned “that they could not dictate the pace of events.”<sup>230</sup> In defense of the British, Black wrote that the British did indeed compromise, however it was dismissed as “inadequate” and “too late,” by Madison.<sup>231</sup>

Another important factor that contributed to the start of war in 1812 was, according to Black, due to simple “visceral hatred” between men from both nations. Black blamed both the British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval and the British Foreign Secretary Richard Marquess Wellesley for their “visceral anti-Americanism” as well as Jefferson and Madison for their

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p.33.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, p.34.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

“visceral hatred of Great Britain.”<sup>232</sup> Black charged that the maritime and trade “hostilities” were much more difficult to negotiate due to the history of “harmed relations” that existed between the men at the time.<sup>233</sup> Black wrote that specific animosity between both those in the British and American governments had obviously been festering for decades as they had all been involved in the “bitter” Revolutionary war as adversaries.<sup>234</sup>

Black explained that eventually Madison’s thoughts on the situation changed, mostly due to the “domestic pressures” the resulted from the failed embargo.<sup>235</sup> Black argued that current affairs had led “Jeffersonians to fear for the survival of the republic. Unsuccessful as a tool of foreign policy, non-importation had also resulted in major economic stains, and this was increasing opposition to the government,” which all caused Madison to reverse course.<sup>236</sup> Black wrote that Madison also feared for the future of his party as Federalists seemed to be gaining some traction in elections.<sup>237</sup> Black concluded that Madison was therefore left with only two choices, “back down or force Britain to back down.”<sup>238</sup> Firmly rebuking Madison’s decision, Black argued that Madison “underestimated the risks of the latter and failed to appreciate the prudence of the former.”<sup>239</sup> To Black, it was clear that American exceptionalism led Madison down the wrong path many times, ultimately leading to war.

As for Congress’ support for the war, Black again circled back to his idea of misplaced American confidence. He argued that while the Congressional War Hawks had been fueled by “patriotic anger with British policies” it was also a “very much a planned party measure by the

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, p.36.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, p.37.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.



Republicans.”<sup>240</sup> Black noted that their party outrage was generally geared towards impressment, as it had “been seen as a particular outrage, as it represented an infringement of the national sovereignty of American vessels and a denial of America’s ability to naturalize foreigners.”<sup>241</sup>

Black also took this opportunity to discuss the possibility that Native Americans had been instigated by the British, thus leading to an outbreak of war. This echoed the “savage native” argument that had been popularized by historians in the early twentieth century. Black somewhat dismissed this idea, but also acknowledged that some truth may indeed be there. He wrote that “the activities of British officials, officers, and traders on the frontier that, in large part, justifie[d] these suspicions.”<sup>242</sup>

Black continued his explanation, writing that the “British instigators” had at one point been “former officers” in the British Army and had “surrendered at Yorktown in 1781,” thus, according to Black, they developed a resentment for Americans and instigated “native agitators” when it suited them.<sup>243</sup> Black scoffed at the idea that this had been a larger conspiracy set forth by the British government and specifically refuted the idea that the British had anything to do with the rise in popularity the “nativist movement that centered on Tecumseh and, even more, his brother, Tenskwatawa, the Prophet.”<sup>244</sup> Black argued that the most concrete proof that Native American relations had nothing to do with the declaration of war resided in Madison’s war message to Congress, in which he made “no reference to problems with Native Americans in his

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid, p.39.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, p.40.

case for preparedness.”<sup>245</sup> Black instead argued that the increase in Native American tensions was a natural consequence, a direct cause of American expansion. Black also noted that rather than a “cause of the War of 1812,” Native American tensions was more of a “background” to the war.<sup>246</sup>

Concluding his explanation of the cause of the War of 1812, Black introduced a final theory that seemed to explain the cause of the war. He wrote “aside from the specific issues in dispute...there was a more general sense, particularly among the Jeffersonians, that the Revolution was unfinished because Britain remained powerful; and that this power threatened American interests and public morality as Britain was corrosive but seductive model of un-American activity.”<sup>247</sup> Black had decided that moniker of “Revolutionary War II” fit the War of 1812 nicely, explaining that it was simply a result of so much unfinished business.

In Paul A. Gilje’s 2010 article “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights: The Rhetoric of the War of 1812,” the author also examined the causes of the War of 1812. In this article, Gilje asserted that the answer to “what caused the war” was easily found in a popular saying that existed amongst American sailors at the time: “free trade and sailors’ rights.”<sup>248</sup> Gilje argued that the slogan was embraced “by common people” and that its “resonance” was due to the fact that the chant was reminiscent of ideals that had “represented important aspects of Revolutionary heritage.”<sup>249</sup> While illustrating the popularity of the slogan amongst the sailors that emblazoned

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, p.43.

<sup>248</sup> Paul A. Gilje, “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights’: The Rhetoric of the War of 1812,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 30, no. 1 (2010), p.1.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, p.3.

it on their flags, Gilje also explained that the embargo and non-intercourse act all issued before the “outbreak of war” all sought the same result “the desire for free trade.”<sup>250</sup>

As for the “sailors’ rights” part of the chant, Gilje explained that while this statement had obvious “revolutionary implications,” it also served as “a low culture message meant to rile aristocrat[ic]” British Navy officers who had been charged with the tasks of searching American ships.<sup>251</sup> Gilje continued arguing his point by providing James Madison’s war message, in which the President claimed that “thousands of American citizens under the safeguard of public law and of their national flag have been torn from their country, and from everything dear to them.”<sup>252</sup> To Gilje, this was irrefutable proof that Madison was finally admitting something must be done to guarantee government protection for sailors.

Gilje also provided a quote from one of Henry Clay’s speeches in 1813 to support his sailors’ rights argument. Gilje wrote that Clay declared “if we fail, let us fail like men, lash ourselves to our gallant tars, and expire together in one common struggle, fighting for ‘Seamen’s rights and free trade.’”<sup>253</sup> To Gilje this again proved how dedicated Washington was to their commitment to Sailors and trade, cementing the idea that this had been the main driver to declare war. While a short article, Gilje provided a unique and interesting perspective that attempted to take a “history from the bottom up” approach to determining what may have been the cause of the war.

Gilje continued his study on the War of 1812 for the next few years, and in 2013 he published his book *Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812*. In the introduction of his text, the reader quickly learns that Gilje has almost completely changed his opinion on what had

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p.14.

been the cause of the war. The author explained “the origins of the war were complex and entailed more than the slogan free trade and sailors’ rights waving from Porter’s masthead.”<sup>254</sup> Continuing, Gilje wrote that he had changed views and had now seen what some other historians had explained almost a century ago. Gilje had concluded that there was some merit to the “expansionist” theories put forth by Julius Pratt. He noted “in many ways the roots of the war lay in assorted expansionism that coveted not only Canada to the north and Florida (which belonged to neutral Spain) to the south, but also the Native American lands in between.”<sup>255</sup>

Interestingly Gilje also argued for the support of yet another cause of the war, American Nationalism. He wrote “for large numbers of Americans, the war also had to be fought to sustain the honor of the Republic that was being tested by an aggressive, arrogant and oppressive Great Britain (and maybe France).”<sup>256</sup> While some historians had argued that the Americans needed to fight for the survival of their nation, Gilje wrote that the “honor” of the new nation was significantly important as well.<sup>257</sup>

Gilje wrote that he soon saw a pattern emerge when attempting to try and pinpoint an exact cause for the war. The author argued that all of these causes had been influenced by Enlightenment ideals. Attempting to present his theory, he explained “The Enlightenment challenged the way most nations did their diplomatic business in the 18th century. Central to this challenge was the ideology of free trade.”<sup>258</sup> Gilje, however, failed to completely develop this idea. The author does however provide future historians with an interesting point of future research.

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<sup>254</sup> Paul A. Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812*, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p.6.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid*, p.7.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, p.18.

While Gilje was able to provide several examples to support various theories on the causes of the war, he still wanted to impress upon his readers the importance of Porter's slogan, especially among the average American citizen at the time. Seemingly somewhat perplexed, Gilje concluded, "whatever the origins of the conflict, the rhetoric during the war emphasized the ideals encapsulated in Porter's motto."<sup>259</sup> Gilje's evolving theory in his text examined many different theories that emerged over the past two centuries that all could have contributed to the cause of the war, but also echoed the important role "national honor" played.

In an effort to sort the confusion surrounding the cause of the war, Gilje wrote that he wanted to examine the situation as a whole and even for historians to acknowledge that the "confusion" around the war had all been an intended. The author claimed that it was a wider conspiracy, part of a larger "political game" that was being played. Gilje argued "Republicans began to mold the memory of the War of 1812 as soon as the conflict ended" in an attempt to avoid political upheaval for their party.<sup>260</sup> Gilje explained that the Republicans suffered a drastic political hit because of "the often pathetic performance of the military, the political paralysis that contributed to one disaster after another, and a peace treaty that settled none of the reputed causes of the war."<sup>261</sup>

While Gilje concluded that the Republicans were for the most part successful in obscuring their "pathetic performance" he also noted that "Federalists were outraged by this approach and correctly pointed out that the Treaty of Ghent ignored Porter's motto."<sup>262</sup> A point that the author admits the Federalists failed to fully capitalize on. Ending his work, Gilje wanted to emphasize the complete failure of the war, again showing exactly why he believed the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, p. 277.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

Republicans did all that they could to obscure as many details as possible about the war, including details about the cause. He concluded “issues of impressment and sailors’ rights were never settled; the issues simply became irrelevant after Great Britain and France ended their war.”<sup>263</sup>

Noah Feldman’s 2017 biography of James Madison entitled, *The Three Lives of James Madison, Genius, Partisan, President*, sought to provide a fully detailed account of James Madison’s political career, starting with the years just before the Revolutionary War. Feldman, a constitutional law expert who has had the “pleasure” of testifying before Congress concerning the founding fathers, wrote that he wanted to show the world the intellectual side of Madison. Feldman argued that Madison’s innate intellectual ability is what allowed him to “shape ideas that could be expressed through precise, reasoned argument,” which Feldman argued, is how Madison was able to “devise the Constitution” as well as the Bill of Rights.<sup>264</sup> Feldman’s text contained a wealth of primary sources, seemingly leaving no stone unturned and providing readers with an extremely detailed picture of Madison. Feldman’s work offered valuable insight into how Madison arrived at certain decisions, using excerpts from Madison’s letters and diary entries in order justify his conclusions.

While Feldman’s work did not intentionally set out to examine and explain the cause(s) of the War of 1812, his study of Madison’s political choices shed some light on the situation. Feldman divided his text into three smaller “books” with the third and final book being mostly devoted to the War of 1812. Here, Feldman wrote that he wanted to look at the embargo President Jefferson enacted, as well as the fallout from its abject failure. Feldman did remind his

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Noah Feldman, *The Three Lives of James Madison: Genius, Partisan, President* (New York: Picador Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), xiv.

readers that importantly, Madison, not Jefferson, had been the “brains” behind the embargo, a fact that would later prove important in Feldman’s conclusion.

First, Feldman wrote that he sought to vindicate the theories Madison had on the “possible impact” of an American embargo. Feldman used records to prove that, indeed “prices skyrocketed exactly as predicted,” with a barrel of flour in the West Indies jumping from seven dollars before the embargo, to nearly forty after.<sup>265</sup> Feldman explained that this ultimately caused a loss of about 50% of the needed supply of flour in the West Indies. Feldman then found records that this trend continued with other exports such as American cotton, which “fell from a high of forty million pounds in 1807, when importers were frantically trying to get stocks to Europe in Advance of any sanctions, to just twelve million pounds in 1808.”<sup>266</sup> Feldman also provided the date that showed the embargo had caused a “jump in the price of cotton in London.”<sup>267</sup> Feldman concluded, “the embargo thus had an impact. The problem was that the impact was not drastic enough to achieve the desired coercive effect quickly.”<sup>268</sup> Feldman effectively proved that had the American economy been able to sustain the impact, Madison’s experiment could have proved very successful, and averted war. Unfortunately, this was not the reality.

While “Britain’s export economy was more robust, immune to external shocks than Madison had anticipated,” Feldman explained, the Americans were suffering as “the consequences of the embargo were immediate and devastating.”<sup>269</sup> While many American citizens supported efforts aimed at causing harm to England, Feldman noted that “patriotic

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid, p.494.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

sentiment could not restrain merchants from trying to sell their wares abroad,” causing merchants to seek out ways to get their goods to foreign markets illegally.<sup>270</sup> Because merchants were allowed to travel between American ports, Feldman argued the “simplest” way to “avoid” the embargo “was therefore to stock a ship and pretend to sail for another U.S. port, then put out to sea and head for the West Indies, British Canada or Europe,” which many merchants did.<sup>271</sup>

Feldman explained that at this time, the federal government lacked anyway to effectively enforce their embargo. He noted that this changed six months into the embargo, when Gallatin explained to Jefferson and Madison that in order to enforce the embargo effectively he would “require both a rule that no ship could leave port at all without advance permission, and a little army on the Canadian border to prevent smuggling.”<sup>272</sup> Feldman continued, writing that Gallatin also requested “to be able to give his officers the authority to seize goods arbitrarily on the basis that they were intended for illegal export, without probable cause or warrant.”<sup>273</sup> The irony that Jefferson and Madison were prepared to cross their own citizens in ways similar to how the British had, was not lost on Feldman. He declared that Jefferson and Madison’s “draconian measures...had led the Republicans to a policy of massive coercive authority over American citizens.”<sup>274</sup>

Feldman also made sure to note that while these measures seemed extreme, especially when compared to the party ideals these men typically held, he argued that the men had concluded any alternative to war was the better choice for the citizens of their young nation.<sup>275</sup> A war, they argued, would have far more of an impact than any measures they would be taking to

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid, p.495.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.



enforce the embargo. Despite all efforts, Feldman explained that the embargo never succeeded in its goals. Feldman wrote that Madison's ability to recover from the embargo politically, and to be elected President, was nothing short of a miracle. The author concluded that Madison's success had in fact been "buoyed by an atmosphere of enthusiasm for the end of a policy that he had himself initiated."<sup>276</sup>

Feldman wanted to emphasize to his readers that Madison's intentions with the embargo had always been pure. He explained that Madison had simply been so set in idea that his logic was correct, and his embargo, "logically", could not fail. When it did, the need to contain the fallout was a matter of fighting for existence, Feldman noted.<sup>277</sup> The author explained that winning the Presidency had not been a selfish goal of Madison's. Instead, Feldman argued that Madison felt an obligation. He explained "he had not sought the presidency in fulfillment of the psychological drives that have powered so many into the office, for good or for ill. He had run because he believed he could successfully navigate the dangerous shoals of global war."<sup>278</sup> Feldman explained that Madison felt unfinished in his work of developing and designing the nation, and that "his broader aim was to do for American foreign policy what he had done for domestic governance through the Constitution: design, create, and implement a model that would align republican liberty and the public interest."<sup>279</sup> As far as Feldman was concerned, this was a major key in understanding the cause of the war. He noted that while Madison had good intentions with his adherence to "certain principals... these principles could not resolve the dilemma of being caught between Britain and France.... neither would permit American

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid, p.501.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, p.502.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, p.503.

shipping” leaving Madison to return to square one in order to find a solution to his European problem.<sup>280</sup>

Feldman explained that at this point, “Madison needed a new account of why war was necessary.”<sup>281</sup> He continued, arguing that producing an accessible, comprehensible explanation for the war was especially important because, although Madison was now advocating bold action, he had reached this conclusion only after years of exhausting every possibility of peace,” and as a result the American economy had taken a huge hit.<sup>282</sup> Feldman concluded that Madison’s solution was “crafting a narrative that could be understood and adopted by the public,” arguing that “his experience in founding the Republican party had taught him the importance” of such a “skill.”<sup>283</sup> It is because of these reasons that Feldman believed there was so much confusion surrounding what had caused the War of 1812.

Feldman continued his accusations against Madison, writing “the key to his success was changing the meaning of the war as it was fought, depicting it as a second war of independence to establish national sovereignty on the seas. Reframing the narrative transformed the result into a victory.”<sup>284</sup> Feldman argued that Madison knew exactly what was at stake, as he “had gambled his political legacy on war,” causing the President to “begin his story with impressment,” the author charged.<sup>285</sup> Despite the many setbacks, Feldman concluded that Madison “triumphed despite failing to achieve his original goals.”<sup>286</sup> Listing his successes, the author concluded “Madison’s presidential legacy was now assured. He had striven to avoid war, and his economic

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, p.504.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, p.543.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, p.543.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid*, p.609.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid*.

sanctions proved in retrospect that he had embraced force only when it was unavoidable... and in the process, he had cemented the dominance of the Republican Party, which aspired- according to Madison's constitutional vision- to end partisanship altogether."<sup>287</sup>

Feldman also discussed other possible causes of the war, such as Native American relations. He explained that while "Americans wanted conquest for expansion" they were left with "no peaceful means readily available to improve border relations" as the "Indian tribes wanted to keep the land on which they lived."<sup>288</sup> The author concluded, as Black recently did, that the increasing tensions with Native Americans had more to do with American expansion, and less to do with nefarious actions by British military officers.<sup>289</sup> If anyone was to be blamed for increasing tensions, Feldman concluded it would have to be the person who encouraged Americans to move westward after purchasing a large amount of land. Feldman, of course, was referencing Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase that had been completed several years earlier.<sup>290</sup>

In his text, Feldman also took a moment to address the work of historian Henry Adams in his *History of the United States of America 1801- 1817*. Feldman wrote that Adams' interpretation was flawed, with the historian interpreting "Madison's...policies as the adoption of the Federalist program associated with his great-grandfather John Adams."<sup>291</sup> Instead, Feldman argued that Adams "overstated" the case for his grandfather, reminding his reader that this biased piece was what heavily influenced the historiography concerning topics involving the War of 1812 for decades.<sup>292</sup> Feldman concluded that the evidence was clear, Madison had "muddied"

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid, p.609.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p.506.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, p.505.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

the cause of the war of 1812 on purpose, not only to save his career, but also in order to preserve the union.

In 2015 Richard Maass published his article “Difficult to Relinquish Territory Which Had Been Conquered”: Expansionism and the War of 1812.” In this article, the author revisited “expansionism” causes of the war that had been popularized by Julius Pratt in the 1940s. Maass sought to explain how that explanation had gained traction and concluded that historians in that camp had likened the events to recent wars. He wrote “it was not a premeditated land grab akin to the 1939 German invasion of Poland.”<sup>293</sup> Maass explained “it was not even a war that President James Madison wanted to fight. In fact, both the Madison administration and the majority of Congress opposed the annexation of Canada.”<sup>294</sup>

In an attempt to explain why Pratt may have been misguided, Maass explained that the theory may have been given more merit than it deserved as “visions of acquiring Canadian land inflamed public opinion in the northwest territories and hand handful of congressmen.”<sup>295</sup> However, Maass noted that “the majority of US leaders firmly opposed annexation.”<sup>296</sup> Maass explained that rather than a land grab, the war of 1812 it was a diplomatic bluff of continental proportions.”<sup>297</sup> Maas argued that clearly, “the war was a desperate act on the part of US leaders brought to their wits end by British maritime restrictions, which were themselves desperate acts by a British government fighting for its life against Napoleon.”<sup>298</sup> Maass wrote that “after six years of failed US attempts at commercial coercion, war was seen as the only lever remaining by

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<sup>293</sup> Richard W. Maass, “Difficult to Relinquish Territory Which Had Been Conquered: Expansionism and the War of 1812,” *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 1 (2015), p.71.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

which the United states might free itself from those maritime restrictions, which had combined with the ill-advised US commercial retaliations to devastate the American economy.”<sup>299</sup> Again, a pattern emerges where historians paint Madison as both the cause of the war, and the nation’s only hope.

Maass then attempted to then explain the other side of the expansionist argument, discussing the many ways in which the United States had shown it had no interest in acquiring Canada. Maass explained that while “U.S. leaders wanted Canada during the revolution...by 1812 the United States had changed. The constitution gave various states a measure of influence over each other's domestic affairs through the federal government, heightening tensions among conflicting interests.”<sup>300</sup> Many feared “the anticipated effect of a territorial acquisition on the domestic balance of power,” causing it to become “a key factor in calculating the desirability of expansion not only with the annexation of Canada.”<sup>301</sup> Specifically, Maass noted that many in Congress feared the annexation “would spark a dissolution of the union.”<sup>302</sup> The author also explained that relatively “few Americans were eager to re assimilate Canada’s British loyalists,” as rampant Anglophobia persisted. Maass also noted the “problems” with assimilating the French Canadians as it was “feared” that the “French population’s... Catholicism and monarchism might contaminate American society.”<sup>303</sup> As far as Maass was concerned, the answers as to what caused the war were easily explained when assessing Madison’s actions.

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid, p.74.

## Conclusion

When describing the war, historian and (then) soon to President Theodore Roosevelt concluded that “the grounds of the war were singularly uncertain.”<sup>304</sup> While it has been over a century since Roosevelt declared his stance, one must ask if historians have answered the seemingly unending question about why exactly the war was fought.

While it appears that almost every angle has been assessed, most historians tend to be in agreement that “maritime grievances” was the main drive behind the decision to declare war. Native American relations, and the desire to expand the nation may have been extremely important issues at the time, but many historians seem to conclude that without the conflicts involving free trade and impressment, treaties could have been effective in realizing these other goals.

As the historiography on the topic continues to grow, it appears that those assessing the situation in the early twenty first century have decided to target James Madison. While they bring up many interesting points, these historians have proven that while not intentional Madison’s actions that resulted in war could have caused the nation to fail shortly after it started. However, one important conclusion several have made is that Madison never intended to go to war. In fact, they concluded that he attempted to avoid war in any way he believed possible. As Noah Feldman wrote, “[Madison] had not sought the presidency in fulfillment of the psychological drives that have powered so many into the office, for good or for ill. He had run because he believed he could successfully navigate the dangerous shoals of global war.”<sup>305</sup> This also explains why the history of the war seems so confusing, as Feldman noted, Madison believed it had to be in order to preserve the nation. The War of 1812 had not been declared on a

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<sup>304</sup> Warren H. Goodman, p.174.

<sup>305</sup> Noah Feldman, p. 502.

whim; every single option available had been exhausted until Madison felt he could no longer take any other action that would force the belligerent European nations to respect American ships on the sea.

When discussing the future of the topic, a quote from historian Clifford Egan comes to mind. He wrote “one truism is that every generation needs to rewrite the past.”<sup>306</sup> With attention firmly placed on Madison it will be interesting to see where historians in the twenty first century will go. Perhaps with such a solid understanding of what exactly caused the war, historians can now answer Reginald Horsman’s call to focus more attention on how the ever-changing maritime laws effected average Americans at this time.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>306</sup>Clifford L. Egan, “The Origins of the War of 1812: Three Decades of Historical Writing,” p.75.

<sup>307</sup> Reginald Horsman, “The War of 1812 Revisited,” p.121.

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