

REVIEW ESSAY

A RELATIVELY INDECISIVE WAR

Jack A. Gottschalk

Daughan, George C. *1812: The Navy's War*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. 411pp. \$32.50

This is an excellent book about a relatively unknown war. Perhaps only the Mexican War (1846–48) is less known to Americans. The War of 1812 was America's first declared war, one that neither side really wanted and that resulted in a military draw.

Beginning with the introduction, George Daughan, a distinguished academician and recipient of the 2008 Samuel Eliot Morison Award, has created a work that is almost the equivalent of an exciting novel. The first three chapters provide a clear understanding of the relationship between the United States and Great Britain in the years following the Revolution. The political scene in America is also examined to show the deep differences that existed between the Federalists in the north, particularly in New England, and the Republican interests. These

differences were to persist throughout most of the war. From the earliest days of the nation, the Federalists held that a positive relationship with England was of benefit to the United States given, among other things, a common language and an established history of trade. Southern leaders, including Thomas Jefferson, were hostile toward Great Britain and highly sympathetic to France and its perceived democratic ideals.

Daughan notes, as he sets out the prewar years, that the Jay Treaty (also known as the Treaty of London) was a disappointment to George Washington. One important point was its restriction on American trade with France, a fact that eventually led to the undeclared maritime conflict between the United States

Jack A. Gottschalk is a lawyer and best-selling author. He has worked as a reporter for several news agencies, was an assistant prosecutor for Essex County, New Jersey, and hosted a cable television show, Legally Speaking. He served as a U.S. Army Reserve captain in military intelligence, and is a graduate of the Naval War College. In addition to his publication of many articles, Jack Gottschalk is the author of The Global Trade and Investment Handbook (1993); Firefighting (2002), on the world history of fires; and Jolly Roger with an Uzi (2000), on the problem of modern-day piracy. Jack Gottschalk holds a master's degree from Salve Regina University, and a juris doctor degree from the University of Baltimore. He is an adjunct professor at the Stillman School of Business, Seton Hall University.

and France, the Quasi-War (1798–1800), during the John Adams administration. The American navy grew rapidly during that conflict, but once the war ended the Navy became a political issue and fell into disfavor in the eyes of Thomas Jefferson, even though he had deployed warships against Tripoli's pirates.

By the time Jefferson took office in 1801, the problems caused by Napoleon were major and growing, and the questions of sailors' rights and free trade increasingly came into focus. In 1806, Napoleon sealed European ports to all British ships. Great Britain responded by restricting neutral shipping with France, and at about the same time British warships off the New Jersey coast seized American merchant ships and impressed sailors.

American political disagreement on the issues of ship seizure and impressments only gave way to a united front in June 1807 when there was a confrontation between the USS *Chesapeake* and HMS *Leopard* that resulted in the seizure of several seamen aboard the American ship. Tensions ran high, but Jefferson avoided a war by successfully having Congress pass the Embargo Act in December 1807, which was a crippling blow to American foreign trade since it prohibited all shipments abroad.

The intent had been to force Great Britain to end its seizure of seamen and to cancel its neutral shipping restrictions. The measure failed on both counts and was so unpopular that it was replaced after James Madison's election with the passage of the Non-Intercourse Act, which allowed Americans to trade with every nation except Great Britain and France.

Meanwhile, the British continued to impress sailors on American merchantmen despite warnings from Madison and attempts to resolve issues by negotiation. By the end of 1811 Madison was convinced that the only action that would force meaningful negotiations was a declaration of war. With the exception of the Federalists, in June 1812, both the House and the Senate voted for war, even though America was ill prepared.

The Army was small, with too much reliance placed on the militia; however, the Navy, which Madison initially believed to be of little use, proved instead to be of enormous value on the lakes and rivers, and as a blue-water force. Experienced naval officers and hundreds of privateers were used to raid British commerce.

Despite the lack of preparation, the author notes that Madison did have a war plan that called for the invasion of Canada, a move motivated by the fact that the British Army was tied down in Europe. The British strategy called for invasions from the north and south, a naval blockade along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and coastal raids.

The Canadian land actions were marked by a lack of American success— notable campaign examples were those of Generals William Hull and Henry

Dearborn. American naval actions on Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, and Lake Champlain were, however, critical to the prosecution of the war.

On the ocean, well-known American victories included such blue-water ship-to-ship contests as those between the USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerrière*; the USS *Constitution* and HMS *Java*; the USS *Hornet* and HMS *Peacock*; and the USS *United States* and HMS *Macedonian*. Naval officers to include Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, Captain Stephen Decatur, Commodore Thomas Truxtun, and Commodore William Bainbridge all gained permanent historical notice in America.

Daughan points out that it was a relatively indecisive war, marked by events of which neither side could be proud. Those incidents included the American burning of York (Toronto); the later burning of Washington by the British (in retaliation for York); the unnecessary shelling of Stonington, Connecticut; and the raid—complete with rape and pillage—by the British at Hampton, Virginia. Finally, it seems somehow fitting for a war that neither side wanted that the Battle of New Orleans took place two weeks after the war ended.

Almost until the end of hostilities, the political division in America between the antiwar Federalists and the Republicans continued. So deep were antiwar feelings among some that New York and Vermont farmers openly provided supplies to British forces along the Canadian border, and New England merchantmen carried supplies to Field Marshal Wellington's armies in Spain.

By the autumn of 1814 both sides were looking to end the conflict. The war was unpopular in Great Britain and some Federalists were urging secession of New England states and a separate peace. Discussions about the war took place in Hartford, Connecticut, in December, but secession was either not on the agenda or not seriously discussed.

On Christmas Eve 1814, the Treaty of Ghent was signed by American and British representatives and ratified in Washington in February 1815. Many issues over which the war had been fought were not addressed in the treaty, such as British blockades and impressments, these having ended with the defeat of Napoleon.

This work is marred by some editorial errors that are unfortunate since they tend to jar the reader, who is otherwise proceeding happily through the book. They are as follows: on page 212 “ordinance” is incorrectly used instead of “ordnance”; on page 278 “coarse” is incorrectly used instead of “course”; on page 400 “manage” is mistakenly used instead of “managed”; and on page 416 “initiating” is used instead of “initiated.”

However, despite these lapses, the book should win a place on the shelf of any student of American history. There are an excellent glossary, many relevant maps, and a helpful illustration that shows the names and locations of sails on a square-rigged ship.