The War of 1812 - Crash Course US History #11

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course US History and today we're going to talk about what America's best at: War.

Cue libertage

Me From the Past: Uh Mr. Green, the United States has only declared war five times in the last 230 years.

John Green: Oh me from the the past, you sniveling literalist. Well today we are going to talk about America's first declared war, The War of 1812, so called because historians are terrible at naming things. I mean the could have called it The Revolutionary War: Part Deux, or The Canadian Cataclysm, or The War to Facilitate Future Wars. But no. They just named it after the year it started.

Cue Intro

I know this disappoints the military historians among you but as usual we are going to spend more time talking about the causes and effects of the war than like the actual killing part, because ultimately it is the ambiguity of The War of 1812 that makes it so interesting.

The reason most often given for The War of 1812 was the British impressment of American sailors where by American sailors would be kidnapped and basically forced into British servitude. This disrupted American shipping and also seems like a reasonably obvious violation of American sovereignty, but it's a little more complicated than that.

First of all, there were many thousands of British sailors working aboard American ships so many of the sailors the British captured were in fact British. Which gets to the large point that citizenship at the time was a pretty slippery concept especially on the high seas. Like papers were often forged, and many sailors identified supposed Americans through tattoos of like eagles and flags. And there were several reasons why a British sailor might like to become, or pretend to be, an American, including that the Brits at the time were fighting Napoleon in what historians, in there infinity creativity, called The Napoleonic Wars.

And on that topic, Britain's impressment policy allowed them to disrupt American shipping to France and get new British sailors to strengthen their war effort, which was annoying to the Americans on a couple levels especially the French-loving Republicans, which is a phrase you don't hear very often anymore.

Another reason often given for the war, was America's crazy conspiratorial Anglo-phobia. There was even a widespread rumor that British agents were buying up Connecticut sheep in order to sabotage the textile industry, lest you worry that American fascination with conspiracy theories is new.

So those pushing for war were known as war hawks, and the most famous among them was Kentucky's Henry Clay. They took the impressment of sailors as an affront to American national honor, but they also complained that Britain's actions were an affront to free trade, by which they meant America's ability to trade with Europeans other than Great Britain.

And to be fair, the British were trying to limit American trade. They even passed The Orders in Counsel which required American ships to dock in Britain and pay tax before trading with other European nations. Britain, we were an independent nation! You can't do that kind of stuff! We have a special relationship but it's not that special!

But the problem with saying that this caused the war was that The Orders had been in affect for five years before the war started and they were rescinded in 1812 before we declared war, although admittedly we didn't know about it because it didn't reach us until after we declared -- there was no twitter.

Another reason for the war was Canada. That's right Canada. American's wanted you and who can blame them we your excellent healthcare and your hockey and your first rate national anthem. Stan this is fun but enough with the #1812problems.

According to the Virginia Congressman John Randolph, "Agrarian cupidity not maritime rights urges the war. We have heard but one word: Canada, Canada, Canada." I'm not here to criticize you John Randolph but that's actually three words.

Now some historians disagree with this but the relentless pursuit of new land certainly fits in with the Jeffersonian model of an agrarian republic. And there's another factor that figured into America's decision to go to war: expansion into territory controlled by Native Americans.

[cue mystery document]

Oh, it's time for the mystery document? The rules here are simple. I try to guess the author of the mystery document. Usually I'm wrong and I get shocked. Alright, lets see what we got here.

"You want, by your distinctions of Indian tribes, in allotting to each a particular tract of land, to make them to war with each other. You never see an Indian come and endeavor to make the white people do so."

John Green: It's Tecumseh. Drop the mic... is something that I would do except that the mic is actually attached to my shirt so there's -- there's no drama in this.

Clearly a Native American criticism of white people, and I happen to know that that particular one comes from Tecumseh and I don't get shocked today.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that Americans were continuing to push westward into territories where Indians were living, I mean, this was a big reason for the Louisiana Purchase after all.

By the beginning of the war, more than 400,000 settlers had moved into territories west of the original 13 colonies and they outnumbered American Indians by a significant margin.

Some native groups responded with a measure of assimilation. Cherokees like John Ross wanted to become more "civilized", that is, more white and farmer-y. And some if them did even adopt such civilized practices as written language and slavery, the most civilized practice of all.

UUUUHHHHHGGGG...

People are always like, "Why aren't you more celebratory of American History?" Well, why isn't there more to celebrate?

But other Indians wanted to resist. The best known of these were the aforementioned Tecumseh and his brother Tensk -- Stan, can you just put it on the screen? (says "Tenskwatawa on screen) Yes. Let's just enjoy looking at that. Right, that's just for all you visual learners.

So he was also known as The Prophet, because of his religious teachings, and also because of the pronunciation issues. The Prophet encouraged Indians, especially those living in and around the settlement of Prophetstown, to abandon the ways of the whites, primarily in the form of alcohol and manufactured consumer goods.

So stop drinking alcohol and eating refined sugars -- this guy sounds like my doctor! Tecumseh was more militant; attempting to revive Neolin's idea of pan-Indianism and actively resisting white settlement. As he put it, "Sell a country, why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the Earth? Did not the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?"

The Americans responded to this reasonable criticism in the traditional manner -- with guns. William Henry Harrison destroyed the native settlement at Prophetstown in what would become known as the Battle of Tippecanoe. He would later ride that fame all the way to the presidency in 1840 and then - SPOILER ALERT! - he would give the longest inauguration address ever, catch a cold, and die 40 days later.

Let that be a lesson to you, American politicians. Long speeches? Fatal!

So I just painted a pretty negative picture of the American treatment of the Indians -- because it was awful. But I haven't mentioned how this relates to the War of 1812. The Americans were receiving reports that the British were encouraging Tecumseh, which they probably were.

And the important thing to remember here is that the War of 1812, like the Seven Years War and the American Revolution was also a war against Indians. And as in those other two wars, the Indians were the biggest losers. And not in the cool way of biggest loser where like Trainer Bob helps you lose weight, but in the really sad way, where your entire civilization gets John C. Calhouned.

So the War of 1812 was the first time that the United States declared war on anybody. It was also the smallest margin of a declaration of war vote: 79 to 49 in the House and 19 to 13 in the Senate.

Northern States, which relied on trade a lot, didn't want to go to war, while southern and western states, which were more agrarian and wanted expansion to get land for farming and slavery, did.

The closeness of the vote reflects a profound ambivalence about the war. As Henry Adams put it, "Many Nations have gone to war in pure gaiety of the heart, but perhaps the United States were the first to force themselves into a war they dreaded, in the hope that the war itself might create the spirit they lacked."

Don't worry, Henry Adams! In the future we're going to get pretty gaiety of heart-ish about war. Anyways, as an actual war, the War of 1812 was something of a farce. Let's go to the thought bubble.

Cue Thought Bubble

The US army numbered 10-12 thousand and its officers were sunk into either sloth, ignorance, or habits of intemperate drinking. The US navy had 17 ships. Great Britain had 1,000.

Also, America had very little money, Britain collected 40 times more tax revenue than the US. But Britain was busy fighting Napoleon, which is why they didn't really start kicking America's butt until 1814, after Napoleon was defeated. Napoleon's defeat was also the practice of impressment, since Britain didn't need so many sailors anymore.

Initially, much of the war consisted of America's attempts to take Canada, which any map will show you went smashingly. Americans were confident the Canadians would rush to join the US, when marching from Detroit, General William Hull informed the Canadians that, "You will be emancipated from tyranny and oppression and restored to the dignified station of free men."

And the Canadians were like, "Yeah, we're okay actually." And so the British in Canada, with their Indian allies, went ahead and captured Detroit and then forced Hull to surrender.

America's lack of success in Canada was primarily attributable to terrible strategy. They might have succeeded if they'd taken Montreal, but they didn't want to march through northern New York because it was full of Federalists who were opposed to the war. Instead they concentrated on the West, that is, the area around Detroit, where fighting went back and forth.

The British had much more success, even seizing Washington D. C. and burning the white house. In the course of the battle, British admiral George Cockburn, overseeing the destruction of a newspaper printing house, told the forces that took the city, "Be sure that all the Cs are destroyed, so that the rascals cannot any longer abuse my name.

It's hard out there for a Cockburn. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

End of Thought Bubble.

Given these problems it's amazing there were any American successes, but there were. The battleship USS Constitution broke the myth of British naval invincibility when cannonballs bounced off it and earned it the nickname "Old Ironsides". Oliver Hazard Perry defeated a British fleet, in, of all places, Lake Erie.

At the battle of the Thames, William Harry Harrison defeated Tecumseh and the battle of Horseshoe Ben showed one of the reasons why Indians were defeated when Andrew Jackson played one groups of Creeks against another group of Creeks and Cherokees. 800 Indians were killed in that battle.

And speaking of Jackson, the most notable American victory of the war was the Battle of New Orleans, which catapulted him to prominence. He lost only 71 men while inflicted 236 British casualties.

Of course, the most memorable thing about the battle is that it took place two weeks after the peace treaty ending the war had been signed. But hey, that's not Jackson's fault. Again-no twitter, #1815problems.

The treaty of Ghent, which ended the war, proved just how necessary the war had been; not at all. No territory changed hands when negotiations started and on August 1814, the British asked for Northern Maine, demilitarization of The Great Lakes, and some territory to create an independent nation for the Indians, and the Northwest.

But none of that happened, not because the US was in a particularly good negotiating position but it would have been awkward for Great Britain to carve out pieces of the US, and then tell Russia and Prussia that they couldn't take pieces of Europe for themselves to celebrate their victory in the Napoleonic Wars.

There were no provisions in the treaty about impressment or free trade and basically the treaty returned everything to the status quo. Neither the US or Great Britain actually won. But the Indians suffered significant casualties and gave up even more territory, definitely lost.

So with a treaty like that, the war must have had a negligible impact on American history, right? Except, no. The war of 1812 confirmed that the US would exist. Britain would never invade American again. (until 1961). I mean the US were good customers, and Britain was happy to let them trade, as long as that trade wasn't helping a French dictator.

The War launched Andrew Jackson's career and solidified the settlement and conquest of land east of the Mississippi River, and our lack of success in Canada reinforced Canadian nationalism while also ensuring that instead of becoming one great nation, we would forever be Canada's pants.

The war also spelled the end of the Federalist Party, which tried in 1850 with the Hartford Convention to change the constitution. In retrospect, the Hartford Convention proposals actually look pretty reasonable. They wanted to eliminate the clause wherein black people were counted as 3/5 of a human, and require a 2/3 congressional majority to declare war.Â But Because they had their convention right before Jackson's victory in New Orleans, they only came off looking unpatriotic and out of touch, as the elite so often do.

It's hard to argue that the Americans really won The War of 1812, but we felt like we won, and nothing unleashes national pride like war winning. The nationalistic fervor that emerged in the early 19th century, was like most things; good news for some and bad news for others. But whats important to remember is regardless of whether you're an American is that after 1812, the United States saw itself not just as an independent nation but as a big player on the world stage.

For better and for worse, that's a gig we've held onto and no matter how you feel about America's international interventions, you need to remember, that didn't begin in Afghanistan or even Europe; it started with freakin' Canada.

Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

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