

The British Capture of Washington, DC, 1814

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“So why doesn’t August 24th [1814] have a place in our memories similar to December 7th . . . or now September 11th?”

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the British capture of Washington, DC, on 24 August 1814. After a landing at Benedict, Maryland, on the Patuxent River, a British force of some 4,500 men marched to Bladensburg, where they quickly defeated a much larger force of American soldiers, sailors, and militiamen. The British then marched unimpeded to Washington, where they burned the Capitol and the President’s Mansion.^a

Historians have repeatedly revisited this iconic event: Charles C. Muller’s *The Darkest Hour* (1963), Walter Lord’s *The Dawn’s Early Light* (1973), Anthony Pitch’s *The Burning of Washington* (1998), and Steve Vogel’s recent *Through the Perilous Fight: Six Weeks That Saved the Nation* (2013) are among the most prominent accounts. They detail the flawed political and military judgments that led to the “Bladensburg Races”—the epithet pinned to the rapid American retreat that preceded the unopposed British march into the Nation’s capital.¹

Seldom, however, has this story been told or remembered as a critical intelligence failure. Several years ago, historian John Lewis Gaddis briefly addressed this question:

So why doesn’t August 24th have a place in our memories similar to December 7th . . . or now September 11th? It’s partly, I think, because the casualties on both sides were relatively light, because the attack didn’t lead to anything worse, and because it was quickly overshadowed by Andrew Jackson’s decisive defeat of the British at the Battle of New Orleans in early 1815. Yet another reason is that the invasion came at the end of the war, not at its beginning: peace negotiations had been underway for several months, and on Christmas Eve 1814, they produced the Treaty of Ghent, which acknowledged victory for neither side but simply restored the status quo.”²

This raises the question: Did an intelligence failure contribute to the British “surprise” attack of 1814 that Gaddis equates to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the 2001 al Qaeda attacks on New York City and Washington, DC? Analyzing the causes and consequences of the American failure to anticipate, perceive, and prepare for the British attack provides both a useful analytic exercise and a deeper appreciation

a. The building was commonly referred to as President’s House or Mansion, although “White House” was also used as early as 1811. The name “Executive Mansion” was used officially until President Theodore Roosevelt established the formal name by having “White House—Washington” engraved on the stationery in 1901.

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of this event during the bicentennial anniversary of the War of 1812.³

To be sure, intelligence in 1814 was far less developed than in 1941 and 2001.

- Both sides gathered intelligence from newspapers and civilians—particularly those who crossed largely unguarded borders—merchants, prisoners, deserters, and spies.
- Intelligence coups were rare. Exceptional was the British seizure of the *Cuyahoga*, a ship that carried all of General William Hull's papers and correspondence, which alerted them to a large American force moving toward Detroit.⁵

In the run up to the war, the US suffered a major intelligence failure and a political fiasco followed when, in March 1809, President Madison made public letters purchased for \$50,000—the government's entire espionage budget—from a purported British agent, John Henry, who promptly left the country. The letters revealed that Henry had been sent by the governor of Lower Canada in 1808 to assess the possibility of the New England states seceding from the young union. The administration anticipated that the letter would prove British subversion, discredit his Federalist opponents, and spark a declaration of war. However, they proved to be little more than commonplace gossip, bringing ridicule on the administration.⁶

A Surprise Attack

The British attack in 1814, like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor

and the 11 September attacks, was not a bolt out of the blue. Madison's administration, like Roosevelt's and Bush's, expected a surprise attack but did not know where or when it would take place. In the case of Pearl Harbor, Navy and Army commanders in Washington sent out on 27 November separate alerts to all US commanders in the Pacific, but this did not prompt those at Pearl Harbor to put their forces on high alert and order active patrolling. Ten days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson wrote in his diary,

*[Roosevelt] brought up the event that we are likely to be attacked perhaps next Monday, for the Japanese are notorious for making an attack without warning, and the question was what we should do. The question was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves.*⁷

The day before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt noted after reading an intercepted Japanese diplomatic message instructing its embassy to break off relations, "This means war."⁸

Similarly, three weeks before the 9/11 attacks, an article in the *President's Daily Brief* (PDB), "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US," provided a general warning but lacked specifics on the time, place, and methods of attack:

Clandestine, foreign government, and media reports indicate Bin Laden since 1997 has wanted to conduct terrorist attacks in the US. . . . We have not been able to corroborate

*some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that from a [—] service in 1998 saying that Bin Laden wanted to hijack a US aircraft to gain the release of "Blind Shaykh" 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman and other US-held extremists. Nevertheless, FBI information since that time indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York.*⁹

Madison, unlike his successors in 1941 and 2001, was aware of both the size and direction of the enemy force approaching the United States. News of the allied armies' capture of Paris on 30 March arrived in Boston on 12 May and was reported in Washington newspapers on 18 May. Madison wrote to Virginia Governor James Barbour of the impending threat in mid-June:

*That the late events in Europe will put it in the power of Great Britain to direct a much greater force against the United States cannot be doubted. How far she may be restrained from so doing by an estimate of her interest in making peace, or by respect for the sentiments of her allies, if these should urge it, cannot yet be known. It is incumbent upon us to suppose that she may be restrained by neither, and to prepare as well we can to meet the augmented force which may invade us.*¹⁰

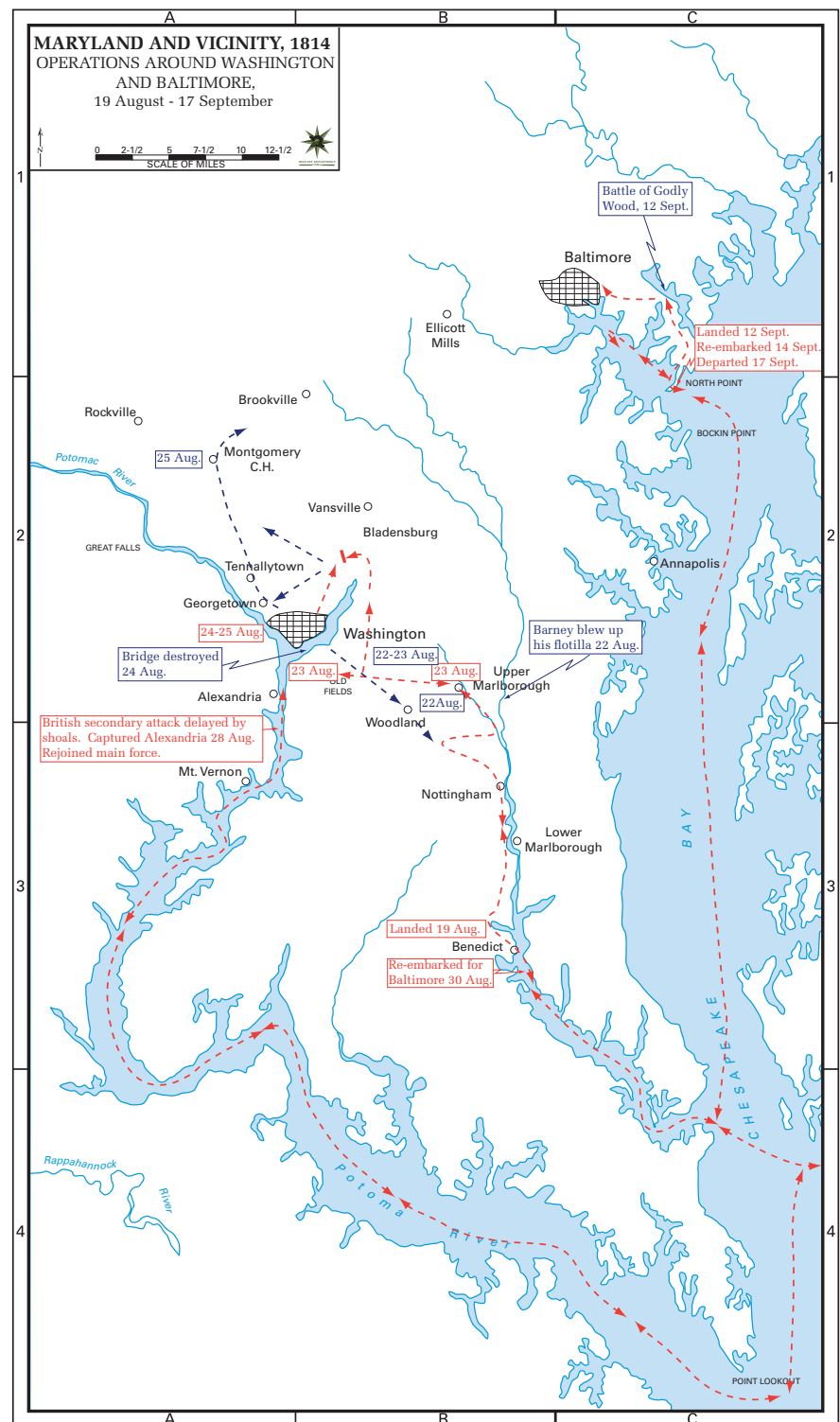
Yet, his government was divided over what to do and, consequently, unprepared and poorly organized.

The cabinet did not meet to discuss the changed strategic situation until 1 July 1814, when Madison called for the creation of a separate military district responsible for defending the District of Columbia, Maryland, and part of northern Virginia. The new Tenth Military District was carved out of the Fifth Military District, commanded by Brig. Gen. Moses Porter, a veteran of the Revolutionary War.

As with Pearl Harbor and 9/11, the intelligence failure was intertwined with a policy failure. British efforts to mask their intentions exacerbated disagreements within Madison's cabinet.

Porter, who had improved the defenses of Norfolk, Virginia, and served along the Canadian frontier, was an ideal choice for the new district. Secretary of War Armstrong nominated him, but Madison chose Colonel William Winder and promoted him to the rank of brigadier general. Winder, captured at the Battle of Stoney Creek in Upper Canada in 1813, had recently been exchanged. He had almost no military experience, but he was the nephew of Maryland Governor Levin Winder, whose state militia was critical to the defense of Washington.

Armstrong, disappointed that Madison had not endorsed his recommendation, refused to call up units of the DC, Maryland, and Virginia militia before a British force posed a definite threat, preventing them from preparing defenses or training. This suggests that he thought such a contingency was unlikely and not worth the federal government's limited resources to activate the militia until they were absolutely needed.



Source: <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/War%20of%201812/181206OperationsDCBalrimore.pdf>

It is also likely that his miserliness disguised his pique over Madison's refusal to appoint Porter to defend the city.

Secretary of State Monroe, however, supported Winder, possibly because he expected Madison to put him in charge of Washington's defenses if the British actually threatened the city. Monroe, often referred to as "Colonel," his Revolutionary War rank, had aspired to lead the western campaign to regain Detroit, which had been captured by the British in the summer of 1812, but Madison endorsed the appointment of William Henry Harrison.

Against this bureaucratic and political rivalry, the American government suffered from the "Barriers to Perception" listed in the framework of surprise attacks on the facing page:

- Effective use of denial (secrecy, security, stealth) and deception by an improvising, adaptive foe;
- Mirror imaging, fallacious rational actor assumptions;
- Underestimation of actor's commitment, risk tolerance, or bias toward action;
- Failure of imagination.

All four factors masked the danger posed by the British, whose intentions remained unclear and whose movements confused the Americans. On 2 June 1814, British troops under Maj. Gen. Robert Ross boarded ships in France's Garonne River for Bermuda. His sealed orders instructed him "to effect a diversion on the coasts of the United States of America in favour of the army employed in the defense of Upper and Lower

Canada." He was also proscribed from "any extended operation" that would take him far from the fleet. Ross's forces included three infantry regiments, a brigade of artillery, a detachment of sappers and miners, and other support elements totaling some 2,500 men. They arrived in Bermuda on 24 July, and five days later the Twenty-First Royal Scots Fusiliers, numbering 800 troops, joined them. Departing on 3 August, they entered the Chesapeake Bay on 15 August.¹¹

Concurrently, in early June, Governor General Prévost suggested that British Vice Adm. Alexander Cochrane conduct amphibious raids along the Eastern Seaboard and retaliate for American attacks on Canadian towns, most recently Dover on 14 May. Cochrane endorsed the idea and explained to Secretary of State for War and the Colonies Earl Bathurst in a message dated 14 July, "If [British] troops arrive soon and the point of attack is directed toward Baltimore, I have every prospect of success and Washington will be equally accessible. They may be destroyed or laid under contribution as the occasion may require. . . ."¹²

British Rear Admiral George Cockburn, who had led raids in the Chesapeake Bay in 1813, refined Cochrane's concept of operations and proposed landing on the Patuxent River at Benedict, a 50-mile march to Washington. He wrote to Cochrane on 17 July, "I therefore most firmly believe that within forty-eight hours after arrival in the Patuxent of such a force as you expect, the city of Washington might be possessed without difficulty or opposition of any kind."¹³

Cockburn designed an elaborate deception to mask the British attack by landing southeast of the capital at Benedict from where Annapolis, Baltimore, and Washington were only a few days' march away. He also ordered one squadron in the Patuxent to conduct the usual raids on farms and settlements while keeping Commodore Joshua Barney's flotilla bottled up. These US gunboats had harassed British warships in the Chesapeake Bay before being forced to retreat up the Patuxent earlier that summer. "After making a flourish or two there, sacking Leonard's Town [on the Potomac's Maryland shore] . . . I shall again move elsewhere, so as to distract Jonathan, do him all the mischief I can and yet not allow him to suspect that a serious and permanent landing is intended anywhere," Cockburn wrote on 16 July.¹⁴

The British also planned two operations disguising their invasion's ultimate objective. A squadron led by Captain James Gordon would create a diversion up the Potomac, attacking any fortifications along the river and threatening Alexandria, Virginia, and Washington from the south. A second feint up the Chesapeake Bay under Captain Peter Parker hoped to draw troops away from Washington by conducting raids and threatening to disrupt communications between Baltimore and Philadelphia.¹⁵

These movements had the intended effect of confusing the perceptions and thinking of American officials and observers. Francis Scott Key, a member of the DC militia, wrote a reassuring note to his mother on 23 June, telling her the British "have now gone down the river—and nobody seems to think there is any chance of their coming back again,

Anticipating Sudden Hostile Action

Abrupt, deliberate action by an adversary (such as a state, armed force, or terrorist cell) against an unprepared target



Archetypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 • Egypt's attack on Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war • The attacks of 11 September 2001
Essence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abrupt, deliberate, hostile deed by a unified actor (such as a state, armed force, terrorist cell, revolutionary vanguard party) aimed at disorienting, defeating, or destroying an unprepared opponent
Subtypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surprise attack • Abrupt power play, such as the Soviet Union's blockade of Berlin from land communications in 1948 or its emplacement of offensive weapons in Cuba in 1962 • Coups • Diplomatic surprise, such as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's ouster of Soviet military advisers in 1972 or his visit to Israel in 1977 • Political assassination • Initiation, escalation of mass human rights abuses
Barriers to Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective use of denial (secrecy, security, stealth) and deception by an improvising, adaptive foe • Mirror-imaging; fallacious rational actor assumptions • Underestimation of actor's commitment, risk-tolerance, or bias toward action • Failure of imagination
Analytic Concepts/ Analogies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor and reassess warning indicators on regular basis • Conduct red team/forensic assessments of actor's means, motives, and opportunities to commit a sudden hostile act • Defensive casing and premortems of imaginable surprise: assess weaknesses, vulnerabilities in systems that may invite opportunistic attacks • Measure actor's level of political commitment, especially an all-out effort to bolster capabilities; assess strategic red lines • Do regular strategic stability audits

at least, while the troops are in the neighborhood.”¹⁶

Thus, when the British invasion force returned to the Patuxent River in August, senior officials offered a variety of opinions about British intentions. Secretary of the Navy William Jones wrote, “The enemy has entered the Patuxent [River] with a very large force indicating design

upon this place [Washington] which may be real, or it may serve to mask his design on Baltimore.” Three days later, he noted that another British flotilla was sailing up the Potomac, but he was unsure of its intentions. “What the nature of his force is, or whether it is accompanied with transports or troops is quite uncertain.”¹⁷

Armstrong, however, doubted an attack on Washington would take place. “Why the devil would they come here?” he declared, pointing to Baltimore as a more lucrative target. Winder, meanwhile, mused that the British would march to capture Annapolis, whose harbor would serve as a base for attacking Baltimore or Washington. He also insisted that the British army had “no object” other

than Barney's flotilla, and in the unlikely event they moved on Washington, the invading force was so weak it would accomplish nothing more than "a mere Cossack hurrah."¹⁸

After Ross's army landed at Benedict on 19 August, Madison received a report from Monroe, who had taken charge of a cavalry unit to locate and report on the movements of the British forces. Noting that some two dozen enemy vessels were near the town, he inferred that

the British had moved up the river, either against Com[modore] Barney's flotilla at Nottingham, confining their views to that object, or taking that in their way & aiming at the city, in combination with the force on the Powtowmac.¹⁹

Based on this information, Madison considered why the British would not or would advance on the capital.

If the force of the Enemy be not greater than yet appears, & he be without Cavalry, it seems extraordinary that he should venture on an enterprise to this distance [meaning to Washington] from his shipping. He may however, count on the effect of boldness & celerity on his side, and the want of precaution on ours. He may be bound also to do something & therefore risk everything.²⁰

British movements after landing subsequently clouded US perceptions of their intentions. The initial march from Benedict via Nottingham and Upper Marlboro to Pigs Point gave the Americans reason to hope that the British objective was only to destroy Barney's gunboats. Barney scuttled

his vessels just as the British came into view on the morning of 22 August. When Cockburn met with Ross on the morning of 23 August, they agreed to press on to Washington.

The British forces then made their way to Wood Yard after a brief skirmish with the Americans, but shortly after midnight received a message from Vice Admiral Cochrane recalling them to Benedict. Having achieved their principal objective, Cochrane saw no need to risk engagements that might endanger the prospects for capturing his more important strategic objectives, Baltimore and New Orleans. Ross initially wanted to return to the fleet, but Cockburn convinced him otherwise. Ross had his troops moving a few hours later, and ignored a second message from Cochrane ordering him to return. He feinted south toward the bridge crossing the lower Potomac—keeping the Americans from discerning his true objective—before reversing direction toward Bladensburg, where another bridge spanned the river at a fordable crossing point.

Even as the British approached Bladensburg, senior American officials had decidedly different assessments of the outcome of the battle. Jones wrote on 23 August, "Our force is fast accumulating and we shall now retard and ultimately repel if not destroy the forces of the enemy whose numbers are variously estimated but I believe does not exceed at most 5,000." In a memorandum written the next day, Monroe recorded Armstrong's assessment, "that as the battle would be between militia and regular troops, the former would be beaten."²¹

Armstrong's forecast proved accurate. Militia from Maryland arrived first on 24 August and deployed near the bridge, only to have Monroe rearrange their dispositions without permission from their commanding officer. Most were quickly pushed back by British infantry supported by Congreve rockets which, while inaccurate, terrified the militia. The British took longer driving off the small number of US Army regulars, Barney's sailors, and Marines. While they were doing so, Winder ordered a general retreat that included the DC militia who had not fired a shot.

The battle lasted a little more than three hours. The British arrived in Washington later that night and proceeded to burn prominent public buildings. The Americans set fire to the Navy Yard to prevent the British from capturing it intact. The following evening, British retraced their steps after taking heavy casualties when an American munitions dump exploded and after they were buffeted by a violent thunderstorm. As they made their way back to Benedict, the British Potomac flotilla arrived in Alexandria, which promptly surrendered.

Warning and Postmortem

Although no formal intelligence apparatus for collection or analysis existed in 1814, it is worth considering what type of warning might have been written for President Madison in August, 1814. As was true with regard to Pearl Harbor in 1941 and 11 September 2001, the threat was imminent, but the intentions of the enemy and the specific targets remained unknown. The exchange of

letters between Monroe and Madison just after the British landed suggest the issues and uncertainties that might be addressed in a warning article like those published in current intelligence today (see right). The article would have addressed the capabilities of the British forces and their possible intentions.

Such a warning piece would have been quickly overtaken by events. Dolly Madison's letter to her sister on 22 August indicates how quickly the American view of the British threat had evolved into a worst case scenario.

Dear Sister, My husband left me yesterday morning to join General Winder . . . I have since received two dispatches from him, written with a pencil. The last is alarming, because he desires that I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage, and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had at first been reported, and it might happen that they would reach the city with the intention of destroying it.

The devastating attack on Washington lowered public confidence in Madison's administration and prompted London to present new demands for a punitive peace at the negotiations in Ghent, Belgium. As noted above, however, the British soon reversed themselves after the US victories at Baltimore and Lake Champlain. The Congress held a perfunctory hearing on the administra-

British Probably Have Multiple Objectives for Force in Maryland

The British force now at Benedict is large enough to operate for several days, and possibly weeks, against a range of targets, including Commodore Barney's gunboat flotilla, nearby towns, and possibly Annapolis, Baltimore, or Washington. Attacks on any of these objectives would be consistent with London's strategy of drawing our forces away from Canada and conducting punitive raids to weaken public support for the war.

- Two-dozen Royal Navy ships and smaller craft almost certainly landed 2,000–4,000 troops, although apparently without cavalry or artillery, according to reports from our scouts in the area.
- We also have reports that another British flotilla is moving up the Potomac River.

We lack reporting on the goals of the British force, but the absence of a cavalry force and artillery suggests the British want to avoid major engagements and limit their objectives to less well-defended targets. The force, however, is sufficient to attempt the destruction of Barney's flotilla, trapped upriver at Pigs Point.

- The British are also in position to attack and plunder towns between Benedict and Bladensburg to gather supplies and terrorize the populace.
- If they reach Bladensburg, they would be in position to ford the Potomac and take the National Road to attack Washington in concert with the flotilla sailing up the Potomac.

Alternative objectives may be the port of Annapolis and Baltimore. Annapolis could serve as a base for sustained operations in the Chesapeake Bay. From there, British troops could also reembark and sail north to attempt to take Baltimore, a still more lucrative prize.

- The Secretary of War and the Commander of the Tenth Military District judge the British will attack these cities and not Washington.

Our militia in the Bladensburg region outnumber the British troops and could use defensible terrain to delay or stop the more experienced and better trained British force. The Secretary of War, however, judges that British regulars would prevail against our militia. ☐

tion's handling of the British attack on Washington, and briefly considered moving the nation's capital to Philadelphia or New York. Winder's conduct at the Battle of Bladensburg was also exonerated by a military court. Copies of the British-signed

Treaty of Ghent arrived in the United States in February; it was immediately signed by the president and ratified by the Senate. No commission was convened to study the intelligence failures surrounding the British capture of Washington.



Endnotes

1. For a summary and analysis of these accounts, see William Weber, “Could Washington Have Been Saved?” Chapter Six in *Neither Victor Nor Vanquished: America in the War of 1812* (Potomac Press, 2013).
2. John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience* (First Harvard University Press, 2005), 10.
3. Gaddis’ shorthand explanation leaves out several crucial facts. First, the capture of Washington prompted the resignation of Secretary of War, and Revolutionary War General John Armstrong, whose counterparts in 1941 and 2001 remained in office.⁴ Second, the American victory at the Battle of Lake Champlain on 11 September 1814 had a far greater impact on British thinking than Jackson’s defense of New Orleans that occurred after the treaty was signed. After losing this naval engagement, the governor-general of Canada, Lt. Gen. Sir George Prevost, ordered his army—poised to secure the strategic invasion route astride Lake Champlain by capturing Plattsburgh, New York—to retreat to Quebec.
Prevost’s army was the principal British offensive against the United States in 1814, attempting to succeed where General John Burgoyne’s campaign had failed in 1777 at the battle of Saratoga. Success at Plattsburgh was intended to compel Washington to accede to London’s maximalist terms at the peace talks in Ghent, Belgium. Indeed, when news of Prevost’s retreat reached London—triggering his court martial—Prime Minister Liverpool ordered British negotiators to come to terms with the US delegation as quickly as possible. Finally, by the time Jackson won at Bayou Bienvenue outside New Orleans, the signatures were dry on the treaty that was being carried across the Atlantic and was ratified days after it reached Washington in February 1815.
4. Such resignations during war have frequently occurred in US history. Armstrong’s predecessor, William Eustis, resigned after three US invasions of Canada failed in 1812. Simon Cameron, Lincoln’s first secretary of war, resigned in early 1862 over corruption charges. His reputation for corruption was so notorious that Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, when discussing Cameron’s honesty with Lincoln, told Lincoln “I don’t think that he would steal a red hot stove.” When Cameron demanded Stevens retract this statement, Stevens told Lincoln, “I believe I told you he would not steal a red-hot stove. I will now take that back.” Russell A. Alger resigned at President McKinley’s request during the Spanish American War after “Algerism” became an epithet to describe incompetence regarding the overall performance of the Army, Alger’s poor choice of field commanders, and his inept administration of the department. President Truman asked for Louis A. Johnson’s resignation in 1950 after the administration’s defense economization policies contributed to disaster in Korea. Robert McNamara resigned in 1968 over disagreements with President Johnson over the Vietnam War. Finally, Donald Rumsfeld left office in 2006 after eight retired generals and admirals called for his resignation in what was called the “Generals Revolt,” accusing him of “abysmal” military planning and lack of strategic competence. <http://en.wikipedia.org>.
5. Donald R. Hickey, *Don’t give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812* (University of Illinois Press, 2006), 263–68; J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison’s War, Politics, Diplomacy and Warfare in the Early American Republic 1873–1830* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 97–99.
6. David S. and Jeanne T. Heidler, eds., *Encyclopedia of the War of 1812*, (ABC-CLIO, 1997), 238–39.
7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_L._Stimson; <http://www.library.cia/other-library-files/pdf/911Report.pdf>.
8. Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford University Press, 1962), 273.
9. “Bin Ladin Determined To Strike In US,” [Wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org).
10. *The Letters and Other Writings of James Madison, 1794-1815, Vol II* (J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1865), 583.
11. Steven Vogel, *Through the Perilous Fight: Six Weeks that Saved the Nation* (Random House, 2013), Kindle edition, Chapter 3.
12. *Ibid.*, Chapter 13.
13. *Ibid.*, Chapter 11.
14. *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.
15. *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.
16. *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.
17. http://www.History.navy.mil/library/online/burning_washington.html#bladensburg.
18. Vogel, Chapter 5.
19. *The Writings of James Madison, 1808–1819*, 291.
20. *Ibid.*, 291; Monroe 290.
21. http://www.constitution.org/jm/18140824_bladensburg.htm; www.History.navy.mil/library/online/burning_washington.html#bladensburg.

