

# Causes and Consequences of the War of 1812: As Seen Throughout the Decades

by Marc Keirstead

**Suggested grade level:** Intermediate/Senior

**Suggested time:** 2 class periods

## Brief Description of the Task

In this lesson students will explore how the causes and consequences of the War of 1812 were described differently in various sources, across a number of decades.

## Historical Thinking Concepts

- Historical Significance
- Cause and Consequence

## Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

1. Participate in an activity that allows them to understand the concept of **historical significance** and multiple perspectives.
2. Identify the causes of the war of 1812.
3. Explore how various secondary sources present different accounts of the **causes and consequences** of the war.

## Materials

Each student will need a copy of the Primary Source Organizer, Appendix 1.

Each group will need a set of photocopies of the text selections, Appendix 2.

## Prior Knowledge

It would be an asset for students to:

- be familiar with the impact on North America of the war between France and Britain

- understand the negative relations that existed between Britain and the newly independent United States

### **Assessment**

## Detailed Lesson Plan

**Focus Question: Do textbooks present different perspectives on a common set of events? Why or why not?**

### Part 1

1. Teacher will tell students that as part of their study of the causes and consequences of the War of 1812 they will be examining sources from different time periods. However, before students begin their examination of the War of 1812 they will complete an activity on multiple perspectives.

2. To begin, the teacher will write on the board a list of 3 to 5 significant events that occurred in the last year. Students will consider the list and be asked to decide which of the events is the *most* significant. The concept of **historical significance** can be discussed with students, and criteria can be provided to assist in their selection (see [www.historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-significance](http://www.historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-significance)).

3. Students can share the event they selected with a partner and discuss the reasons for their selection. Students can develop a list with commonalities and differences noted.

4. Teachers can wrap-up the activity by discussing the following with students:

- How did your personal feelings and background influence your selection of events?
- This exercise is an example of how perspective can influence beliefs; how would you define 'perspective'?

Teachers can ask students to keep these ideas in mind as they examine some secondary sources on the War of 1812.

### Part 2

1. In light of the fact that both the United States and Britain/Canada claimed victory in the War of 1812, students can be asked if they can predict what the various national sources might say in their descriptions of the **causes and consequences** of the war? How might

the sources written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries differ in their interpretations and perspectives?

2. Students should be divided into small groups and be given one source at a time that provides information on the causes and consequences of the war (**Appendix 1**). As students examine the sources, they will complete an organizer (**Appendix 2**) that contains information about the nature of source, audience, nationality, date, vocabulary, list of causes, biases noted, results. Students will then determine what the source says (or implies) about who was to blame for the war and what were the consequences, if any, of the war.

3. You may want to put these additional questions on the board to help guide students in their reading:

- What causes were mentioned and repeated?
- What consequences were mentioned and repeated?
- What words/phrases indicated a particular perspective/bias?

4. Students will present their findings and a master list of comments will be created with similarities and differences noted. Students will review and attempt to answer the focus question.

**Teaching Tip: You may wish to discuss why is it important to know that perspectives are included in writing history. This discussion will help students to understand that history is constructed based on what information/evidence is included, and what is left out. What we choose to include or leave out, is often influenced by our perspective.**

## Various Interpretations of the War of 1812

### A) NINETEENTH CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS

**Excerpt A – J. George Hodgins. A History of Canada and the Other British Provinces in North America. Montreal: Published by John Lovell, 1866.**

#### Causes:

The relations between England and the United States had been unsatisfactory for some time. This state of things arose out of the persistent claim of the British Government to the right of Search for British naval deserters in American vessels, and also in consequence of . . . [laws banning trade between Britain and other countries and threatening seizure of ships that violated the decrees] . . . In the meantime the relations between England and the United States continued to be most unfriendly. At length a decisive act of hostility occurred in the capture, on the 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1812, by an American frigate of 44 guns, of a British sloop (*single sail military vessel*) of 18 guns.

In order to excite Congress to a prompt declaration of war against Great Britain, President Madison purchased from Captain Henry for \$500,000, a series of confidential letters, which the captain had written . . . on the state of feeling in the New England States against the projected war. In the letters a wish on the part of these states to ally themselves with England was alleged. The President laid these letters before Congress, as evidence of the secret machinations (*plots*) of England against the integrity of the Republic. They produced the desired result; and . . . war was forthwith declared against England by the President on the 18<sup>th</sup> June.

#### Consequences:

Although the war of 1812 lasted only three years, it left Upper and Lower Canada very much exhausted. It, however, developed the patriotism and loyalty of the people in the two Provinces in a high degree. Party spirit was hushed; and political parties of all shades united in a firm determination to uphold the honour of the country's flag . . . And notably, the loyal militia (*consisting of unprofessional soldiers . . . who at this time were mostly farmers*) of Canada maintained their country's freedom; for at the close of the war no invader's foot rested within our borders.

**Excerpt B – William Withrow. A History of Canada for the Use of Schools.  
Toronto: Copp, Clark, 1876**

**Causes:**

For sometime previous to the open rupture of 1812, public feeling in the United States had become increasing hostile to Great Britain. The “Berlin Decrees” of Napoleon (November 1, 1806), declared a blockade of the entire British coast, and let loose French privateers against her shipping, and that of neutral nations trading with her. Great Britain retaliated with “Orders in Council” which declared all traffic with France [... illegal ...]. These restrictions pressed heavily on neutrals, especially on the United States, which now engrossed much of the carrying trade of the world.

Another cause conspired to fan the war feeling to a flame. Great Britain asserted the “right of search” of American vessels for deserters from her navy. The United States frigate *Chesapeake* resisted this right, but was compelled to submit, and to deliver up four deserters found among her crew . . .

Public resentment in the United States was still further exasperated by the publication of the secret correspondence of a Captain Henry, a renegade adventurer, sent by Sir James Craig, Governor-General of Canada, in 1809, to ascertain the state of feeling in New England toward Great Britain. He reported a disposition to secede from the Union . . . His information was unauthentic and unimportant . . . War was declared June eighteenth, 1812, in the hope of . . . overrunning Canada before it could be aided by Great Britain. Almost simultaneous the obnoxious “Orders in Council”, the chief ostensible cause of the war, were repealed, but the news produced no change in American policy.

**Consequences:**

The calm verdict of history finds much ground for the revolt of 1776; but for the American declaration of war 1812, little or none. A reckless Democratic majority wantonly invaded the country of an unoffending neighbouring people, to seduce them from their lawful allegiance and annex their territory. The long and costly conflict was alike bloody and barren... On Canada, too, the burden of the war fell heavily. Great Britain, exhausted by nearly twenty years of conflict, and still engaged in a strenuous struggle against the European despot, Napoleon, could only, till near the close of the war furnish scanty military aid. It was Canadian militia, with little help from British regulars, who won the brilliant victories of Chrysler’s Farm and Chateauguay; and throughout the entire conflict they were the principal defence of their country. In many a Canadian home bitter tears were shed for son or sire left cold and stark upon the bloody plain of Queenston Heights or Chippewa, or Lundy’s Lane, or other hard fought field of battle.

**Excerpt C -- G. Mercer and W. J. Robertson. Public School History of England and Canada. Toronto: Copp, Clark, 1886**

**Causes:**

In this year (1811) the growing hostility to Britain shown by the United States, which had never got over the bitterness of separation, rose to a flame over some unauthorized acts of British naval officers in command of vessels on the Atlantic coast. Previous acts in asserting England's "right to search" on the high seas, for deserters and contraband . . . had intensified the ill-feeling between the two countries. Britain was at this period in the throes of a European conflict [. . . and was therefore not inclined to . . .] undertake a new war on the American continent.

There was little justification for the invasion of Canada, and the step was opposed by a considerable portion of the American people. Congress, however, declared it was against Great Britain, and took instant steps to invade Canada. Canada . . . proceeded to call out her militia and determinedly braced herself to resist invasion.

**Consequences:**

The Treaty of Ghent terminated the war, and left Canada in possession of Britain. The country had been devastated, innumerable homes made desolate, and thousands of lives sacrificed, in an inglorious attempt by the American people to subjugate Canada, and supplant the Union Jack by the Stars and Stripes.

**Excerpt D – Henry Chambers. A Higher History of the United States for Schools and Academies. New York: University Publishing Company, 1898**

**Causes:**

In the war which Napoleon waged against England, American commerce suffered greatly. To injure France, England issued several Orders in Council prohibiting any vessel from entering a French port. In retaliation, Napoleon issued several Decrees forbidding any vessel to carry English goods to any port of Europe or to submit to being searched by any English ship of war...

One of the most flagrant of these outrages was that committed upon the American frigate Chesapeake. The Chesapeake was stopped by the British ship of war Leopard. The British commander claimed several of the Chesapeake's crew as deserters from the English navy, and demanded that they be given up. On being refused, the Leopard opened fire. The attack was a surprise, and the Chesapeake in her unprepared state soon lowered her flag.

News of the outrage caused the greatest indignation throughout the United States. [President] Jefferson issued a proclamation ordering all British vessels to leave American ports. He wished, however, to avoid war with England, and pursued a policy which he thought would bring England to terms.

The efforts of the United States to avoid war only brought upon it the contempt of foreign nations. England and France both continued their outrages. Nine hundred American vessels were taken by England since difficulties began . . . Five hundred and fifty vessels had fallen prey to France. Neither nation gave any heed to the protests of our Government. Our position was indeed humiliating . . .

But a new generation was coming to the front and making itself felt in American affairs. These younger citizens saw their country insulted and humiliated upon every side . . . The honour of America was at stake, and the spirit of young America was eager to defend it. War was demanded. Both England and France had been aggressors; but the conduct of England had been the more offensive . . .

**Consequences:**

The results of the War of 1812 seemed at first of little consequence. In reality they were of much importance. Respect for the United States greatly increased abroad, for a nation that could vanquish the powerful ships and experienced veterans of England was no longer to be despised. National spirit and the idea of union were greatly strengthened at home, for men do not fight and suffer for a government without becoming very much interested in its welfare. The States, which were at first but loosely held together, were now bound more closely by common

sympathies and by the memory of gallant deeds and of the glories they had jointly achieved.

## **TWENTIETH CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS**

### **Excerpt E – Frank Basil Tracy. *The Tercentenary History of Canada: From Champlain to Laurier, Vol II.* Toronto: P.F. Collier, 1908**

#### **Causes:**

It is not necessary for us to give in detail the causes of that war... One cause of irritation was the [seizure] of American seamen by British ships. The British authorities claimed the right to search any vessel anywhere either in an English port or on the high seas, in order to find British sailors who were serving under another flag that they might escape service in their own country. The British navy was suffering heavily from desertions, and this drastic step was taken to recruit the force  
...

Now in all this disturbance and quarrel there was, as any one today can see, no real justification for a war, but the United States had been yearning for war with Great Britain ever since the Revolution. The temper of the people was distinctly anti-British, and the tactlessness of the British authorities in dealing with the American ships and with American commerce provoked the Americans until they were fighting mad and mad for a fight.

...It had been alleged in the United States... that Canadian officials had incited the Indians to revolt. This is, we are pretty sure, a groundless allegation. In fact, the year before the Canadian government had warned the United States in a friendly way of the existence of this hostile spirit among the Indians.

### **Excerpt F – Leon Canfield and Howard Wilder. *The Making of Modern America.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958**

#### **Consequences:**

After the war the countries of Europe looked with new respect at the United States, the young nations which had dared to cross swords with the leading naval power of the day. Of even more importance was the fact that the United States now turned its back on Europe and poured all its energies into developing its resources and settling problems within the country. With the defeat of the Indians along the frontier the way to the west was open as never before.

## Source Evidence

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

|  |                                    |                                |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>1. What type of source is it?</b>   | <b>2. Who authored/created it?</b> | <b>3. When was it created?</b> |
| <b>4. What historical events were occurring when it was created?</b>                                     |                                    |                                |
| <b>5. Why was it created? Who was the intended audience?</b>   |                                    |                                |
| <b>6. What point of view/position does the author/creator represent?</b>                                 |                                    |                                |
| <b>7. How does the point of view/position shape the source?</b>  |                                    |                                |
| <b>8. What are the causes and results of the War of 1812 according to the source?</b>                    |                                    |                                |
| <b>9. What other information would you like to know in order to understand the source's perspective?</b> |                                    |                                |