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Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xi, 325. ISBN 978-0-19-539178-7.

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Rather than examine the War of 1812 in blow-by-blow detail, historian Troy Bickham (Texas A&M)¹ summarizes military and naval engagements of the conflict and places them in the context of the many momentous events that troubled the world before, during, and after the war:

The United States was ... engaged in an undeclared quasi war with Spain over the Floridas, aided a rebellion in Texas, and fought a series of wars with American Indians, most notably against the northern confederacy led by Tecumseh and against the Red Sticks, so named for their vermilion-stained war clubs, in the Creek War. Meanwhile Britain waged a global war against France. Yet to depict these conflicts as branches of the War of 1812 is to miss the forest for the trees. North America was not the center of the Universe in 1812. Europe was locked in a parallel struggle that had littered the world with the corpses of tens of millions of soldiers, sailors, and civilians. The wars in Europe engulfed much of the world, precipitating and facilitating innumerable local conflicts in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, including the Haitian Revolution, the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War in South Asia, and the rise of the Nationalist Muhammad Ali in Egypt. (7)

By examining contemporary press reports from Europe, the West Indies, and North America, Bickham exposes the symptoms of public discontent—riots,² assassination,³ global conflict, and, in the United States, calls for secession.⁴

There were strong feelings of political and moral superiority throughout America and Britain. For example, the *Jamaica Magazine* declared that “The people of those [United] States have long been in the habit of viewing their own political importance through a medium similar to that by which a man comprehends the magnitude of his own nose.’ They have,’ the magazine continued, ‘like many eminent liars, told over their falsehoods so repeatedly, that they have at length worked themselves up to a belief of their reality.’ America’s self-importance grated at British sensibilities, and the war ... was the opportunity to correct this. A thorough chastisement of the United States would burst the Americans’ bubble and reassimilate them into the proper world order, in which Britain’s name came first on treaties with client nations...” (18–19). Furthermore, Bickham writes, “The French Revolution completed any rehabilitation by allowing British critics to unmask once and for all the true tyrannous nature of [American and French] republicanism; when war broke out again, Britain was once more the protector of human liberty against French [and American] oppression. As a result, both Britain and America entered the War of 1812 espousing a sense of moral superiority” (18).

Not for the first or last time, two nations found themselves fighting for the same thing: in this case, liberty. There was, of course, more to it; some participants in the conflict sought revenge (the vengeance of the book’s title), not least those loyalists who had fled north to Canada following American independence. They volunteered in disproportionately high numbers to fight for Britain because the Americans “were a people whose lands were manured with the blood of our friends and kinsman, who drove our wives and children out of their houses into the woods or threw them into dungeons” (13). This quotation from the

1. His previous books include *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005) and *Making Headlines: The American Revolution as Seen through the British Press* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois U Pr, 2009).

2. In June 1812, for example, a mob in Baltimore attacked and destroyed the press of the antiwar *Federal Republic* (187).

3. British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval was shot to death in the lobby of the House of Commons on 11 May 1812 (214).

4. Fear of secession was part of political life in the early republic and haunted the War of 1812 (196).

York Gazette (9 August 1812) typifies the sort of primary sources Bickham uses to reconstruct public opinion throughout North America, continental Europe, and the British Empire.

Chapter 1, “The American Case for War,” examines the American view in greater detail. In particular, Bickham recounts President James Madison’s “rambling” criticism, in June 1812, of Britain’s foreign policy and provocative behavior at sea; Madison’s complaints “lacked punch” and implied a sense of victimhood or grudge sustained since 1803: “Madison offered three primary reasons [for declaring war]: Britain’s ongoing interference with the overseas trade of the United States as a neutral nation, most specifically Britain’s Orders in Council;⁵ Britain’s standing policy of impressment of sailors from American merchant ships on the high seas; and, to a much lesser degree, Britain’s encouragement of American Indians living within the territory of the United States to rebel against American authority” (20).

In Chapter 2, “The British Empire’s Case for War,” Bickham highlights the prejudice still lingering in Britain long after America’s War of Independence. In a letter to the *Edinburgh Star*, headed “Character of the Americans,” a Scots clergyman who had lived in the United States postulated that

the problem was republicanism. In America “the great equality of the people” made everyone fancy himself a politician and a lawyer despite knowing precious little about those subjects.... But there is no arguing with these narrow arrogant people as “Truth seems to make no impression on their minds when it is opposite to their prejudices, but they are satisfied with the slightest shadow when it is on their own side.” Therefore, he lamented, “it is rare to see them convinced of any thing, and almost impossible to make them acknowledge that they have ever been in the wrong.” Worse still, the American form of government put these sorts of people in power. (52)

The British government, however, adopted a conciliatory but firm stance in response to mounting American belligerence. Before the United States declared war, Britain suspended the offending Orders in Council, but continued to impress British sailors discovered on American ships, on the grounds that they had been wrongly enticed from their patriotic duty by higher wages. Furthermore, Britain’s ongoing alliances with Native Americans were a vital addition to its thin defenses in Canada. The British saw some advantages in war with America as an overconfident, expansionist upstart threatening Canada, the West Indies, and maritime commerce. There was support for a maritime war to “remind the Americans who was in charge and who must obey in this transatlantic relationship.... The Yankees should be thus convinced of our decisive character and power” (65).

From the British perspective, the United States enjoyed far too close a relationship with France during the presidencies of Jefferson and Madison. “American ships handled the carrying trade between France and its colonies, France sold the Louisiana territory to the United States for a bargain price, the United States opened harbors to French privateers and warships that were closed to the Royal Navy, and the Americans seemingly accepted all of Napoleon’s restrictions on neutral trade while railing at Britain” (65–66). The *Bahama Gazette*, too, saw any official American action against Britain as the work of the “Corsican usurper” manipulating his puppet, Madison (66). Despite such overt animosity, close bonds still spanned the Atlantic: the *Edinburgh Star* regarded Americans as “brethren,” the Dublin *Freeman’s Journal* called them “our countrymen on the other side of the Atlantic.” Even the anti-Madison London *Times* lamented the eventual outbreak of war as a division of “two great British families” (68).

Chapter 3, “Declaring War,” shows that the changing political scene in Washington encouraged the US declaration of war in June 1812. For a while, fragmentation within the Republican party forestalled war, but the leader of the House of Representatives, Henry Clay, and his “War Mess” of fellow-lodgers, allied to a group of “war hawks,” eventually triumphed (79). The commercial restrictions imposed by Britain and France had by 1811 shattered the US economy, reducing annual revenues to \$11 million and to \$9 million in

5. A series of decrees, the equivalent of a US Executive Order, made by Britain’s Privy Council to restrict commerce during the Napoleonic War. Their effect was to constrain neutral trade and enforce a naval blockade of France and its allies. This infuriated many neutral nations, particularly the United States, which prospered by supplying vital commodities like grain and cotton to both sides during the European conflict. The Orders symbolized for many in the United States all that was wrong with the British-American relationship (26). They were removed “over Percival’s dead body” in 1812 (see note 3 above).

1812. Facing war preparation costs of \$22 million, Congress increased taxes and sought loans; these tardy measures proved barely adequate—a worrying omen of things to come (82). Not everyone supported the war: the Massachusetts legislature voted against it, but a dissenting Republican minority petitioned Washington “to resist depredations the most wanton and edicts the most barbarous, savage and tyrannical ... and to save our commerce from destruction, and our citizens from slavery” (87).

In Chapter 4, “America on the Offensive,” Bickham describes the faltering commencement of the war, its calamitous impact on communities, and various difficulties experienced by both sides. Assigning responsibility, he writes that the greatest error of judgment

belonged to the Madison administration, its agents, and its supporters in Congress, who earnestly believed they could bluff and bully the possessor of the world’s largest overseas empire and navy out of what it perceived as maritime rights. Failing that [achievement], many saw war against a vastly superior, albeit distracted, opponent as a viable alternative.... Congress balked at providing the resources and organization necessary to create an efficient military machine, and in less than two short years the United States government was bankrupt, the nation’s economy was in ruins, its troops were deserting in droves, and Britain was ready to take control of the war....

Despite mounting a series of invasions into Canada, the Americans came up largely empty handed as the combination of British regulars, Canadian militia, and American Indians consistently pushed them back into the United States. Problems of supply, recruitment, communication, inexperience, and an uncooperative militia beset the American forces’ every attempt.... Public optimism waned rapidly in 1813, as the wealthy began to evacuate coastal towns for fear of British attacks, and the Royal Navy’s blockade of America’s ports was expanded. Desertion mounted in the army and militia, and harsh attempts to stem the flow instilled only bitterness in an American public already suspicious of government power and armies. (99, 103, 112)

Yet there were American successes. York, the capital of Upper Canada, was captured in April 1813. Assisted by locals, the American raiders burned and looted much of the small town, escaping with about £2,500 worth of booty including the governor’s mace, which the United States kept until 1934 (112). The editor of South Carolina’s *Pendleton Messenger* celebrated the victory as a “presage of glorious events [that] will have a great effect on the British allies” (113), but most commentators were less sanguine. Indeed, the raid hardened the hearts of British commanders and encouraged later retaliation.

Bickham highlights the changing motivators and factors determining success or failure. After the initial engagements, Indians became a focus of discussion, displacing maritime rights, and both Britain and America struggled to control their militias, upon which both relied heavily. In Upper Canada,

Assumptions that the late loyalists remained American in outlook proved entirely true, but what both sides failed to grasp was that being an ordinary American typically meant not wanting to risk one’s life or property in a war. Mostly poor farmers hailing from the mid-Atlantic, the late loyalists were in many ways quintessentially Americans; like their brothers and sisters to the south, they avoided military service, regularly absconded from military duties whenever conditions became difficult or a harvest beckoned, traded with the enemy when profit could be had, and remonstrated against the hardships of war. (139).

In contrast, American Indians, who might comprise half a British force (113), were enthusiastic participants in the war: “Tecumseh underlined Brock’s threat [of an Indian massacre] by parading his warriors in full view of the [besieged] fort—circling them around to give the impression of an almost infinite Indian coalition. A terrified woman witnessing the display of painted warriors from inside the fort described the scene as akin to ‘standing at the entrance to hell, with the gates thrown open to let the damned out for an hour’s recreation on earth’” (116).

The American army’s failure on land was offset by early success at sea. In more than two decades of war against the French, the Royal Navy lost only one frigate in a single-ship action; against the Americans, they lost three in six months. The *Niles Weekly Register* called the USS *Constitution*’s victory over HMS *Guerrière* “one of the most splendid achievements in maritime history,” likening overall American success to Britain’s victory at Trafalgar. In Britain, the Prince Regent remarked that, although “We rejoice that the attempts of the United States to invade Upper Canada have added laurels to the many victories of our soldiers...,” the

only maritime trophy [HMS *Macedonian*] on either side [was] the enemy's" (124). By 1813, Britain had doubled its naval forces in American waters and shaken off the blow to its prestige. The US navy was quickly confined to its ports, but its many swift, resourceful privateers continued to harass Britain's maritime supply lines.

Bickham explains how, as the war progressed erratically, the Americans failed to stop maritime interference and sailor impressment or to gain Canadian territory, while the British could not cut the United States down to size and create buffer American Indian states. Economic considerations and popular pressure forced both sides to the negotiating table. The situation was greatly exacerbated by a series of hurricanes—the worst in living memory—that struck the West Indies in July 1813. An estimated one-third of houses were destroyed, along with virtually all the ships in the harbors. The prices of key commodities like flour, rice, and white oak staves more than doubled (154). Britain also had to grapple with the political complexities of maritime trade.

For colonies such as the Bahamas, which were favorably located at a nexus between the British and Spanish empires, inter-imperial trade was vital. The governor [had] reminded [British Prime Minister] Lord Liverpool in July 1812 that "the principal support of the Islands is the trade carried on with the Spanish Colonies." The Spanish knew how to take advantage of the situation, too. Cuba, which quickly became the leading neutral [entry point] for American flour, taxed British buyers at a rate of seven Spanish dollars a barrel (roughly 20 percent of its market value in Jamaica), which was exported on a Spanish ship. Soon this "Spanish" flour became a staple in the British West Indies. Other neutral powers participated, and by the end of 1813 Swedish registered vessels were routinely carrying American lumber from the United States to Cuba, where British and Spanish vessels collected it for use as staves on British West Indian plantations. (157)

In his conclusion, "Who Won the War of 1812," Bickham notes that British troops sacked Washington and burned the White House and that, after formal peace negotiations began in Ghent (August 1814), hostilities continued even as the treaty was being ratified. This allowed Andrew Jackson's motley force to thrash an army of British regulars nearly three times its size at New Orleans a month before news of the treaty reached the United States in mid-February 1815. By then, the nation was already enthusiastically celebrating the spectacular victory that became synonymous with the end of the war, but had no effect on its outcome (266).

The Weight of Vengeance is a well-written book that offers a broad view, chronicling events, explaining historical details, and presenting the relevant dramatis personae, both military and political. Its readers will gain a much clearer understanding of the War of 1812 and its place in world history.