

Lesson Forty-Three

The War Of 1812

LESSON IDEA

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

PREPARATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

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

destroy every symbol of American independence.

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

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

THE INVADERS, not realizing the prize that had escaped them, helped themselves to the food and drink that President Madison had unknowingly provided for them. They then moved to other rooms and rummaged through his personal belongings. One practical-minded looter exchanged his grimy, sweat-stained shirt for one of the President's best. Others made off with the Madison's medicine chest, his hat, and a pair of rhinestone shoe buckles. Outside, the guards who were unable to join in the souvenir hunt amused themselves by hacking up an abandoned carriage. When the looting finally ended, a torch was used to turn the official residence of the President of the United States into a roaring bonfire.

What is your opinion of such acts? What does it tell us about the character the European "gentlemen" who called Americans uncouth savages? [Encourage a discussion of personal ethics.]

A predawn thunderstorm put an end to the British handiwork, but the next morning (August 25th) resumed their prowling of Washington streets with torches and axes. Of the remaining government buildings, only the Patent Office escaped unscathed. At last, a thunderous wind and rain storm, described by some as equivalent in its violence to a hurricane, brought an end to the orgy of looting and destruction.

Distraught by the storm, the accidental explosion of a magazine that killed a number of English officers, and reports of advancing American troops, the British opted to return to their ships. They had accomplished more than their commanders had dared hope.

AS NEWS of the Washington disaster swept throughout the nation, fear dominated seaport towns from north to south. The residents of each were convinced, to the point of being nearly paralyzed with terror, that they would be next to face British forces. Baltimore, especially, appeared to be a prime target. As the third largest city in the Union, it was also one of the richest. Warehouses bulged with cargoes representing a potential fortune for British admirals and generals. And there was also the allure of revenge. Privately armed merchant vessels from Baltimore had sunk or captured more than 500 British ships during the course of the war; Vice

Admiral Cochrane, hating the Americans as he did, would hardly bypass the chance to level the city that had so embarrassed the Royal Navy.

One thing seemed certain: Baltimore's military resistance would not be planned and led by some weak and vacillating general imported from Washington or Canada, but by a bold and decisive commander who was determined to win. The man had already been selected: Major General Samuel Smith, commander of the Third Division of Maryland's Militia.

Smith was shrewd, tough, and thorough. On the August 27th, he ordered the citizens of Baltimore to collect all or the wheelbarrows, pickaxes, and shovels they could find. The next day they started digging. A fortification line gradually took shape along the eastern edge of the city (the side most exposed to a British landing). White and black, slave and master—all worked together in relays from 6 a.m. until dark.

Smith drilled the militia mercilessly, bypassed the military brass who threatened his plans, and supervised every detail of the preparations. No item was too small for his attention, no obstacle too large for him to tackle. One minute he was authorizing countersigns for sentries; the next, engineering a loan from a Baltimore bank for more supplies.

Had you been living in Baltimore at the time, would you have followed Smith into battle? Would he have earned your confidence? Why? [Have family members discuss the qualities of a good leader. Smith obviously had a strong (in time of crisis nearly dictatorial) personality. He had not been taught to "get along with everyone," to lead by committee action, or to take a democratic vote before making decisions. Discuss why such traits would be drawbacks in a military leader, as well as leaders in many other areas of our national life (such business, religion, voluntary associations, etc.)]

As the British fleet closed in on Baltimore, Cochrane had no way of knowing that in less than one month the enemy force had been transformed from an assembly of largely panic-stricken stumblebums into a disciplined and determined fighting force. When English troops landed at North Point east of the city, they soon realized the change. Their rockets, so effective in frightening the militia outside Washington, were answered by

the roar of American cannon; their marches stopped by volleys of musket and rifle fire.

In the harbor, Fort McHenry's guns, manned by well-equipped militiamen, were aimed at the British fleet. Cochrane had planned to slip past the Fort and storm the inner harbor, then either bombard the town or carry off prized goods. But Smith had ordered American ships sunk to block the entrance to the inner harbor. Cochrane had no alternative but to attack Fort McHenry.

He began a bombardment that ultimately hurled between 1,500 and 1,800 shells (weighing as much as 220 pounds) at the Fort. But its walls were too strong, and its cannon too well placed. Finally after 24 hours of virtually constant rocket and cannon fire, Cochrane was forced to admit he had made little dent in the American fortification. This meant that all would now depend on the ground troops at North Point. A hasty war council was called. It was decided that the victory, even if achieved, would prove too costly. A retreat was ordered. Baltimore had withstood a powerful thrust from the British and gained an astonishing victory for the new nation.

Concluding Thought

The difference between victory and defeat was then, is now, and always will be the quality of military leadership. When good leadership was lacking, as on the Canadian and western frontiers and in the defense of Washington, defeat was inevitable. But in Baltimore, when the leadership was bold, decisive, and determined, victory was assured.

Looking Ahead

The best is yet to come in our story of the War of 1812. It was on the high seas that America won its greatest victories and turned the tide from defeat to victory. Next week will learn about the leadership and heroism of several key U.S. Navy captains, including Oliver Hazard Perry.

DURING THE WEEK

The victory at Baltimore inspired Francis Scott Key to write a poem that ultimately became our national anthem: The Star-Spangled Banner. Its stirring words refer to the giant battle flag that flew above Fort McHenry. Major Armistead, commander of the Fort, had requested production of the flag during a prior invasion scare. In the

summer of 1813 he wrote to Sam Smith:

We, Sir, are ready at Fort McHenry to defend Baltimore against invading by the enemy. That is to say, we are ready except that we have no suitable ensign to display over the Star Fort, and it is my desire to have a flag so large that the British will have no difficulty in seeing it from a distance.

General Smith arranged to have the giant flag made and delivered in time for the decisive battle. It was one of the many details that comprised his overall defense strategy.

Lesson 34 in our FAMILY HERITAGE SERIES detailed the story of The Star-Spangled Banner. You may wish to review it prior to this week's lesson. For additional details, refer to a reliable book of history and/or encyclopedia.