
Historiographical Essay

The Causes of the War of 1812: 200 Years of Debate



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On the face of it, the War of 1812 appears absurd. The most important official reason for which the war was declared—British interference with American foreign trade under the Order-in-Council of 1807—was about to disappear when Congress voted for the declaration of war. Two days before President James Madison signed the declaration of war on 18 June 1812, Lord Castlereagh, Great Britain's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, announced in Parliament that the Order-in-Council would be suspended. News of the British government's intention to repeal the offensive order, however, reached America's shores too late to prevent the outbreak of war. One of the major causes for which Americans went to war—along with the issue of impressment of American sailors—was thus in the process of becoming a dead letter at the time of the declaration of war. Great Britain for her part did not want war at all, as she was tied up in a titanic struggle with Napoleonic France. The United States played little role in British foreign policy.¹ As a consequence, Great Britain fought the war only half-heartedly—to the great advantage of the U.S. which otherwise probably would have lost the war. After declaring war, Congress and the Madison Administration also were quite unwilling to actually fight the war. Taxes were

*The author would like to thank Chris Bayer of Tulane University for his valuable comments and Bruce Vandervort of the Virginia Military Institute and the anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Military History* for their helpful suggestions on this article.

1. Cf. Jeremy Black, *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

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not raised to finance the war in 1812 nor were the army or navy enlarged sufficiently to effectively wage it. The peace treaty which concluded the war simply reestablished the status quo ante bellum. Once again, news of the peace treaty, which the American and British negotiators had signed in Ghent, Belgium, on 24 December 1814, reached America's shores too late to prevent the greatest and, in terms of human lives, most costly battle of the war, the battle of New Orleans, which took place in January 1815—about one month *after* the commissioners of both countries had agreed to conclude peace and the British government had already ratified the peace treaty. The war, ending in a draw, thus seems to have been altogether unnecessary, as the peace treaty did not mention the issues the U.S. had gone to war for, such as impressment, interference with foreign trade, and alleged British support for Indian raids against American settlers. The maritime issues had become meaningless anyway, as Britain's war with France, which had provoked the furor over neutral rights in the first place, ended in 1814. Great Britain for her part had to return the territory in the North of the U.S., which her troops had occupied in the war, to American control. To Great Britain, the War of 1812 had been a mere distraction from her more important war against Napoleonic France in Europe. The peculiar nature of this war might be the reason why historians have for a long time tended to ignore what Donald Hickey has labeled "the forgotten conflict." Since America did not "win," Americans chose to "forget" the war.² In the last two decades, however, historians' interest in this "obscure" war has increased significantly. The bicentennial of America's declaration of war last year has, moreover, elicited a wave of new publications on the conflict. It is therefore a timely occasion to take stock of and review the literature on the causes of the War of 1812, to recapitulate the major interpretations of the conflict advanced in the last 200 years, to identify the contentious issues, and to reveal historical problems which future research should address.

Diplomatic Causes of the War of 1812: Maritime, Economic or Expansionist?

The causes for America's declaration of war against Great Britain have always been a puzzle to historians. As the war was officially commenced because of a dispute over violation of America's neutral rights and the impressment of American sailors—both of which were results of British maritime practices during the Napoleonic Wars—nineteenth-century historians concentrated on maritime factors in their explanations of the Anglo-American conflict.³ Yet it was mainly Southern and Western congressmen who voted for war, while the majority of Northern representatives and senators voted against it. Most of those New Englanders who did vote for war, moreover, had been sent to Congress

2. Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). Also see Roger H. Brown, "Who Bungled the War of 1812?" *Reviews in American History* 19, no. 2 (1991): 183.

3. For an overview of nineteenth-century historiography on the origins of the War of 1812, see Warren H. Goodman, "The Origins of the War of 1812: A Survey of Changing Interpretations," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 28, no. 2 (1941): 171–86.

from the frontier areas of New Hampshire and Vermont and not from electoral districts along the seaboard. This seems paradoxical because it was the Northern states which were most affected by British interference with American foreign trade and the impressment of American seamen. An interpretation based strictly on maritime factors—prevalent in nineteenth-century historiography—thus does not explain the origins of the War of 1812.

In the first half of the twentieth century, historians grappled with the problem of explaining the Western vote for war and investigated Western grievances and war aims. They came up with different explanations for the West's war fever.⁴ First, some argued that Westerners were looking for more fertile land and thus desired the annexation of Canada.⁵ Others claimed that Westerners were frustrated over constant problems with Indians who resisted the expansion of white settlers and hence wanted to cut off once and for all what they saw as crucial British assistance to them in the Northwest.⁶ Still others connected Western interests to the maritime issues by showing that the British blockade of the European Continent depreciated the prices for western grain.⁷ J. C. A. Stagg, connecting both sets of causes, namely maritime problems with Great Britain and western expansionism, to explain the vote for war, argued that Madison was anxious to deprive Britain of her Canadian colonies, since he was convinced that British access to Canadian provisions had undermined his and former President Thomas Jefferson's embargo. An embargo would only work if Great Britain could no longer rely on Canadian timber and foodstuffs to compensate for the loss of the American supplies.⁸ Stagg had to acknowledge, however, that Madison never directly stated this rationale for a declaration of war.⁹

4. Extracts of most of the works mentioned in this paragraph are compiled in Bradford Perkins, ed., *The Causes of the War of 1812: National Honor or National Interest?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962). Also see George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The War of 1812. Past Justifications and Present Interpretations* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1963).

5. Howard T. Lewis, "A Re-Analysis of the Causes of the War of 1812. Part I," *Americana* 6, no. 5 (1911): 506–16. Lewis, "A Re-Analysis of the Causes of the War of 1812. Part II," *Americana* 6, no. 6 (1911): 577–85. Louis Morton Hacker, "Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812: A Conjecture," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10, no. 4 (1924): 365–95.

6. Dice Robins Anderson, "The Insurgents of 1811," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1911* 1 (1913): 167–76. Christopher B. Coleman, "The Ohio Valley and the Preliminaries of the War of 1812," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 7, no. 1 (1920): 39–50. Julius W. Pratt, "Western Aims in the War of 1812," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12, no. 1 (1925): 36–50.

7. George Rogers Taylor, "Prices in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812," *Journal of Economic and Business History* 3, no. 1 (1930): 148–63. George Rogers Taylor, "Agrarian Discontent in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812," *Journal of Political Economy* 39, no. 4 (1931): 471–505. Also see Reginald Horsman, "Western War Aims, 1811–1812," *Indiana Magazine of History* 53, no. 1 (1957): 1–18.

8. J. C. A. Stagg, "James Madison and the Coercion of Great Britain: Canada, the West Indies, and the War of 1812," *William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1981): 3–34.

9. Cf. Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., "The War of 1812 Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 12, no. 2 (1984): 215–19; see especially 216.

These explanations, however, have been shown to be debatable. Historians were unable to find widespread hunger for land in Canada among Westerners before 1812; simply put, there was still plenty of unsettled land available in the U.S.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Indian threat was hardly as pervasive as proponents of the “expansionist thesis” have suggested. Except for scattered farms along the frontier, most settlements in the Ohio valley did not have to fear attacks by Indians, who had already been severely decimated by this time. Moreover, the attacks that did occur could not be shown to have been encouraged by British authorities.¹¹ Finally, George Rogers Taylor’s argument about economic recession (see note 7) only applied to Kentucky and Tennessee and not to the West in general. There was no depression, for example, in Ohio, which did not depend on the export trade.¹²

More importantly, the “Western explanations” do not account for the Southern votes for war. In fact, Westerners provided only ten votes for the war in the House of Representatives. The bulk of votes—almost 50 percent—came from states south of Maryland. Margaret Latimer, therefore, applied the economic thesis to South Carolina, arguing that British maritime policies led to a depression of its export trade in cotton.¹³ Julius Pratt, meanwhile, attempted to vindicate the expansionist thesis by claiming that a secret alliance was formed between Westerners aiming at wresting Canada from Great Britain and Southerners keen on taking Florida from Spain.¹⁴ The evidence for such an alliance, however, is very thin.¹⁵ Besides, no state provided more votes for the war than Pennsylvania which had no interests in the west or in the south. What further undermines the expansionist thesis is the fact that it does not explain why New England opposed the war. After all, the North would have profited most from the acquisition of Canada, as the sectional balance would have shifted in its favor through the incorporation of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into the union (a simultaneous acquisition of Florida notwithstanding).¹⁶ Federalist Senator James A. Bayard shrewdly observed that a majority of Southern senators, in fact, favored a mere maritime war, as a land war would give the Northern states more influence in the union:

No proposition could have been more frightful to the southern men, and it seems they had never thought of what they were to do

10. Stephen M. Millett, “Bellicose Nationalism in Ohio: An Origin of the War of 1812,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 1, no. 1 (1973): 221–40; see especially 225.

11. Hacker, “Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812,” 373. Eugene H. Roseboom and Francis P. Weisenburger, *A History of Ohio* (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1961): 78–80. Millett, “Bellicose Nationalism in Ohio,” 226–28. A. L. Burt, *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America: From the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace after the War of 1812* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941), 302–4, 309.

12. Millett, “Bellicose Nationalism in Ohio,” 229–30.

13. Margaret Kinard Latimer, “South Carolina—A Protagonist of the War of 1812,” *American Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (1956): 914–29.

14. Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (New York: Macmillan, 1925).

15. Goodman, “The Origins of the War of 1812,” 181–83.

16. David C. Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789–1941* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 56–58.

with Canada before, in case they conquered the country. [...] The consequence has been that they now begin to talk of maritime war, and of the ocean being the only place where G. Britain is tangible.¹⁷

Since the acquisition of Canada as such could not have been in the interest of the South, most scholars today stress that the invasion of Canada was only a means of fighting the war but not the ultimate objective of the war. Henry Clay—the chief promoter of an invasion of Canada—had already made clear in 1812 that “[i]n making the war effective, conquest may become necessary; but this does not change the character of the war; there may be no other way of operating upon our enemy but by taking possession of her provinces, which adjoin us.”¹⁸ On a later occasion, he described even more plainly the character of the invasion: “When the war was commenced Canada was not the end but the means; the object of the War being the redress of injuries, and Canada being the instrument by which that redress was to be obtained.”¹⁹ Since the 1960s scholars as Bradford Perkins, Reginald Horsman, and Donald Hickey have therefore brought the discussion back to trans-Atlantic diplomacy, arguing that maritime issues—seizures of ships and cargoes and impressment in particular—were the cause of war and not the desire to annex Canada.²⁰

Their works have dominated the American interpretation of the War of 1812 to date, as the numerous publications on occasion of the bicentennial demonstrate. Troy Bickham, for example, argued that “opponents of the war brought up the subject of expansion far more often than did its supporters,” because the discussions about a possible annexation of Canada made the war look unjust and illegitimate. According to him, the Republican leadership sought to conquer Canada not to annex more territory but rather to extract maritime concessions from Great Britain.²¹ In his latest account of the conflict, J. C. A. Stagg analyzes transatlantic diplomacy over

17. James A. Bayard to Andrew Bayard, 2 May 1812, in *Papers of James A. Bayard, 1796–1815*, ed. Elizabeth Donnan, 2 vols. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1915), 2:196–97.

18. Henry Clay, 11 January 1812, in *Annals of Congress*, 12th Congress, 1st Session, 744.

19. Henry Clay to Thomas Bodley, 18 December 1813, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. James Franklin Hopkins, 9 vols. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959–1988), 1:841–42; quote at 842.

20. Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805–1812* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962). Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 72. Donald R. Hickey, *Don't Give up the Ship: Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006). Horsman later somewhat revised his position on Canada, believing that “many politicians in the United States [...] saw the invasion and retention of Canada as a useful side benefit of the war.” While still holding maritime issues as chiefly responsible for the outbreak of the war, Horsman now claimed that “Canada played a part in the ultimate decision for war.” Reginald Horsman, “The War of 1812 Revisited,” in *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 1 (1991): 115–24, see especially 118. Also see Reginald Horsman, “On to Canada: Manifest Destiny and United States Strategy in the War of 1812,” in *Michigan Historical Review* 13, no. 2 (1987): 1–24.

21. Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43, 45.

neutral trade and impressment in his chapter on the coming of the war but does not mention the acquisition of Canada as a war aim.²² In his recent publications, Donald Hickey also has maintained his claim that the desire to annex Canada was not the reason America declared war in 1812 but rather the desire to protect America's neutral trade and her seamen.²³ Today, it is mostly British historians who uphold the expansionist thesis and interpret the American declaration of war as an attempted land grab.²⁴ While rightly discarding the rather speculative thesis that the U.S. went to war in an expansionist effort to annex Canada (and Florida), the "maritime school" still falls short in failing to explain why Westerners and Southerners were eager to go to war over maritime issues, while Northerners, who had by far the largest share in America's foreign trade, mostly opposed the war.²⁵

Domestic Causes of the War of 1812: Political or Ideological?

To understand why Congress voted for war in 1812, it is necessary to change the frame through which historians have looked at the war declaration. The voting record makes clear that the vote for war was not a sectional but rather a partisan affair.²⁶ While it is true that Western representatives from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio and those of Georgia and South Carolina unanimously voted for war,

22. J. C. A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Also see George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

23. Donald R. Hickey and Connie D. Clark, *The Rockets' Red Glare: An Illustrated History of the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, bicentennial ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012). Also see Donald R. Hickey, *187 Things You Should Know About the War of 1812* (Baltimore, Md.: Maryland Historical Society, 2012), 25–26.

24. Cf. Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3. Andrew Lambert—in the most recent British assessment of the conflict—interprets the conflict as being forced on the sea-faring, commercial-minded, and eastward looking New England states by the agrarian, inward-looking, slave-holding, and expansionist Southern and Western states. "The obsession with territorial expansion ensured that America would declare war in 1812 by invading Spanish Florida and Canada, intent on conquest." He rejected the idea that Canada was only supposed to be a bargaining chip, since Westerners and Southerners never would have acquiesced in a peaceful relinquishment of the new Canadian possessions. Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 29–30, 32, 52, 56.

25. Cf. Clifford L. Egan, "The Origins of the War of 1812: Three Decades of Historical Writing," in *Military Affairs* 38, no. 2 (1974): 72–75. Horsman, "The War of 1812 Revisited." "Strategic logic dictated offensive action, especially since America had declared war," Reginald C. Stuart concluded. "Utterly unable to challenge the British at sea, Madison and Monroe embarked upon an invasion of Canada as the only plausible way to press concessions from Great Britain." Reginald C. Stuart, *War and American Thought: From the Revolution to the Monroe Doctrine* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1982), 135.

26. The first to note that partisan allegiance was more important than sectional background in the vote for war was Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 45. Steven E. Siry disagreed, arguing that if "one used the Delaware

and representatives from Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Delaware voted solidly against it, the rest of the U.S. was divided. A majority of delegates from North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and New Hampshire voted for the war, while only a minority of those from New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts did so. Without the votes of congressmen from north of the Delaware River, the declaration of war would not have found a majority. The six Massachusetts votes were especially significant for adoption of the declaration—only three other states provided more votes. The importance of the Northern and Middle States for the declaration of war is even more visible in the Senate vote. Had New England senators unanimously opposed the declaration of war, the vote would not have carried. Only 60 percent of Western senators, moreover, voted for war, with two Senators from Kentucky and Ohio voting against it. It would thus be a mistake to consider the War of 1812 a strictly sectional war forced upon the U.S. by Westerners and Southerners. Instead, the declaration of war was a partisan affair. While 83 percent of Republicans in the House and 73 percent in the Senate voted for war, no Federalist in either branch of the legislature voted for it. To trace the root causes of the War of 1812, the question to be answered is not why Southerners and Westerners voted for war, but why Republicans voted for it.²⁷

Scholars who have argued that war was declared for political reasons have emphasized the desire of President Madison to increase his popularity and thus his chances for reelection. J. C. A. Stagg claimed that Madison's decision to ask

River as a dividing line, a clear sectional vote emerges." Steven E. Siry, "The Sectional Politics of 'Practical Republicanism': De Witt Clinton's Presidential Bid, 1810–1812," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no. 4 (1985): 441–62; here at 446. On voting behavior, see Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 407–15. Leland R. Johnson, "The Suspense Was Hell: The Senate Vote for War in 1812," *Indiana Magazine of History* 65, no. 4 (1969): 247–67. Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler, "Party Unity and the Decision for War in the House of Representatives," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1972): 367–90. Donald R. Hickey, "Letter to the Editor," in *William and Mary Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1973): 371–73. Rudolph M. Bell, "Mr. Madison's War and Long-Term Congressional Voting Behavior," *William and Mary Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1979): 373–95. Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler and Robert L. Ivie, "Justifying the War of 1812: Toward a Model of Congressional Voting Behavior in Early War Crises," *Social Science History* 4, no. 4 (1980): 453–77. A list of the Representatives and Senators of the Twelfth Congress and their votes on the declaration of war can be found in David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, eds., *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 571–74.

27. There is no consensus on the party identities of individual Congressmen, as there was no formal party membership yet in 1812. Donald Hickey based his determination of party allegiances on a list of Congressmen with partisan labels printed in *Weekly Register* (Baltimore), 30 November 1811. Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler—by contrast—identified party allegiances by consulting Clifford P. Reynolds, ed., *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774–1961* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1961) and the *Dictionary of American Biography*. The above numbers follow Hickey's list. Donald R. Hickey, "The Federalists and the War of 1812" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1972), 341–42. Hatzenbuehler, "Party Unity." Also see Hickey, "Letter to the Editor."

Congress for a declaration of war was motivated by domestic politics. Politically challenged by a rising number of Republican Party members who were unhappy with his passive foreign policy and fearing that he might thus face serious intraparty competition in the next presidential election, Madison escalated tensions with Great Britain in order to gain political ground at home.²⁸ It is a matter for debate, however, whether a statesman whose outlook was shaped by classical republicanism and who believed that a republic could only be maintained if its office-holders were exclusively devoted to the public good, would start a war for purely political reasons.²⁹ Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler argued—on the basis of a statistical analysis of roll call votes—that “Republican party unity was the determining factor in the decision of the House of Representatives to declare war on Great Britain.”³⁰ It is unclear, however, how Republican party unity alone can explain the Republican vote for war. After all, Republicans could have rallied round a different policy as well.³¹

Roger H. Brown took a larger view of the Republican vote for war in 1812. He held that in 1812 Republicans were concerned that republicanism itself was in danger since Americans were losing faith in the efficacy of republican government, and they thus had to declare war to restore Americans’ attachment to their republic. If they did not demonstrate that they were able to effectively defend the national interest, Republicans feared, they would lose control of the federal government to the resurgent and—so they believed—anti-republican Federalist Party in the next election and thus imperil the republic.³² Richard Buel, Jr., in a more recent assessment of the War of 1812, also has argued that Republicans voted for war since they sought to prevent a revival of the Federalists, who had aligned themselves with the British and considered taking New England out of the union.³³ Alan Taylor has offered a variation of Brown’s thesis by proposing that Republicans wished to extend republicanism to Canada and to those regions

28. J. C. A. Stagg, “James Madison and the ‘Malcontents’: The Political Origins of the War of 1812,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1976): 557–85. Stagg, *Mr. Madison’s War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783–1830* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 48–119.

29. For Madison’s insistence on republics’ need for disinterested rulers who were “above party,” see Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789–1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 113–23.

30. Hatzenbuehler, “Party Unity,” 383. On partisanship as a factor in the declaration of war, also see Victor A. Sapio, *Pennsylvania & the War of 1812* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970).

31. Through an analysis of 602 roll call votes from 1789 to 1812, Rudolph M. Bell, for example, demonstrated that party unity was well established before 1812 and that Republicans in Congress would have supported “any policy reasonably consonant with a wide range of options acceptable to the majority coalition.” Party unity was hence “necessary but not sufficient as a causal factor in explaining the war decision.” Bell, “Mr. Madison’s War,” 390.

32. Brown, *The Republic in Peril*.

33. Richard Buel, Jr., *America on the Brink: How the Political Struggle over the War of 1812 Almost Destroyed the Young Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

in which Federalists still loyal to the British Empire were dominant. In his view, the War of 1812 was thus “a civil war between competing visions of America,” American republicanism and British imperialism. “By invading Canada and defeating the British, the Republicans hoped to save the republic from a menacing convergence of [Loyalist] internal and external enemies.”³⁴

In stressing the importance of the ideology of republicanism, Brown anticipated those historians, such as Lance Banning, who would argue that the court-country dichotomy not only had been at work in America in the War for Independence but also continued to have currency in the early republic, as Republicans feared that Federalists in the 1790s—concentrating ever more power in the federal government and making Congress increasingly dependent on the executive—would subvert republicanism.³⁵ Since the 1980s, however, scholars such as Joyce Appleby and Gordon S. Wood have shown that Republicans, an alliance of land- and slave-holding Southerners and ambitious ordinary Americans in the Middle States who challenged the eighteenth-century world of deferential politics and gentry rule and demanded political participation, did not so much subscribe to the ideology of eighteenth-century republicanism as to that of nineteenth-century liberalism. It was Republicans more than Federalists who embraced democratic and capitalist cultural values offering ordinary folk in the Middle States the opportunity of social advancement.³⁶ The traditional republican mind-set, while certainly important for older politicians like Madison who had witnessed the American Revolution, thus could not have played a major role in winning a vote for war from younger Congressmen such as John C. Calhoun or Henry Clay.

Steven Watts, in contrast to Brown, accordingly argued that in 1812 Republicans had not been looking backward, trying to save and restore the republic the founders had envisioned in 1787/88. War rather had been sought as “an emotional, fusing catalyst for latent impulses and tendencies of an emerging liberal ideology. The war crisis served as an ideological bridge over which many Jeffersonians walked—with varying degrees of sure-footedness—from the republican past into the liberal future.” He claimed that the War of 1812 sprang “more from some fundamental national dynamic of social psychology, cultural aspiration, and sense of collective

34. Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 6, 11, 14. Troy Bickham also interpreted the War of 1812 as “a continuation of the clash of the American and British systems” in North America and thus as a Second War of Independence. “The Americans fought for their definition of postcolonial independence,” while “Britain pursued an informal imperialism that sought to stifle American ambition and turn it into a client state.” Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance*, 17–19.

35. Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978).

36. Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984). Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164–67.

experience.”³⁷ Watts, however, did not take into account America’s diplomatic issues and political maneuvering, or the decision-making process in the various branches of the U.S. government. It therefore remains unclear why Republicans voted for war when they did, in the early summer of 1812, and not on an earlier or later occasion. The maritime and expansionist interpretations also do not explain why Republicans voted for war in 1812 and not earlier. The disputes over neutral rights and the issue of impressment had troubled Anglo-American relations for quite some time and were not as burdensome in 1812 as they had been in 1807 when HMS *Leopard* had attacked the USS *Chesapeake* in a search for British deserters and Jefferson could “have had war at the drop of a hat,” as Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry S. Commager put it.³⁸

“Mr. Madison’s War” or the War of the “War Hawks”?

The answer to the question why Republicans declared war in June of 1812 requires an investigation into the dynamics of the political process and the issue of agency. Who was the major force behind the movement towards war? Was the War of 1812 “Mr. Madison’s War,” as mainly Federalist contemporaries derogatively called it to make it seem polarizing and illegitimate?³⁹ Or was it “forced” on the President by belligerent Congressmen, as again many contemporary Federalists claimed, wishing to make President Madison appear weak and incompetent?⁴⁰ Did President Madison, in order to lead the country into war, carefully orchestrate the movement until it was strong enough that a declaration of war would be met with widespread support? Or did a rising number of bellicose Congressmen “force” a war upon a reluctant and hesitating President who had tried to avoid war until the end? The answers to these questions have largely depended on which individuals scholars have focused on.

Biographers of Madison usually “credited” him with the decision for war.⁴¹ Madison’s foremost biographer, Irving Brant, hailed Madison as a strong President who was not forced into war by public opinion and congressional pressure but who had made up his mind to seek war as early as 23 June 1811, when Great Britain refused to revoke her Orders-in-Council, after Napoleon had pledged to rescind his

37. Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790–1820* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), xvii–xviii, 224.

38. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1:403.

39. Cf. John Lowell, Jr., *Mr. Madison’s War...* (Boston: Russell & Cutler, 1812).

40. Richard Hildreth, *The History of the United States of America*, rev. ed., 6 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880), 6:289–98.

41. Madison expert Robert Allen Rutland argued that Madison pressured Congress to declare war and not the other way round. Robert Allen Rutland, *The Presidency of James Madison* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 86. Robert A. Rutland, *Madison’s Alternatives: The Jeffersonian Republicans and the Coming of War, 1805–1812* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1975), 41–45. Madison biographer Garry Wills also depicted Madison as the driving force: “Madison actually welcomed the war. He schemed to bring it on.” Garry Wills, *James Madison* (New York: Times Books, 2002), 2. Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg came to the same conclusion in

decrees against American trade. He waited until the summer of 1812 to ask Congress for a declaration of war when it appeared that he had persuaded a sufficient number of hesitant members of Congress to make possible the step towards war. Madison's policy was motivated by the desire to achieve the greatest possible majority for the war, Brant found. Caught between overzealous "war hawks" and reluctant Republicans, Madison sought to slow down the former group in order to give the latter group time to catch up: "By this course he increased the vote for war in the two houses and added to the popularity of it."⁴² As did Brant, Madison biographer Ralph Ketcham also accepted the explanation provided by Madison's private secretary, Edward Coles, for the President's policy. According to this view, Madison had already decided in 1811 that war could not be avoided but delayed action in order "to bring to his side 'tardy and over cautious members of Congress.'" Although critical of Madison's stubborn insistence on "peaceful coercion," Ketcham defended the President's policy of deferred action by arguing that his republicanism was more earnest than that of the "war hawks." "Madison lacked not will nor understanding of what needed to be done nor courage to face war, but rather, as his own apologies verify, a capacity to disentangle himself from republican pieties [...]."⁴³ Madison's private secretary, however, might not be the most reliable source for evaluating the President's policy, as his recollections—put to paper 44 years after the declaration of war—could have tended to embellish the former President's policies.⁴⁴

Those writing biographies of influential Congressmen generally concur that the heart of the war movement resided in the legislature, commonly pointing to the formation of a "war hawk" faction in Congress in 1812 as a decisive event. Clement Eaton, biographer of Henry Clay, claimed that "Clay as Speaker proved more influential in formulating policy than President Madison, whom he regarded as a timid soul."⁴⁵ Frank A. Cassel, biographer of one of Madison's critics in Congress, Senator Samuel Smith, criticized Madison for "indecision" and a lack

Madison and Jefferson (New York: Random House, 2010), 500–507. Most recently, Hugh Howard "credited" Madison and his wife with being responsible for the declaration of war. Hugh Howard, *Mr. and Mrs. Madison's War: America's First Couple and the Second War of Independence* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012). Richard Brookhiser—in another recent biography of Madison—does not address the question of who was responsible for the War of 1812. Richard Brookhiser, *James Madison* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). Rudolph M. Bell argued that Congress followed the President's initiative. As with his predecessors, "foreign policy initiatives and decisions for war or peace always had rested with the executive branch" and it was therefore "Madison who had the power and used the power to lead the country into war. Bell, "Mr. Madison's War," 374, 391.

42. Irving Brant, *James Madison*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1941–1961), 5: *The President, 1809–1812*, 479–81. Irving Brant, "Madison and the War of 1812," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 74, no. 1 (1966): 51–67.

43. Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison. A Biography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 530–32.

44. Edward Coles to William C. Rives, 21 January 1856, printed in "Letters of Edward Coles," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2nd Ser. 7, no. 3 (1927): 162–65; here at 163.

45. Clement Eaton, *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957), 25.

of “leadership.”⁴⁶ In his biography of Senator William Branch Giles, Dice Robins Anderson maintained that Madison did not pursue a “decided policy” and did not provide leadership between 1810 and 1815.⁴⁷

Those studying the proceedings of Congress also have found that the war movement originated in the legislature. According to Dice Robins Anderson, Madison “threw the responsibility of declaring war entirely upon congressional shoulders.” As late as March 1812, Madison was still “willing to make another attempt at peaceful settlement, by a special mission” but he “was forced by the warhawks to give it up.” It was thus “the insurgents of 1811” within the Republican Party, who had formed in opposition to the President, who steered the country towards war.⁴⁸ John S. Pancake argued that a group of anti-administration Republicans joined the “war hawks” in 1811 to push Madison towards war with Great Britain.⁴⁹ James Sterling Young, in an analysis of Washington politics in the first half of the nineteenth century, noted that in “creating sublegislatures Congress practically liberated itself [...] from even the weak bonds of dependence upon the Presidency which Jefferson had been able to exploit for leadership purposes. Committees provided Congress with its own organs for exercising policy initiative, investigating policy alternatives, obtaining background information, and supervising the administration of measures passed.”⁵⁰ Abbot Smith attributed Madison’s leadership deficiencies to his republicanism, arguing that Madison was “dedicated to the notion that policy should rise from the people upward through the legislature and executive [...]; indeed it was one of the glories of the republican form of government that it could never be tempted into adventures by irresponsible rulers.” It followed from this approach that Madison “exerted not the slightest influence to determine the legislators’ actions.” Consequently, “it was not Madison [...] who brought the country into war, but rather the new influences from the West which appeared in Congress after the elections of 1810.”⁵¹ Perkins also held that “the war impulse” had come from the members of the House of Representatives “rather than the White House” and concluded that the “war came, not because of the President, but despite him.”⁵²

Two issues in particular have dominated the debate among historians over who was responsible for the War of 1812. First, they have argued over the existence, strength, and influence of the so called “war hawks.” The election to the Twelfth Congress saw

46. Frank A. Cassell, *Merchant Congressman in the Young Republic. Samuel Smith of Maryland, 1752–1839* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), 157.

47. Dice Robins Anderson, *William Branch Giles. A Study in the Politics of Virginia and the Nation from 1790 to 1830* (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Publishing, 1914), 154–56.

48. Anderson, “The Insurgents of 1811,” 173–74.

49. John S. Pancake, “The ‘Invisibles’: A Chapter in the Opposition to President Madison,” *Journal of Southern History* 21, no. 1 (1955): 17–37.

50. James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800–1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 204.

51. Abbot Smith, “Mr. Madison’s War: An Unsuccessful Experiment in the Conduct of National Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1942): 229–46, here at 238, 241, 244.

52. Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 403, 425.

almost one-half of the members (63 of 142) of the Eleventh Congress replaced. Many historians therefore have seen in the election of new members to Congress a decisive precondition for the eventual declaration of war.⁵³ In particular, it was argued that a group of bellicose “war hawks”—such as Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Felix Grundy—was elected to Congress with the explicit aim of pushing the U.S. into a war with Great Britain and who were therefore responsible for the declaration of war.⁵⁴ Scholars, however, have disagreed not only over the membership of the “war hawks” group but even over whether such a faction ever existed.

Through an analysis of the debates and votes in Congress, Reginald Horsman identified twenty-one “war hawks” in the Twelfth Congress who “in the winter of 1811–1812 spoke actively for war as the only way out of America’s dilemma and urged action upon the dilatory American Congress.”⁵⁵ Upon carefully reading the private correspondence of Congressmen, Roger H. Brown, however, doubted that an identifiable faction of “war hawks” existed in the Twelfth Congress: “No Republican genuinely hoped for war or joined the consensus that war had become necessary with any other feeling than deep regret.” Instead, the great majority of Republicans had reluctantly come to the conclusion in the second half of 1811 that “no acceptable alternative to force remained.” He came to this conclusion by reasoning that “the speeches of Congressmen afford a false impression of eagerness for war,” since Republicans felt a need to arouse the country and “to justify their conduct before their constituents.” Private letters would provide a more “accurate picture of prevailing reluctance.”⁵⁶ Alexander DeConde criticized Brown’s conclusion, bringing attention to the fact that while it may be true “that men’s speeches frequently do not reveal their inner motives, it does not necessarily follow that legislators do not vote their convictions, particularly on war measures.”⁵⁷ Norman K. Risjord—by contrast—remained skeptical about Horsman’s analysis of voting patterns in the Twelfth Congress, since they “alone reveal little of personal motives, passions, or fears.” The anti-administration “Invisibles,” for example, frequently voted for war measures

53. Bradford Perkins warned about jumping to a premature conclusion on this issue. The Twelfth Congress, he wrote, “did not have markedly more new members than either of its two immediate predecessors.” Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 262.

54. The first time the term “war hawk” was used was in a private letter of Josiah Quincy to Harrison Gray Otis in late November 1811. Josiah Quincy to Harrison Gray Otis, November 26, 1811, in Samuel Eliot Morison (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis. Federalist, 1765–1848*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 2: 33–35; here at 35. The first time the term “war hawks” was used in a newspaper was on 19 February 1812, in the *Columbian Centinel*: “OUR War-Hawks when pot valiant grown, Could they the British King dethrone, Would sacrifice a man a day.” *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), 19 February 1812.

55. Reginald Horsman, “Who Were the War Hawks?” *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 2 (1964): 121–36; quote at 125.

56. Roger H. Brown, “The War Hawks of 1812: An Historical Myth,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 2 (1964): 137–51, quotes at 145, 149–51.

57. Alexander DeConde, “The War Hawks of 1812: A Critique,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 2 (1964): 152–54; quote at 153.

because they wished to make Madison appear weak, not because they actually wanted war. For this reason, they would eventually try to prevent the actual declaration of war. Risjord, however, disagreed with Brown's conclusion that there were no "war hawks" in Congress at all. Instead, he maintained that while the majority of Republicans had reluctantly come to the conclusion that war was unavoidable, it required leadership to transform this insight into a declaration of war and it was the "war hawks" that performed this function.⁵⁸ Harry W. Fritz also depicted the "war hawks" as a discernible group of Congressmen who "constituted the leadership of the majority party" and who employed a host of techniques such as the use of the committee system, the practice of secret sessions, control of debate by, among other things, cutting short minority speeches, and parliamentary tactics to secure party cohesion on the vote for war.⁵⁹

Another point of contention between historians concerns a meeting between a group of Republican Congressmen, led by Clay, and Madison in May 1812, during which it was discussed that Madison would formally recommend war to Congress.⁶⁰ Federalists later claimed that Clay had threatened to withdraw support for Madison in the upcoming election if he did not send a war message. If this was true, it would appear that Madison was "forced" into war.⁶¹ Madison's biographer Gaillard Hunt, however, rejected this claim and pointed to the scarcity of sources confirming it: the primary evidence for the meeting was a letter from Federalist Abraham Shepherd to his colleague Timothy Pickering. These men were not well disposed towards Madison and might have wished to discredit the President and the war to which Federalists were unanimously opposed.⁶² In the letter, Shepherd paraphrased what Senator Worthington of Ohio had communicated to him in a conversation: "Mr. Madison told him that his friends [Clay and Grundy] had waited upon him and said,

58. Norman K. Risjord, "The War Hawks and the War of 1812," *Indiana Magazine of History* 60, no. 2 (1964): 155–58. According to Risjord, the "war hawks" were a catalyst but not the source of the movement towards war in Congress. Risjord, "1812: Conservatives, War Hawks and the Nation's Honor," *William and Mary Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1961): 196–210; quote at 210.

59. Harry W. Fritz, "The War Hawks of 1812: Party Leadership in the Twelfth Congress," *Capitol Studies* 5, no. 1 (1977): 25–42; here at 26, 33.

60. While Henry Adams dated it early April 1812, most historians agree that the meeting must have taken place in May. Madison's correspondence of mid-May still shows no sign of him being settled on a course of war, while on 29 May John Randolph spoke in the House of Representatives of rumors that it had been decided that a declaration of war would be laid before the House in June. Henry Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1879), 456–62. Brant, *James Madison: The President, 1809–1812*, 462–63. Gaillard Hunt, "Joseph Gales on the War Manifesto of 1812," *American Historical Review* 13, no. 2 (1908): 303–10; here at 309. Theodore Clarke Smith, "War Guilt in 1812," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 64 (1930–1932): 319–45; here at 338–45. Also see Gaillard Hunt, *The Life of James Madison* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1902), 316–19.

61. Cf. Hildreth, *The History of the United States of America*, 6:298. Sydney Howard Gay, *James Madison* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1898), 296–97.

62. Hunt, *The Life of James Madison*, 316–19. Also see Edward Channing, *A History of the United States*, 6 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1927–1930), 4:453–54.

if he did send Mr. Bayard to England [on a peace mission] they would forsake him and be opposed to him, and he was compelled to comply, or bound to comply, with their wishes.”⁶³ While the claim that Clay issued an outright ultimatum may very well be a Federalist fabrication, it is doubtful that Federalists “invented” the meeting between bellicose Congressmen and Madison, at which Clay certainly pressured for war, especially as there are other sources confirming that such a meeting took place. A second source for the claim was James Fisk, a Republican congressman and war advocate from Vermont who later told historian Edwin Williams that he had been a member of the congressional committee which had met with Madison and which had insisted that he should deliver a war message.⁶⁴ Another source confirming that bellicose Congressmen built up political pressure on Madison is a letter of Augustus John Foster, Britain’s Minister Plenipotentiary in the United States, in which he informed British Foreign Secretary Castlereagh that “there has been no nomination made in Caucus as yet by the democratic members of Mr. Madison as candidate for the Presidency [...] because the war party have suspected him not to have been serious in his late hostile measures, and wish previously to ascertain his real sentiments,” i.e. his willingness for war against Great Britain.⁶⁵ While it cannot be ascertained in detail what was discussed in this meeting since no record was kept, the later recollections of Joseph Gales, who in 1812 was the editor of the *National Intelligencer*, Washington’s leading newspaper, are the most plausible, since he was a rather neutral source and tended to assign praise and blame even-handedly. According to Gales, Clay assured the President “of the readiness of a majority of Congress to vote the war if recommended.” Since the President considered a war with Great Britain unavoidable, he determined to ask Congress for a declaration of war as soon as he was informed that Congress would follow his recommendation.⁶⁶ In other words: both the President and Republican leaders in Congress concurred that it was necessary to declare war against Great Britain at that point in time.⁶⁷ This might explain why both biographers of Madison and of relevant congressmen found enough material to claim that their subjects of investigation favored a declaration of war since both sides actually were in agreement that war was inevitable. Emphasizing the intensive cooperation between the executive and legislative branches achieved in the Twelfth Congress, Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler and Robert L. Ivie therefore came to the conclusion that “the president, Secretary

63. Abraham Shepherd to Timothy Pickering, 20 February 1814, in Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin*, 457–58.

64. Edwin Williams, ed., *The Statesman’s Manual. The Addresses and Messages of the Presidents of the United States. Inaugural, Annual, and Special, from 1789 to 1854; With a Memoir of Each of the Presidents and a History of Their Administrations*, 4 vols., new and enlarged ed. (New York: Edward Walker, 1854), 1:348.

65. Sir Augustus John Foster to Lord Castlereagh, 3 May 1812, in Public Records Office, Foreign Office Series 585 (Photostats in the Library of Congress).

66. Hunt, “Joseph Gales on the War Manifesto of 1812,” 309.

67. Stagg, *The War of 1812*, 45.

of State James Monroe, Speaker of the House Henry Clay, and the House Foreign Relations Committee shared the leadership role, gave direction to the war movement, and shaped its content and timing.”⁶⁸ Harry W. Fritz also argued that the “war hawks” were successful in gaining support for their activities in Congress because they “consulted often with cabinet members” and “acted on behalf of the administration’s policy.” While Madison set the general agenda, they worked out the details.⁶⁹ According to J. C. A. Stagg, the so called “war hawks” in Congress—“a loose group of the most prominent members of the committees of the House of Representatives”—“received in committee policy recommendations from the administration, then reported them as bills to the floor of the House.”⁷⁰ With the laying bare of the intensive cooperation between the Madison Administration and Congress by these historians, the question of who, Madison or the “war hawks,” was responsible for the declaration of war no longer seems relevant. Both sides influenced each other and worked together to bring about the declaration of war.

Agenda for Future Research

As demonstrated in the first part of this historiographical essay, transatlantic diplomatic issues preceding the War of 1812—such as the British practice of impressment, British interference with American trade, or alleged British assistance to the Indians in the Northwest—have been investigated in detail. Diplomatic historians have examined the sources pertaining to cabinet members, congressmen, and diplomats to find out whether they sought war in 1812 because of maritime, economic, or expansionist reasons. The domestic politics of the War of 1812 also have been comprehensively analyzed. Political historians have closely scrutinized the congressional debates and the voting patterns of Congressmen to analyze whether they voted for war because of political or ideological reasons, as was shown in the second part of this essay. The political process leading to the declaration of war and the role of individual actors in it have been the subject of a long running historiographical debate, which was reviewed in the third part of this essay. We know less, however, about cultural factors leading to the War of 1812. Since the 1980s diplomatic historians have increasingly inquired into the cultural context in which diplomatic actions were taken, exploring the symbols, images, and values upon which foreign policies were based.⁷¹ According to these scholars, the cultural underpinnings of a nation created the “prism” through which national interests were defined and international events

68. Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler and Robert L. Ivie, *Congress Declares War: Rhetoric, Leadership, and Partisanship in the Early Republic* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1983), 12. Also see Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler, “The War Hawks and the Question of Congressional Leadership in 1812,” *Pacific Historical Review* 45, no. 1 (1976): 1–22; quote at 17.

69. Fritz, “The War Hawks of 1812,” 30.

70. Stagg, “James Madison and the ‘Malcontents,’” 559–60.

71. Cf. Akira Iriye, “Culture,” *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 99–107. Frank Ninkovich, “Interests and Discourse in Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 13, no. 2 (1989): 135–61.

were interpreted.⁷² Historians analyzing the causes of the War of 1812, however, have been reluctant to apply these theoretical and methodological innovations.⁷³ In the words of Emily S. Rosenberg, the “paucity of work in early American diplomatic history [...] arises from the overly narrow definition of the subdiscipline itself.”⁷⁴

Several opportunities arise for future research on the causes of the War of 1812 from the cultural perspective. Nationalism as a factor in the coming of the War of 1812 needs to be investigated. Did an aroused American nationalistic movement “force” Congress to declare war or did Congress declare war to keep American nationalism under its control? While historians have acknowledged the connection between nationalism and the War of 1812, they either have simply claimed that Americans entered the war to defend the nation’s honor, which was challenged by British maritime practices,⁷⁵ or they have held that a wave of nationalism was the *outcome* of the War of 1812, which supplied Americans with national heroes and a national anthem.⁷⁶ The role of nationalism leading up to the War of 1812 and the question of how a surging wave of nationalism influenced the decision-making process in the federal government prior to the outbreak of the war are subjects less thoroughly analyzed.⁷⁷ An analysis of the petitions to Congress before June of 1812 would indicate if Americans put pressure on Congress to declare war. A systematic analysis of newspapers during the election campaigns for the Twelfth Congress, moreover, would be a suitable way to find out not only whether newspapers beat the drums for war but also whether Republican candidates who ran on a war platform were elected and whether the election was thus a popular referendum on the war question. It could

72. Bradford Perkins, “Interests, Values, and the Prism: The Sources of American Foreign Policy,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14, no. 4 (1994): 458–66.

73. To be sure, Steven Watts applied a cultural approach to the War of 1812 but he did not connect his analysis of the cultural context to the political process. Therefore he did not explain why political actors made their decision for war.

74. Emily S. Rosenberg, “A Call to Revolution: A Roundtable on Early U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 1 (1998): 63–70; quote at 70. For this criticism, also see Bradford Perkins, “Early American Foreign Relations: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 1 (1998): 115–20; here at 115. William Earl Weeks, “New Directions in the Study of Early American Foreign Relations,” *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8–43; here at 8–15.

75. Norman K. Risjord argued that the “only unifying factor, present in all sections of the country, was the growing feeling of patriotism, the realization that something must be done to vindicate the national honor.” Risjord, “1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation’s Honor,” 204.

76. Cf. Walter R. Borneman, *1812: The War That Forged a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). A. J. Langguth, *Union 1812: The Americans Who Fought the Second War of Independence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). Sidney Hart and Rachael L. Penman, *1812: A Nation Emerges* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2012).

77. A first analysis of American nationalism as a cause of the War of 1812 is Jasper M. Trautsch, “Mr. Madison’s War’ or the Dynamic of Early American Nationalism?” *Early American Studies* 10, no. 3 (2012): 630–70.

also be investigated whether some Republicans thought of war as a means to unite the fragile union at a time of profound social and cultural change. Historians could thus build on Steven Watts's perceptive study on the anxieties, which had been created by the "massive, multifaceted transformation away from republican traditions and toward modern liberal capitalism in America," at the beginning of the nineteenth century and which "middle- and upper-class elites" felt deeply at the time war was declared in 1812, by connecting the social and cultural context Watts describes with a political analysis of the deliberations of Congress and the correspondence of congressmen.⁷⁸

Ethnic and racial factors also have been neglected in previous explanations of the War of 1812. What was the role of Irish-Americans, who had immigrated en masse to the U.S. in the years of the early republic, in promoting a declaration of war against England? Between 1783 and 1819, more than 35,000 Irish immigrated to the Philadelphia region alone.⁷⁹ Irish-Americans, moreover, often grouped together in immigrant-aid societies and ethnic benevolent associations such as the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick in New York and Philadelphia, Boston's Charitable Irish Society, or the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants, which not only created ethnic solidarity among the Irish but which exerted considerable political pressure.⁸⁰ Many Irish immigrants, moreover, entered the printing business, for example, William Duane, John Binns, and Mathew Carey, and became vociferous and influential editors.⁸¹ Most Irish-Americans tended to be radically Anglophobic and many Irish refugees, who had fled to America when Britain suppressed the Irish Rebellion of 1798, continued their struggle against Great Britain after they had arrived in the U.S.⁸² St. Patrick's Day celebrations in particular offered the chance to publicly denounce the British in vitriolic terms.⁸³ The influence of Irish-Americans in promoting a declaration of war against Great Britain in 1812, however, has yet to be scrutinized.

Was the War of 1812 an attempt by a predominantly Anglo-Saxon nation to dissociate itself from its ethnic sibling across the Atlantic? Was it a reaction to the increasing "fraternization" between New England Federalists and Canadians that had begun during the Embargo of 1807, evidenced by large-scale smuggling

78. Watts, *The Republic Reborn*, xvii. For the social and cultural changes taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century, also see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

79. Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, "European Immigration to the United States in the Early National Period, 1783–1820," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133, no. 2 (1989): 190–214; quote at 192.

80. John Hugh Campbell, *History of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and of the Hibernian Society for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland* (Philadelphia: Hibernian Society, 1892).

81. Cf. Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

82. Cf. David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrants Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

83. Cf. John Daniel Crimmins, *St. Patrick's Day; Its Celebration in New York and other American Places, 1737–1845; How the Anniversary Was Observed by Representative Irish Organizations, and the Toasts Proposed* (New York: The Author, 1902).

along the border, and that the “Henry Affair”⁸⁴ brought to the fore? Historians mostly have not chosen to analyze the “Henry Affair” in depth, dismissing it as an obviously partisan plot that backfired, since Federalists could easily show that Henry’s letters did not contain any information which had not also been published in New England newspapers.⁸⁵ The public reaction to the “Henry Affair” needs to be investigated in detail, however, to assess whether it increased Republicans’ general fear that New England Federalists’ loyalty to the U.S. might be doubtful and whether it thus gave the war question a greater degree of urgency. The fact that Federalists disclosed the “Henry Affair” as a partisan scheme does not necessarily mean that Republicans failed to attach relevance to it.

Did the escape of American slaves to British ships prior to the war make some Southern Congressmen opt for open conflict to protect their slaving interests? Did Southern Republicans fear that the British practice of impressing white Americans into service would undermine the racial basis of slavery in America?⁸⁶ To answer these questions it is necessary to look at other sources than those traditionally used to analyze how the war vote came about. If southern slaving interests played a role in the declaration of war, it might be more fruitful to examine the private sources of Southerners than the congressional debates. Slavery was a divisive issue that could have spoiled the fragile Republican alliance between plantation owners in the South and so-called “middling people” in the Mid-Atlantic States, had it been openly discussed in Congress. It would thus be in the correspondence between Southerners or in their diaries that one would discover whether slaving interests had an influence on their vote for war.

Another neglected aspect of the causes of the War of 1812 is religion. Apart from the dated study of William Gribbin, we know very little about the connection between religion and the War of 1812.⁸⁷ Religion may have played a part in the origins of the war since the conflict took place during the Second Great Awakening. Did the Protestant revival movement, which was gaining momentum at the time of the

84. On 9 March 1812, President Madison had informed Congress about an alleged British plot to incite disunion in New England through an Irish agent by the name of John Henry. The Irishman had immigrated to the U.S. in 1798 and then moved on to trade in furs in Canada. In 1808, he travelled New England on a business trip. When he came back to Canada, he wrote a report about the state of affairs in New England and sent it to Britain. Next year, the governor-general of Canada, Sir James Craig, sent him to New England again to gather additional information, especially about regional Federalist opposition to Republican foreign policy. As Henry was not satisfied with the amount of money he received for his service, he decided to sell his reports to the U.S. government.

85. On the Henry Affair, see Samuel Eliot Morison, “The Henry-Crillon Affair of 1812,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 69 (1947–1950): 207–231. Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 369–72.

86. Alan Taylor made a first attempt to answer some of these questions but his study concentrates on the course of the war and not on its origins. Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*.

87. William Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973).

declaration of war, consider war as a way of redemption?⁸⁸ Was participation in war thought of as a way to personal salvation? Did the belief in millennialism contribute to the war fever in 1812?⁸⁹ Religious jeremiads about the alleged “Godlessness” which numerous preachers perceived in the U.S. could be juxtaposed with frequently expressed political fears that Americans—in view of the gradual democratization of American society—were losing the “virtue” (devotion to the public good) necessary to keep up the republican character of the U.S. Did the emerging liberalism that pervaded American society provoke a religious backlash which preached war as a way of national salvation? Particular attention should be paid to the interplay of religion and American nationalism before 1812.⁹⁰ For example, was the belief that the U.S. as “God’s chosen nation” had the support of Providence and thus could not lose the war responsible for the fact that America declared war, even though, having only a fairly small army and navy, it was militarily much weaker than the mighty British Empire?⁹¹ The Early American Imprints Series II—easily accessible through the Readex Archive of Americana—contains a huge number of sermons which were printed as books, pamphlets, or broadsides between 1800 and 1819 and which have yet to be systematically examined to find out how much churches contributed to the war movement.

Finally, the role of gendered rhetoric in 1812 also has yet to be scrutinized. Gender relations changed dramatically after the American Revolution. Young daughters left their homes earlier and in greater numbers and they demanded a greater say in their choice of husbands. Women also married men from other regions and religions to a greater extent than during the colonial period. An increasing number of American females became pregnant before marriage; premarital pregnancy rates fluctuated between one quarter and one third in the second half of the eighteenth century. The social control exercised by fathers thus became weaker. After the American Revolution the number of divorces also grew.⁹² It therefore seems plausible that a concern over America’s “male” character also contributed to the impetus for a declaration of war, since American men might have believed that only war would allow them to display

88. Two sermons pointing in this direction are, for example, Samuel Austin, *A Sermon, Preached in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the Occasion of the Special Fast, July 23d, 1812* (Worcester: Isaac Sturtevant, 1812). Joseph Barker, *A Sermon, Delivered in Middleborough, Mass. August 20, 1812, Being the Day of the National Fast* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1812).

89. For the general influence of millennialism on U.S. foreign policy, see Ernest L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Ideas of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

90. Cf. Winthrop S. Hudson, ed., *Nationalism and Religion in America: Concepts of American Identity and Mission* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). Conor Cruise O’Brien, *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

91. For the notion of America as “God’s chosen country,” see Clifford Longley, *Chosen People: The Big Idea that Shaped England and America* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002).

92. Cf. Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, “Premarital Pregnancy in America 1640–1971: An Overview and Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5, no. 4 (1975): 537–70; material cited at 538. Nancy F. Cott, “Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1976): 586–614; material cited

and assert their “manliness.”⁹³ Bellicose Republicans frequently called congressmen hesitant to declare war “effeminate” and instead demanded “a manly vindication” of America’s neutral rights.⁹⁴ Nicole Eustace has demonstrated in her cultural history of the War of 1812 that Republicans portrayed the war as a “romantic adventure, one in which dashing young men went to war to win the hearts of patriotic young maidens.” The war against Native Americans in the West, moreover, became associated with romance, since the lands opened up for settlement would become available for newly-wed couples founding families of their own. “In an age when starting a family usually meant clearing a farm, the population’s fertility and the land’s fecundity were closely linked.” She examined, however, only the impact of the war upon the popular culture of the U.S. rather than the war’s causes. It thus remains unclear whether the depiction of war as a means of “family formation and procreation” played any role in bringing about the declaration of war.⁹⁵ Future research could build upon her perceptive study to shed light on the role of gender in the coming of the war.

A broadening of scholarship on the causes of the War of 1812, beyond transatlantic diplomacy and domestic politics, is thus opportune. Analyses on the discourses that shaped American nationalism, on the influence of ethnic and racial factors, and on the role of religion and of gender all promise to further uncover the roots of the “forgotten conflict.”

at 592. Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 135–50. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 147. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 230–35.

93. For overviews about gendered rhetoric in the early republic, see Mark E. Kann, *On the Man Question: Gender and Civic Virtue in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

94. Burstein and Isenberg, *Madison and Jefferson*, 495. John C. Calhoun, *Annals of Congress*, 12th Congress, 1st Session, 1547. Also see Henry Clay, “Newspaper Editorial,” 14 April, 1812, in Hopkins, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, 1:645–48; cited material at 645. Considering Republicans’ frequently-made argument that America had to emancipate herself from her British parent, the War of 1812 also was seen as a symbolic step into manhood for the young republic. For the continuing importance of familial rhetoric for defining America and her relationship to Great Britain in the post-revolutionary period, see Jennifer Clark, “The Adaptation of Familial Ideology to the Post-Revolutionary Anglo-American Relationship,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 8, no. 2 (1989): 1–13. Jennifer Clark, “John Bull’s American Connection: The Allegorical Interpretation of England and the Anglo-American Relationship,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1990): 15–39. Jennifer Clark, “The War of 1812: American Nationalism and the Rhetorical Images of Britain,” *War & Society* 12, no. 1 (1994): 1–26.

95. Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), xiii–xv. Scholars investigating gendered rhetoric in the debates over a declaration of war in 1812 will find a suitable point of comparison in Kristin L. Hoganson’s analysis of how gender beliefs helped cause America’s declaration of war against Spain in 1898. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

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