

War of 1812: A Just War?

by Ernest Wasson

Suggested grade level: grades 10-12

Suggested time: Two classes of 50 minutes

Brief Description of the Task

Students will attempt to determine whether America was morally justified in declaring war and invading British North America during the War of 1812.

Historical Thinking Concepts

- Use of Primary Source Evidence
- Cause and Consequence
- Historical Perspective-Taking
- Ethical Dimension

Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

1. interact critically with primary sources
2. appreciate multiple American perspectives on the causes of the war
3. explore the ethical dimension of the causes of the War of 1812

Materials

Photocopies of the Appendices.

Prior Knowledge

It would be an asset for students to:

- have a basic understanding of the causes of the war and of the concept of the **ethical dimension** of history.

Assessment

Graphic Organizers

Paragraph Answer

Detailed Lesson Plan

Part 1

1. Explain to students that they will be reading three primary source documents in an attempt to determine whether the United States of America was morally justified in attacking the British colonies of Canada during the War of 1812.

This is a complex task that requires students use primary evidence to consider multiple causation, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension of history.

2. Arrange the class into groups of three. Give each group one complete copy of the three sources (President Madison's War Message and speeches by Samuel Taggart and Henry Clay), as well as the graphic organizer (all documents found in the **Lesson 25, Appendices** file).

a) Have each group read through their individual source first considering how it might have been a *cause* of the war. For instance, they could decide to first focus on the issue of impressment.

b) Then the students should read their source to determine the historical perspective of Madison, Taggart and Clay in regard to each of the perceived causes of the war.

Teaching Tip:

It is important that students note not just major differences in the perspectives but nuance and tone as well. For example, both Clay and Madison favoured the war but Clay was writing in 1813, after the Orders in Council had been revoked by Britain, and was even more hawkish (pro-war). As well, it should be noted that although America declared war on Great Britain they invaded the British colonies in North America and never attacked Great Britain directly.

c) Students should then reflect on the different perspectives using their own value structure, norms, etc. Some possible questions to generate analysis/discussion:

- Did concerns over territory and control justify the decision to go to War in 1812?
- To what extent do the conditions of the time mean that we should excuse the decision to go to war?
- Is there any evidence that the decision to go to war was taken lightly? Or that it was a reckless decision?

Students will do this for all the perceived causes mentioned in the sources.

Part 2

1. Consolidate all of the work they have done on the primary source documents by writing the following question on the board:

“Based on the evidence you reviewed, were the American’s justified in their decision to declare war and invade British North America?”

2. Have students write one-page on whether America was justified in declaring war and subsequently invading BNA in 1812. Student responses should include quotes from the source documents to support their position.

Additional information about the concept of the Ethical Dimension of History can be found on the Historical Thinking Project website at <http://historicalthinking.ca/concept/ethical-dimensions>

Lesson 25, Appendices

Appendix 1: Madison's War Message 2 June 1812

President James Madison was the fourth president of the United States and called the "Father of the Constitution" for his involvement in the drafting of the American constitution. President from 1809 to 1817 he led America to war against Great Britain in 1812. These are the reasons he cited for going to war against the British Empire.

1. Impressment - British cruisers have been in the continued practice of violating the American flag on the great highway of nations and of seizing and carrying off persons sailing under it, not in the exercise of a belligerent right founded on the law of nations against an enemy, but of a municipal prerogative over British subjects. ...

The practice, hence, is so far from affecting British subjects alone that, under the pretext of searching for these, 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; have been dragged on board ships of war of a foreign nation and exposed, under the severities of their discipline, to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes, to risk their lives in the battles of their oppressors, and to be the melancholy instruments of taking away those of their own brethren.

Against this crying enormity, which Great Britain would be so prompt to avenge if committed against herself... the British Government was formally assured of the readiness of the United States to enter into arrangements such as could not be rejected if the recovery of British subjects were the real and the sole object. The communication passed without effect.

2. Blockade - British cruisers have been in the practice also of violating the rights and the peace of our coasts. They hover over and harass our entering and departing commerce. To the most insulting pretensions they have added the most lawless proceedings in our very harbors, and have wantonly spilt American blood within the sanctuary of our territorial jurisdiction... our commerce has been plundered in every sea, the great staples of our country have been cut off from their legitimate markets, and a destructive blow aimed at our agricultural and maritime interests...

3. Orders in Council - Not content with these occasional expedients for laying waste our neutral trade, the cabinet of Britain resorted at length to the sweeping system of blockades, under the name of Orders in Council, which has been molded and managed as might best suit its political views, its commercial jealousies, or the avidity of British cruisers...

It has become, indeed, sufficiently certain that the commerce of the United States is to be sacrificed, not as interfering with the belligerent rights of Great Britain; not as supplying the wants of her enemies, which she herself supplies; but as interfering with the monopoly which she covets for her own commerce and navigation. She carries on a war against the lawful commerce of a friend that she may the better carry on a

commerce with an enemy – a commerce polluted by the forgeries and perjuries which are for the most part the only passports by which it can succeed...

4. **Natives** - In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare just renewed by the savages on one of our extensive frontiers – a warfare which is known to spare neither age nor sex and to be distinguished by features peculiarly shocking to humanity. It is difficult to account for the activity and combinations which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence and without recollecting the authenticated examples of such interpositions heretofore furnished by the officers and agents of that government...

5. **Blockade** - Other counsels have prevailed. Our moderation and conciliation have had no other effect than to encourage perseverance and to enlarge pretensions. We behold our seafaring citizens still the daily victims of lawless violence, committed on the great common and highway of nations, even within sight of the country which owes them protection. We behold our vessels, freighted with the products of our soil and industry, or returning with the honest proceeds of them, wrested from their lawful destinations, confiscated by prize courts no longer the organs of public law but the instruments of arbitrary edicts, and their unfortunate crews dispersed and lost, or forced or inveigled in British ports into British fleets, whilst arguments are employed in support of these aggressions which have no foundation but in a principle equally supporting a claim to regulate our external commerce in all cases whatsoever...

Whether the United States shall continue passive under these progressive usurpations and these accumulating wrongs, or, opposing force to force in defense of their national rights, shall commit a just cause into the hands of the Almighty Disposer of Events, avoiding all connections which might entangle it in the contest or views of other powers, and preserving a constant readiness to concur in an honorable reestablishment of peace and friendship, is a solemn question which the Constitution wisely confides to the legislative department of the Government. In recommending it to their early deliberations I am happy in the assurance that the decision will be worthy the enlightened and patriotic councils of a virtuous, a free, and a powerful nation.

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Appendix B - Samuel Taggart, Speech Opposing the War 24 June 1812

Most of the Federalists in Congress, including twenty of the thirty delegates from New England, voted against the war. Among them was congressman Samuel Taggart of Massachusetts. Congress made the decision for war in closed session, and Taggart decided not to deliver the speech he had prepared, but it was published in the Alexandria Gazette on 24 June and then in the Annals of Congress.

...I cannot contemplate my country as on the verge of a war, especially of a war which to me appears both unnecessary and impolitic in the outset, and which will probably prove disastrous in the issue, a war, which, in my view, goes to put not only the lives and property of our most valuable citizens, but also our liberty and independence itself, at hazard, without experiencing the most painful sensations. Believing, as I most conscientiously do, that a war, at this time, would jeopardize the best, the most vital interests, of the country which gave me birth and in which is contained all that I hold near and dear in life, I have, so far as depended upon my vote, uniformly opposed every measure which I believed had a direct tendency to lead to war...

1. Orders in Council - ... I wish it to be kept in view, that I have no intention, neither do I entertain a wish, to vindicate the Orders in Council. Every neutral, and especially every American, must view the principles contained in these orders as injurious to his rights...

One cause of this may be found in the attitude which we have assumed. So long as we placed both the belligerents upon an equal footing, the Orders in Council were not very rigorously carried into effect. By our non-importation law we have departed from our neutral ground and have no longer considered the different belligerents as on an equal footing. The consequence has been that the Orders in Council have been more rigorously carried into effect on the part of Great Britain. And since the additional hostile attitude assumed during the present session of Congress has been known in Great Britain, I understand, from the public prints, that orders have been given for their still more rigid execution. Unless she saw fit to rescind them, this was naturally to be expected. In proportion as we assume a more hostile attitude towards her and show a disposition to embrace her enemy in the arms of friendship and affection, it was to be expected that she would either relax and accede to our demands or adhere more rigorously to her own system. She has chosen the latter.

2. Impressment - As it respects the impressment of seamen, this is a delicate and a difficult subject, and if it is ever adjusted to mutual satisfaction it must be by war; and whenever there is mutually a disposition to accommodate, it will be found necessary to concede something on both sides. With respect to the practice of impressments generally, as it respects the citizens or subjects of the country adopting that method of manning her ships, it may be, and doubtless is, in many instances, attended with circumstances of real hardship. The practice may be oppressive, but it is founded upon a principle which is adopted and more or less practiced upon by every nation, i.e. that

the nation has a right, either in one shape or another, to compel the services of its citizens or subjects in time of war... It is vain to contend against the principle itself, since we have sanctioned it by our laws and daily practice upon it, however hardly we may think of some of the particular modes in which it is applied... The principle then being admitted, the only ground of complaint is the irregular application of it to Americans.

Great Britain does not claim, she never has claimed the right of impressing American citizens. She claims the right of reclaiming her own subjects, even although they should be found on board of American vessels. And in the assertion of that claim, many irregularities have without doubt been committed by her officers, on account of the similarity of language, manners, and habits. American citizens have been frequently mistaken for British subjects; but I do not know of any instance in which a real American has been reclaimed, where sufficient testimony of his being an American has been adduced, in which his liberation has been refused...

But so long as such a large number of foreign seamen are employed on board our vessels, and so long as American protections for these foreigners can be obtained with such facility, and are mere matters of bargain and sale, and English, Scotch, and Irish sailors are furnished with them, I pretend not to say by what means, indiscriminately with American citizens, it will be difficult to adjust that subject by treaty, it will be impossible to settle it by war... another description of citizens about which there may be some difficulty, I mean naturalized foreigners. These, however, are few in number, it being rarely found that seamen take the benefit of our naturalization laws... I do not make these observations with a view to excuse the practice of impressments as generally conducted. But when we are insisting on this as one cause of war, it is proper to view the subject as it is and not through a magnifying mirror which represents every object as being tenfold larger than the life...

3. Free Trade/Blockade - ... It is said to be necessary to go to war for the purpose of securing our commercial rights, of opening a way for obtaining the best market for our produce, and in order to avenge the insults which have been offered to our flag. But what is there in the present situation of the United States which we could reasonably expect would be ameliorated by war?

4. Canada - ... What is the particular achievement to be accomplished by this armament. ... Canada must be ours; and this is to be the sovereign balm, the universal panacea, which is to heal all the wounds we have received either in our honor, interest, or reputation. This is to be the boon which is to indemnify us for all past losses on the ocean, secure the liberty of the seas hereafter, protect our seamen from impressments, and remunerate us for all the blood and treasure which is to be expended in the present war. Our rights on the ocean have been assailed, and, however inconsistent it may seem to go as far as possible from the ocean to seek redress, yet this would appear to be the policy. We are to seek it, it seems, by fighting the Indians on the Wabash or at Tippecanoe, or the Canadians at Fort Malden, at Little York, at Kingston, at Montreal, and at Quebec. ... I shall say nothing of either the morality or the humanity, or of the

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reverse of both, which will be displayed in attacking an inoffensive neighbor and endeavoring to overwhelm a country which has done us no wrong with a superior military force alone.

The conquest of Canada has been represented to be so easy as to be little more than a party of pleasure. We have, it has been said, nothing to do but to march an army into the country and display the standard of the United States, and the Canadians will immediately flock to it and place themselves under our protection. They have been represented as ripe for revolt, panting for emancipation from a tyrannical government, and longing to enjoy the sweets of liberty under the fostering hand of the United States.

On taking a different view of their situation, it has been suggested that, if they should not be disposed to hail us on our arrival as brothers, come to emancipate and not to subdue them, that they are a debased race of poltroons, incapable of making anything like a stand in their own defense, that the mere sight of an army of the United States would immediately put an end to all thoughts of resistance; that we had little else to do only to march... To presume on the disaffection or treasonable practices of the inhabitants for facilitating the conquest will probably be to reckon without our host.

The Canadians have no cause of disaffection with the British government. They have ever been treated with indulgence. They enjoy all that security and happiness, in their connection with Great Britain, that they could reasonably expect in any situation. Lands can be acquired by the industrious settlers at an easy rate, I believe for little more than the office fees for issuing patents, which may amount to three to four cents per acre. They have few or no taxes to pay. I believe none, only a trifle for the repairs of highways. They have a good market for their surplus produce, unhampered with embargoes or commercial restrictions of any kind, and are equally secure both in person and property, both in their civil and religious rights, with the citizens of the United States.

What have they, therefore, to gain by a connection with the United States?... Why, then, should they desire a revolution?

They want nothing of us, only not to molest them, and to buy and sell on terms of mutual reciprocity. We, therefore, ought to calculate on every man in Canada as an enemy, or if he is not hostile at the moment of the commencement of the expedition, an invasion of the country will soon make him so, and when an enemy is in the heart of a country, ready to attack our homes and houses, it will inspire even a poltroon with courage... .

But, let us admit, for the sake of argument, that Canada is at length conquered, and everything settled in that quarter—Cui bono? For whose benefit is the capture of Canada? What advantages are we likely to reap from the conquest? Will it secure the liberty of the seas or compel Great Britain to rescind her Orders in Council? Did we ever know an instance in which Great Britain gave up a favorite measure for the sake of

saving a foreign possession, perhaps of very little value to her? Will the advantages to be derived from the conquest of Canada be an equivalent for the loss and damage we may sustain in other quarters? What is Great Britain to be about all the time that we are wresting Canada out of her possession? Is it consistent with the vigor with which she usually acts to stand by and tamely look on? Either she will attempt a vigorous defense of Canada or she will not. If she does, some of the difficulties of the enterprise have been stated. If she does not, it will be that she may be the better able to inflict a severe blow in some other quarter. Admitting war to be sincerely intended, no course could be devised more inconsistent with the maxims of sound policy than that which appears to be pursuing by the United States... .

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Appendix C: Henry Clay, Speech Supporting the War 9 January 1813

Among the newly elected members of the Twelfth Congress, none was more conspicuous than the representative from Kentucky, whose prompt election as Speaker of the House proved the beginning of a long and distinguished career. One of the most vigorous "War Hawks," Clay delivered this defense of the war during a debate on a bill to enlist additional troops.

1. [Blockade/Orders in Council/Impressment/Natives](#) -... The war was declared because Great Britain arrogated to herself the pretension of regulating our foreign trade under the delusive name of retaliatory orders in council, a pretension by which she undertook to proclaim to American enterprise – “Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther” – Orders which she refused to revoke after the alleged cause of their enactment had ceased; because she persisted in the practice of impressing American seamen; because she had instigated the Indians to commit hostilities against us; and because she refused indemnity for her past injuries upon our commerce. I throw out of the question other wrongs.

The war in fact was announced, on our part, to meet the war which she was waging on her part. So undeniable were the causes of the war – so powerfully did they address themselves to the feelings of the whole American people – that when the bill was pending before this House, gentlemen in the opposition, although provoked to debate, would not, or could not, utter one syllable against it...

3. [Orders in Council](#) -... All the world knows that the repeal of the Orders in Council resulted from the inquiry, reluctantly acceded to by the ministry, into the effect upon their manufacturing establishments of our non-importation law, or to the warlike attitude assumed by this government, or to both. But it is said that the Orders in Council are done away, no matter from what cause; and that having been the sole motive for declaring the war, the relations of peace ought to be restored. This brings me into an examination of the grounds for continuing the war.

4. [Orders in Council/Impressment](#) - I am far from acknowledging that, had the Orders in Council been repealed, as they have been, before the war was declared, the declaration would have been prevented. In a body so numerous as this is, from which the declaration emanated, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty what would have been the effect of such a repeal. Each member must answer for himself. I have no hesitation, then, in saying that I have always considered the impressment of American seamen as much the most serious aggression...

She contends that she has a right to the services of her own subjects; that, in the exercise of this right, she may lawfully impress them, even although she finds them in our vessels, upon the high seas, without her jurisdiction. Now, I deny that she has any right, without her jurisdiction, to come on board our vessels upon the high seas for any other purpose but in pursuit of enemies, or their goods, or goods contraband of war. But she further contends that her subjects cannot renounce their allegiance to her and contract a

new obligation to other sovereigns. I do not mean to go into the general question of the right [of] expatriation. If, as is contended, all nations deny it, all nations at the same time admit and practice the right of naturalization. G. Britain herself does. Great Britain, in the very case of foreign seamen, imposes, perhaps, fewer restraints upon naturalization than any other nation.

... The naked truth is, she comes, by her press-gangs, on board of our vessels, seizes our native seamen as well as naturalized, and drags them into her service... .

5. Canada/Natives - The gentleman from Delaware sees in Canada no object worthy of conquest... Other gentlemen consider the invasion of that country as wicked and unjustifiable. Its inhabitants are represented as unoffending, connected with those of the bordering states by a thousand tender ties, interchanging acts of kindness and all the offices of good neighborhood; Canada, said Mr. C., innocent! Canada unoffending!

It is not in Canada that the tomahawk of the savage has been molded into its death-like form? From Canadian magazines, Malden and others, that those supplies have been issued which nourish and sustain the Indian hostilities? Supplies which have enabled the savage hordes to butcher the garrison of Chicago and to commit other horrible murders? Was it not by the joint cooperation of Canadians and Indians that a remote American fort, Michilimackinac, was fallen upon and reduced, in ignorance of a state of war?...

6. Orders in Council/Natives/Impressment/Canada - ... What cause, Mr. Chairman, which existed for declaring the war has been removed? We sought indemnity for the past and security for the future. The Orders in Council are suspended, not revoked; no compensation for spoliations; Indian hostilities, which were before secretly instigated, now openly encouraged; and the practice of impressment unremittingly persevered in and insisted upon. Yet administration has given the strongest demonstrations of its love of peace.

On the 29th June, less than ten days after the declaration of war, the Secretary of State writes to Mr. Russell, authorizing him to agree to an armistice upon two conditions only, and what are they? That the Orders in Council should be repealed and the practice of impressing American seamen cease, those already impressed being released. ... In return, the enemy is offered a prohibition of the employment of his seamen in our service, thus removing entirely all pretext for the practice of impressment. The very proposition which the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Pitkin) contends ought to be made has been made.

How are these pacific advances met by the other party? Rejected as absolutely inadmissible, ... An honorable peace is attainable only by an efficient war. My plan would be to call out the ample resources of the country, give them a judicious direction, prosecute the war with the utmost vigor, strike wherever we can reach the enemy, at sea or on land, and negotiate the terms of a peace at Quebec or Halifax. We are told that

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England is a proud and lofty nation, that disdain to wait for danger, meets it half way. Haughty as she is, we once triumphed over her, and if we do not listen to the councils of timidity and despair we shall again prevail. In such a cause, with the aid of Providence, we must come out crowned with success; but 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."

<http://oll.libertyfund.org>

Appendix 4: Causation Organizer

Cause: _____

	Madison	Taggart	Clay
Historical Perspective			
Modern Perspective			