

The Real War of 1812

Like its predecessors, the War of 1812 cannot be understood so long as its Indian origin is obscured. Whites along the frontier wanted the war, and along the frontier most of the war was fought, beginning in November 1811 with William Henry Harrison's attack on the Shawnees and allied tribes in Indiana, called the Battle of Tippecanoe. The United States fought five of the seven major land battles of the War of 1812 primarily against Native Americans. None of our textbooks recognizes the involvement of Native Americans.

All but two textbooks miss the key result of the war. Some authors actually cite the "Star Spangled Banner" as the main outcome! Others claim that the war left "a feeling of pride as a nation" or "helped Americans to win European respect." The American Adventure excels, pointing out, "The American Indians were the only real losers in the war." Triumph of the American Nation expresses the same sentiments, but euphemistically: "After 1815 the American people began the exciting task of occupying the western lands." **The other ten books simply ignore the key outcome: in return for our leaving Canada alone, Great Britain gave up its alliances with Indian nations in what would become the United States.**

Without weapons and other aid from European allies, future Indian wars were transformed from major international conflicts to domestic mopping up operations. This result was central to the course of Indian-US, relations for the remainder of the century. Thus Indian wars after 1815, while they cost thousands of lives on both sides, would never again amount to a serious threat to the United States. Although Native Americans won many battles in subsequent wars, there was never the slightest doubt over who would win in the end.

Indians who?

Another result of the War of 1812 was the loss of part of our history. "A century of learning [from Native Americans] was coming to a close. A century and more of forgetting — was beginning." After 1815 Indians could no longer play what sociologists call the role of conflict partner—an important opponent who helps shape the identity of the people with whom they are in conflict with—so Americans forgot that Indians had ever been significant in our history. Even terminology changed: until 1815 the word "Americans" had generally been used to refer to Native Americans; after 1815 it meant European Americans.

Natives were no longer conflict partners, their image deteriorated in the minds of many whites. Karen Kupperman has shown how this process unfolded in Virginia after the Indian defeat in the 1640s: "It was the ultimate powerlessness of the Indians, not their racial inferiority, which made it possible to see them as people without rights." Natives who had been "ingenious," "industrious," and "quick of apprehension" in 1610 now became "sloathfull and idle, melancholy, [and] slovenly." Like Christopher Columbus, George Washington changed his attitudes toward Indians. Washington held positive views of Native Americans early in his life, but after unleashing the Ohio War in 1790 he would come to denounce the Ohio Indians as "having nothing human except the shape."

The Indian-white wars that dominated our history from 1622 to 1815 and were of considerable importance until 1890 have disappeared from our national memory. The reason for minimizing the Indian wars was for fear of maximizing them. But is that fear rational? Telling Indian history as a parade of white villains might be feel-good history for those who want to wallow in the inference that America or whites are bad. What happened is more complex than that, however, so the history we tell must be more complex. Textbooks are beginning to reveal some of the division among whites that lent considerable vitality to the alternatives to war. Though those alternatives were never realized and even though disease, war, abandonment and exile did not have to happen, we must remember that it did.