

British Strategy in the War of 1812—the Balance of Power in Europe and the Perilous War in the Americas

by Andrew Lambert, PhD

The War of 1812 was a curious conflict with at least three different interpretations of the outcome. For the Americans, it was an unambiguous triumph. The British, by contrast, had hoped for a collapse of Napoleon in Spain. The battle of Vitoria in 1813 had been a British diplomatic failure, but the collapse of Napoleon’s Spanish army in 1813 was a British success. Instead, British preeminence in the navy was challenged by the Napoleonic Wars. The British government was faced with a dilemma: it was committed to the liberation of Spain, while the British army was committed to the liberation of North America. The British government was forced to choose between the two major theaters of war, leaving a profoundly unenthusiastic government in London.

In 1812, the British government took several months to accept that the Americans were serious, delaying vital strategic measures. The government in London would have been content to accept a status quo ante at any time before the abdication of Napoleon in April 1814. They simply dropped up pressure on Washington by translating the vital naval blockade of New England into an economic offensive, and increased the scale and tempo of coastal raids. As long as Napoleon remained in power, the British soldiers could be spared for America, while fresh theaters were opening in Northern Europe.

At Napoleon retreated westward, the British saw an opportunity to destroy his naval arsenal and fleet at Antwerp. This was the overriding British strategic interest; in compensation, reinforcing Canada and attracting America was insignificant. Antwerp, the capital of Belgium, was a major French naval base, the fixed point around which the British developed their war aims and strategy. Yet, with the main army in Spain, the Cabinet could only ask for a policy that supported the strategy of occupation. If Britain lacked the military force to secure vital war aims in nearby Belgium, there was no prospect that men could be found to put down Napoleonic threat in France. The Americans concede that the British government had no intention of allowing any European power to take a role in the process. By contrast, British law had little ability to influence the negotiations at Ghent by military force. Three weeks after the end of the European conflict, Melville advised Castlereagh that the Admiralty was short

The Anglo-Austrian accord pre-empted the need for American grain and flour. The British government largely ignored every waking moment trying to keep the American trade in the Baltic, and Cockburn’s brilliant, extemporized, small-scale high-tide raiding on the Chesapeake was simply impossible. At the same time, a rising tide of insurrection across the Spanish Caribbean and Latin America challenged the security of the British sugar islands. As a result, too many troops were tied down in West Indies garrisons, ostensibly against the improbable risk of an American attack, but in fact to calm the nerves of politically powerful planters who feared a slave uprising.

The political weight of the West Indies remained strong: the Ministry depended on them and their profits. By early 1813, Britain had no intention of allowing any European power to take a role in the process. By contrast, British law had little ability to influence the negotiations at Ghent by military force. Three weeks after the end of the European conflict, Melville advised Castlereagh that the Admiralty was short
of troop ships. Amphibious operations on the American coast would tie down a large fleet of such ships, because the troops had to be based afloat. British troop numbers at Bladensburg and Baltimore were restricted by the logistical demands of a floating army.

### War on the Frontier

Following the defeat of the economic war in the Atlantic, America's only strategic option in 1814 was yet another invasion of Canada. Having mustered 27,000 regular troops across the country, plus militia, to oppose 12,000 British troops in Canada, any hope of an effective strategy was ruined by quarrels over priorities at Niagara and Washington. The American campaign was better handled than those of 1812 and 1813, but no more successful. By winter all the Americans were once again back on US soil, but they were saved from worse by the ignominious debacle that overtook the largest British land operation of the war. General George Prévost, the cautious Governor General of Lower Canada, had been ordered to advance to Lake Champlain with 11,000 regulars. Before attacking the heavily outnumbered American defenders of Plattsburgh, New York, on the western side of the lake, he directed his naval force to attack the American squadron. The British were defeated decisively, and Prévost, who had manifested no enthusiasm for the operation, retreated to Canada. His failure helped persuade the British to accept the status quo in the negotiations at Ghent.

#### Peace Talks

After Napoleon’s abdication, the American war became a source of growing diplomatic embarrassment for the British government. It left Britain looking weak and distracted just as her European partners were about to settle the political future of the continent. Peace would allow the British to focus on the bigger questions that were to be settled at Vienna and Washington, Baltimore, and Plattsburgh mattered because Britain needed peace with America to secure the benefits of peace in Europe. The death of Robert Ross and the humiliating failure at Plattsburgh broke the spell of Anglo victory, bringing an air of reality to British thinking. Prévost’s debacle at Plattsburgh proved hugely embarrassing and, far worse: it broke the run of success that was proving perfectly effective. Warfare had proven perfectly effective. The strategy of sea control and economic warfare, both internal measures to block trade, were simply irrelevant. By contrast, the New England blockade beginning in the summer of 1814 immediately pushed up commodity prices by 40%, devastat-
is indicative of the fundamentally maritime nature of British strategy that Liverpool did not feel it necessary to mention the obvious lesson that Canada would be defended by the Royal Navy, not a rectified frontier, fortresses, or an army.

For the British, the War of 1812 had always been a “tiresome, pointless distraction… a nuisance, but not a serious threat.” Little wonder that public reaction to the Treaty of Ghent was muted; at least the merchant princes of Liverpool and Bristol were content. With the war at an end, the government could focus on Europe and impending domestic battles over taxation and expenditure. The connection between the epic peace process underway at Vienna and the small-scale discussions at Ghent had long been obvious. By the time news of American ratification reached London in late March, the domestic and international political landscapes had changed. No one cared.

The Treaty of Ghent upheld British maritime belligerent rights, the fundamental bedrock of British power. While many have seen the British position as overbearing and dictatorial towards neutrals, there was no room for neutrality in a total war, the alternative would have been Napoleonic domination of the Continent. By keeping the American war isolated from the European conflict, and accepting the status quo ante, British statesmen showed great wisdom, preserving the legal basis of sea power and reducing the risk of future problems. Ghent maintained a clear distinction between Europe and the outside world, which suited the British, who controlled the communications and trade that bridged the gap. It helped maintain British global power for two generations at a very low cost. Above all, British aims at Ghent and Vienna were clear and consistent—the restoration or recreation of a stable, peaceful world open to trade, one in which the British could prosper while they paid off the mountainous debts incurred waging war with much of the very same world threats, beyond an endless chain of massive stone fortresses. As the maritime belligerent rights regime that won the war of 1812 had not been affected by the Treaty of Ghent, America remained desperately vulnerable after 1815. America lacked the military muscle to win a short war, and, once the British troops had reinforced Canada, the imposition of an effective economic blockade quickly exposed Washington’s chronic lack of financial power. America could not pay for a long war, even one conducted on strictly limited terms. The cost of war was a 200% increase in the American national debt and a decisive shift away from oceanic maritime enterprise.

Back in Great Britain, peace was greeted with little pleasure; Sir Walter Scott lamented the failure to administer America a stern lesson but admitted the country was unwilling to wage the war for such a nebulous object. As a world-class creator of fabulous stories, he realized the Americans had been given an opportunity to claim victory in print, and convince themselves they might try again. Scott understood the enduring legacy of 1812 would not be territory or rights, but a distinct American culture: he expected American pens would generate the victory that had eluded their swords, and this proved to be the case. The War of 1812 was not a second War of Independence in political terms, but it did mark the decisive parting of two cultures. It drove America to acquire a distinctive identity, one that was truly of the New World. ❯

“\textit{A Hundred Years Peace,}” the Signature of the Treaty of Ghent between Great Britain and the United States of America—24 December 1814 by Sir Amédée Forestier.

Andrew Lambert is Laughton Professor of Naval History in the Department of War Studies at King’s College, London. His work focuses on the naval and strategic history of the British Empire between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. His books include: The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy against Russia 1853–1856 (1990); The War Correspondents: The Crimean War (1994); The Foundations of Naval History: Sir John Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Profession (1997); Nelson: Britannia’s God of War (2004); Admirals (2008); Franklin: Tragic hero of Polar Navigation (2009); and The Challenge: Britain versus America in the Naval War of 1812 (2012).