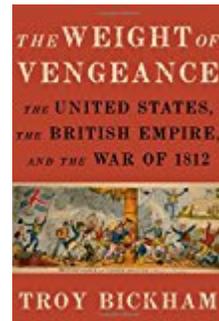




Troy O. Bickham. *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 352 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-539178-7.



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America's First Forgotten War

Significant anniversaries of major wars and conflicts tend to result in the publication of a new round of books examining the long passed events. While the War of 1812 does not enjoy “major war” status in Great Britain or the United States, it holds an important place in Canadian history. For Americans, perhaps the war remains best known for inspiring Francis Scott Key to write “The Star Spangled Banner,” which later became our national anthem. Beyond that, most Americans probably know very little of the war, other than a vague awareness that the British burned Washington DC in 1814. Much of the actual fighting occurred on the seas, thus making it very significant for the development of the nascent U.S. Navy.

Troy Bickham’s *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812*, examines the war from the perspective of both the British and American sides, and adds nicely to the scholarship on this conflict. He outlines the reasons for war between the two nations, traces the actual fighting, shines a light on those opposed to the war in each country, and then delves into the conclusion of the war and its results. The chapters

covering the road to war are the most interesting in this book, in large part because Bickham exposes many myths about the causes of the war.

From the beginning, an obvious contrast emerges between the protagonists: an established world power against a former colony of that great power. Fair trade is often cited as the major U.S. reason for going to war, but Bickham goes well beyond that easy answer in outlining the American reasons for war. Once initiated, the war took on a quality of validating the War for American Independence, concluded only twenty-nine years prior. For the British, the war nested inside an ongoing series of larger conflicts against Napoleonic France, then at the height of its power. The common conception of the War of 1812 for the British portrays it as a sideshow of sorts, taking a distant back seat to the larger war against Napoleon. Bickham refutes this by stressing that the British government and the public both cared deeply about the American war, although they cared for a variety of different reasons. He emphasizes that the lack of attention to the legacy of the war does not prove

a lack of interest at the time of the war.

Bickham covers the actual fighting portion of the war in two robust chapters, each primarily devoted to one of the belligerents. The American experience, taking the offensive approach, was one of woes. Because the United States declared war, it enjoyed the initial advantage of deciding when, where, and how to prosecute the war. Based on Britain's ongoing continental engagements, the American government wanted to make significant gains before Great Britain could move additional resources to North America. As the war went on though, it became increasingly obvious that the U.S. Army lacked many necessary capabilities essential to waging war. The issues spanned the full range: recruitment, training, planning, command and control, and resources. The U.S. Navy provided some early positive results at sea, but those small victories never proved decisive to the overall war. President James Madison also struggled to garner widespread support; an expected outpouring of patriotic spirit fell far short of the 1776 experience. By the end of the war, the U.S. Army began to fare slightly better, winning several key victories in 1814 and 1815. One of the best-known U.S. victories, the Battle of New Orleans, occurred in the period between signature and ratification of the Treaty of Ghent, which is covered nicely in the final chapter of the book.

In examining the other side, Bickham starts by taking a wide view of Britain's commitments across the empire, especially Canada. At the beginning of the war, the British had little choice but to fight a delaying action. As the Napoleonic wars approached a conclusion, for the first of two times, Great Britain devoted increasingly more resources to the North American war. From the aspect of a parent vs. colonial relationship, the Canadian picture had eerie similarity to that experienced by British troops in the American Revolution. While the stakes were undoubtedly high for Canadian colonists, their willingness to fight and their effectiveness were both rather low. In this chapter, Bickham also provides excellent coverage of the economic aspects of the war, particularly the chaotic effect on trade and commerce with the other western colonies in the empire. Bickham labels the 1814 attack and burning of Washington DC "as a diversion for the main event: invasion of the United States from Canada" (p. 165). That invasion never materialized due to the British loss at Plattsburgh in September 1814.

The next two chapters focus on the wartime opposition movements in the United States and Great Britain. These chapters do well in refuting much of the lore and

replacing it with facts and solid analysis. Bickham points out that American opposition had a variety of bases: partisan, ideological, economic, and regional differences all played out in the process of speaking or acting against the war effort. Despite individual distinctions, many of the antiwar Americans believed that the war would lead to a weakening of the United States, very important at that point due to the young age of the country. British opposition took on a more monochromatic theme; most sentiment there traced back to the economy. While not a new argument at the time, tracing back to the prerevolutionary days at least, the case was no less compelling in 1812 when evaluating the amount of trade between the two nations and the potential effects on Great Britain if that trade ceased. Bickham also highlights that disapproval of the War of 1812, like the war itself, fell within a broader context of opposition to the ongoing war with France.

The well-researched and well-written text concludes by looking beyond the war itself, and asking the important question, who won the War of 1812? Despite the typical view of the war as a draw, based mainly on the status quo antebellum terms of the Treaty of Ghent, Bickham declares the United States to have won. The British government still left the war feeling good about the result because a negotiated peace settlement with the Americans brought about a period of near absolute peace for the British Empire based on Napoleon's April 1814 abdication. Great Britain lost though because the war cemented the concept of America sovereignty, free from the wing of British influence. Bickham supports this assessment by pointing out that Europeans and Americans did not engage each other in conflict again until the end of the century, despite several opportunities to have done so.

One notable criticism of the book is the lack of maps. Even a few simple maps would have helped to amplify the narrative, especially in the chapters concerning the conduct of the war on land and at sea. Unfortunately this seems to follow a recent publishing trend against the use of maps. On the positive side, the inclusion of numerous political cartoons and other illustrations ably reinforces the points made in the text. On the whole, the book holds more appeal for diplomatic and political historians than for those looking for detailed campaign or battle histories. The beginning and end chapters specifically offer great insight into the foreign and domestic political machinations which led to the outbreak and conclusion of the war, and the lasting results of the War of 1812.

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