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Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 637. ISBN 978-0-674-02584-4.

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America's bungled effort in the War of 1812 is an excellent example of how not to fight a war. The frequent incompetence of American generals and government officials resulted in many defeats. Nor did the further America's diplomatic objective to protect its rights of neutrality. With its provision to restore the *status quo ante bellum*, the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war, made the conflict seem senseless for the United States. John Quincy Adams, a member of the American delegation that negotiated the treaty, stated: "Nothing was adjusted, nothing was settled—nothing in substance but an indefinite suspension of hostilities was agreed to."<sup>1</sup> Yet many Americans believed the United States had whipped Great Britain in what was called a second war of independence.

In *1812: War with America*, Jon Latimer examines this apparent contradiction between what actually happened and how it was subsequently perceived by the American people. Presenting a decidedly British perspective, Latimer, a former lecturer at the University of Wales in Swansea,<sup>2</sup> disputes the "myth" that the war was "forced on a peaceable America by continuous provocation by an arrogant Britain" (2). He insists that the number of American sailors impressed into service in the British navy has often been exaggerated and that Britain's serious encroachments on America's neutral rights must be viewed in the context of its efforts to remain a pre-eminent world power during its very long struggle against France in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Moreover, though maritime grievances were the main issues pushing America toward belligerency, it was desire for Canada that "would tip the scales into war" (25).<sup>3</sup>

Most of Latimer's book concerns the military campaigns of the conflict as they were affected by problematic financial and administrative conditions and a logistics nightmare for both sides.<sup>4</sup> As he notes, the distances in North America were greater than in Europe, the terrain often significantly more difficult, and the climate harsher. This greatly contributed to logistical problems that severely limited the size of forces and operations.

Overall, the book offers extensive coverage of naval and land operations, placing them within the context of the concluding years of the Napoleonic Wars. Latimer points out that the Americans did not suffer the full brunt of British military capabilities during the War of 1812, since England was fighting Napoleon and the war in America was "little more than an annoying distraction" (35). But he argues that lack of preparedness undercut the American war effort: "Indeed, defeat was practically guaranteed from the moment Madison and Congress stepped onto the warpath with risible preparations that undercooked the navy and put a half-baked army in the field: America would have to go to war with the army it had, not the army it might want, or wish it had" (59). American forces nonetheless won victories on the Great Lakes and in the Northwest, as the alliance between the British and Tecumseh's pan-Indian organization fractured. Furthermore, all of Britain's invasions of the United States eventually ended in failure. The inability to secure a

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1. James West Davidson, et al., *Nation of Nations*, 5th ed. (NY: McGraw-Hill, 2005) 281.

2. And author of six other books, including *Deception in War* (London: John Murray, 2001) and *Buccaneers of the Caribbean* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2009).

3. For historiographical analyses of the causes of the War of 1812, see Jerald A. Combs, *American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1983) and Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

4. For excellent studies of the administrative and political aspects of the war on the American side, see Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (NY: Macmillan, 1951) and J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1983).

crushing victory in 1814 pushed Britain toward negotiating an end to the conflict that resulted in the Treaty of Ghent, signed on Christmas Eve. News of the U.S. Senate's ratification of the treaty reached London on 13 March 1815, just four days after Napoleon escaped from Elba. This allowed the British government to deploy troops to Belgium instead of America, helping ensure the Duke of Wellington's victory at Waterloo.

In evaluating the conflict's outcomes, Latimer stresses America's failure to conquer Canada and ridicules the myth of a second war of American independence: "the one really decisive and lasting result of the War of 1812 was the complete British victory in Canada that secured Canadian independence" (408). Further, by war's end, the United States had achieved none of its aims, its trade had been almost eliminated, and the nation's capital lay in ashes: "in these terms, the War of 1812 must be seen as a British victory, however marginal" (4).

Yet Henry Clay, another American negotiator at Ghent, asserted that, while the United States had earlier suffered scorn and contempt for failing to defend its national honor, after the war it had gained "respectability and character abroad—security and confidence at home."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Americans had again proven they could survive a fight against the greatest power in the world. The eruption of national pride following the stunning American victory at the Battle of New Orleans just two weeks after the Treaty of Ghent was signed indicated a perceptible change in the country's mood: "in asserting itself on the world stage in a fight against a major power, ... [a] new assertive and ambitious United States emerged, ... for the war vindicated the United States to itself as a nation" (403-4).

Latimer has fashioned a richly detailed and deeply informed analysis of the War of 1812. Of the many books on the war published in the past twenty-five years,<sup>6</sup> his should be ranked near the top.

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5. Davidson (note 1 above) 281.

6. See, e.g., Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Champaign: U Illinois Pr, 1990).