THE WAR OF 1812

Causes of the War of 1812
Neither Britain nor the U.S. wanted their dispute to end in war, and yet war between them did break out in 1812. From the U.S. point of view, the pressures leading to war came from two directions:

1. Continued violation of U.S. neutral rights at sea
2. Troubles with the British on the western frontier

1. Free Seas and Trade
As a trading nation, the U.S. depended upon the free flow of shipping across the Atlantic. Yet the chief belligerents in Europe, Britain, & France, had no interest in respecting neutral rights so long as they were locked in a life-and-death struggle with each other. Since the French Revolution in the 1790s, the majority of Americans had tended to sympathize with France against Britain. They remembered that Britain had seemed a cruel enemy during the American Revolution, and Jeffersonian Republicans applauded the French for having overthrown their monarchy in their Revolution. Moreover, even though both the French & the British violated U.S. neutral rights, the British violations appeared to be more blatant because of the British navy's practice of impressing Americans at sea.

2. Frontier Pressures
Adding to grievances over British actions at sea were the ambitions of western Americans for more open land. Americans on the frontier longed for the lands of British Canada and Spanish Florida. Standing in the way of their ambitions were the British and their Indian and Spanish allies. Conflict with the Native Americans was a problem for the restless westerners. For decades, settlers had been pushing the Native Americans farther westward. In an effort to defend their lands from further encroachment, Shawnee twin brothers-Tecumseh, a warrior, & Prophet, a religious leader-attempted to unite all of the tribes east of the Mississippi River. White settlers became suspicious of Tecumseh & persuaded the governor of the Indiana Territory, General William Henry Harrison, to take aggressive action. In the Battle of Tippecanoe, in 1811, Harrison destroyed the Shawnee headquarters and put an end to Tecumseh’s efforts to form an Indian confederacy. The British had provided only limited aid to Tecumseh, but Americans on the frontier blamed the British for instigating the rebellion.

War Hawks
A congressional election in 1810 had brought a group of new, young Republicans to Congress, many of them from frontier states like Kentucky, Tennessee, & Ohio. Known as war hawks because of their eagerness for war with Britain, they quickly gained significant influence in the House of Representatives. Led by Henry Clay of Kentucky & John Calhoun of South Carolina, the war-hawk Congressmen argued that war with Britain would be the only way to defend American honor, gain Canada, and destroy Native American resistance on the frontier.

Declaration of War against Great Britain
British delays in meeting U.S. demands over neutral rights combined with political pressures from the war-hawk Congress finally persuaded Madison to seek a declaration of war against Britain. Ironically, the British government had by June 1812 agreed to suspend its naval blockade. News of its decision reached the White House after Congress had declared war.

A Divided Nation
Neither Congress nor the American people were united in support of the war. In Congress, Pennsylvania and Vermont joined the southern and western states to provide a slight majority for the war declaration. Voting against the war were most of the northern states (New York, New Jersey, & the rest of the states in New England).

The Election of 1812
Division of opinion was seen in the presidential election of 1812, in which Republican strength in the South and West overcame Federalist and antiwar Republican opposition to war in the North. Madison won reelection, defeating De Witt Clinton of NY, the candidate of the Federalists and antiwar Republicans.
Opposition to the War of 1812

Americans who opposed the war viewed it as "Mr. Madison’s War" & the work of the war hawks in Congress. Most outspoken in their criticism of the war were 3 groups: New England merchants, Federalist politicians, and “Quids,” or "Old" Republicans.

1. New England merchants were opposed because, after the repeal of the Embargo Act, they were making sizable profits from the European war and viewed impressment as merely a minor inconvenience. Both commercial interests and religious ties to Protestantism made them more sympathetic to the Protestant British than to the Catholic French.

2. Opposed as a matter of principle to anything Madison did, Federalist politicians viewed the war as Republican scheme to conquer Canada & Florida, with the ultimate aim of increasing Republican voting strength.

3. The "Quids" or "Old" Republicans criticized the war because it violated the Republican commitment to limited federal power & to the maintenance of peace.

Military Defeats & Naval Victories

Facing Britain’s overwhelming naval power, Madison’s military strategists based their hope for victory on Napoleon's continued success in Europe and a U.S. land campaign against Canada.

Invasion of Canada

A poorly equipped American army initiated military action in 1812 by launching a 3-part invasion of Canada, one force starting out from Detroit, another from Niagara, and a third from Lake Champlain. These & later invasions into Canada were easily repulsed by the British defenders. An American raid and burning of government buildings in York (Toronto) in 1813 only served to encourage retaliation by the British.

Naval Battles

The U.S. Navy achieved some notable victories, due largely to superior shipbuilding and the deeds of American sailors, including many free African Americans. In late 1812, the U.S. warship Constitution (nicknamed "Old Ironsides") raised American morale by defeating and sinking a British ship off the coast of Nova Scotia. Also effective were the attacks of American privateers who, motivated by both patriotism and profit, captured numerous British merchant ships. Offsetting these gains was the success of the British Navy in establishing a blockade of the U.S. coast, which crippled trading and fishing. Probably the most important naval battle of the war was fought in 1813 on Lake Erie. After a 3-hour fight, a young American, Captain Oliver Hazard Perry, declared, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." Perry’s naval victory prepared the way for General William Henry Harrison’s military victory at the Battle of Thames River (near Detroit), in which Tecumseh was killed. The next year in 1814 a British fleet was defeated at Lake Champlain. As a result, the British were forced to retreat and to abandon their plan to invade New York and New England.

Chesapeake Campaign

By the spring of 1814, the defeat of Napoleon in Europe enabled the British to increase their forces in North America. In the summer of 1814, a British Army marched through the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., & set fire to the White House, the Capitol, & other government buildings. The British also attempted to take Baltimore, but Fort McHenry held out after a night’s bombardment-an event immortalized by Francis Scott Key in the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Southern Campaign

Meanwhile, U.S. troops in the South were commanded by General Andrew Jackson. In March 1814, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in present-day Alabama, Jackson ended the power of an important British ally, the Creek nation. The victory not only eliminated the Native American ally but also opened new lands to white settlers. A major British effort to control the Mississippi River was halted at New Orleans by Jackson leading a force of frontiersmen, free blacks, and Creoles. The victory was impressive but also meaningless. The Battle of New Orleans was fought on Jan. 8, 1815 two weeks after a treaty ending the war had been signed in Ghent, Belgium.
The Treaty of Ghent

By 1814, the British were weary of war as having fought Napoleon for more than a decade, they now faced the prospect of maintaining the peace in Europe. At the same time, Madison’s government recognized that the Americans would be unable to win a decisive victory. American peace commissioners traveled to Ghent, Belgium, to discuss terms of peace with British diplomats. On Christmas Eve, 1814, an agreement was reached. The terms of the Treaty of Ghent were:

1. A halt to the fighting
2. The return of all conquered territory to the prewar claimant
3. Recognition of the prewar boundary between Canada & the United States

The Treaty of Ghent, promptly ratified by the Senate in 1815, said nothing at all about the grievances that led to war. Britain made no concessions concerning impressment, blockades, or other maritime differences. Thus, the war ended in stalemate with no gain for either side.

The Hartford Convention

Before the war ended, the New England states came close to seceding from the Union. Bitterly opposed to both the war and the Republicans government in Washington, radical Federalist in New England urged that the Constitution be amended and as a last resort, secession be voted upon. To consider these matters, a special convention was held at Hartford, Connecticut, in December 1814. Delegates from the New England states rejected the radical calls for secession, but to limit the growing power of the Republicans in the South and West, they adopted a number of proposals. One proposal called for a 2/3 vote of both houses for any future declaration of war. Shortly after the convention ended, news came of Jackson’s victory at New Orleans & the Treaty of Ghent. These events ended criticism of the war & weakened the Federalists by stamping them as unpatriotic.

The Legacy of the War of 1812

From Madison’s point of view, the war achieved none of its original aims. Nevertheless, it had a number of important consequences for the future development of the American republic such as:

1. Having now survived two wars with Britain, the United States gained the respect of other nations
2. The United States came to accept Canada as a neighbor and a part of the British Empire
3. Denounced for its talk of secession & disunion in New England, the Federalist Party came to an end as a national force & declined even in New England
4. Talk of nullification and secession in New England set a precedent that would later be used by the South
5. Abandoned by their British allies, Native Americans in the West were forced to surrender large areas of land to white settlers
6. As European goods became unavailable due to the British naval blockade, more U.S. factories were built, & Americans took a big step toward industrial self-sufficiency
7. War heroes such as Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison would soon be in the forefront of a new generation of political leaders
8. As a result of the war, there was a strong feeling of American nationalism & also a growing belief that the future for the U.S. lay in the West and away from Europe