

Lesson Forty-Three

The War Of 1812

LESSON IDEA

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

PREPARATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

