



# AMERICA'S 2ND WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

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The United States had to fight not one, but two wars for its independence. The first, of course, was the Revolutionary War. Can you name the second?

It was the War of 1812.

Now, both wars were against the British. And in both cases, the Americans should have lost.

The Revolutionary War is very much celebrated in American history. The second one has all but been forgotten. But had it been lost, America's history would have been much, much different.

The British precipitated the war by failing to recognize the United States as a sovereign nation. For five years between 1807 and 1812, they repeatedly disrupted American commerce, boarding American merchant ships, capturing their sailors—over 5,000 of them—and forcing them to work on British ships.

Finally, President James Madison said, “Enough!” and on June 18, 1812, Congress declared war on Britain. The euphoria didn't last long. And for good reason. The Americans had no viable strategy, no standing army to speak of, no generals worthy of the rank, a very small navy, a wholly inadequate supply of munitions.

It was a different story on the British side. They had all the men, ships, generals and admirals they needed—and then some. If these upstart Yankees wanted war, the British were only too happy to accommodate them.

Things went pretty much as expected: one American defeat after another, culminating in the burning of Washington, D.C.

The great prize of the war was not the tiny American capital, or even the larger, nearby city of Baltimore. The prize the British wanted was the gateway to the American West, the city at the mouth of the Mississippi River—New Orleans. If Britain controlled this key southern port, it could check American expansion, confining it to the eastern half of the continent for the foreseeable future.

To take New Orleans, the British amassed an enormous sea and land force—60 ships, 10,000 men.

And what could the Americans offer by way of defense? Enter Andrew Jackson, one of the most remarkable figures in American history.

Born in 1767 in the territories of the Carolinas, Jackson first encountered the British during the Revolutionary War. His memories were not happy ones. His mother and his two brothers died in the war. And Jackson himself was left with a permanent scar, the gift of a British officer who slashed him with his sword when the teenage boy refused to clean his boots.

Self-educated, Jackson settled in Nashville, Tennessee. There he became a frontier lawyer and, after Tennessee was admitted to the Union, served briefly as its sole congressman, then as a senator representing the new state.

Though he had no formal military training, Jackson was elected major general of the Tennessee militia and gained fighting experience leading several successful campaigns against the Indians of the region.

He inspired both great loyalty and great fear in the men under his command: loyalty because he fought beside them, enduring every hardship they endured; and fear because he demanded strict military discipline. Given the inherently rebellious, don't-tread-on-me nature of the frontiersmen under his command, this was no mean feat.

But Jackson had never faced a foe like the British: a highly disciplined, battle-tested army.

On his side of the ledger, the American general had a motley assortment of volunteers, militiamen, freemen of color, Indians, and regulars. Joined by legendary New Orleans pirate Jean Lafitte and his pirate band, the American force was still less than half of what the British had in numbers and far less in combat experience.

But for all their deficiencies, Jackson's men had three talents he fully exploited: they knew the terrain, they knew how to dig, and they knew how to shoot.

The Battle of New Orleans began in earnest at dawn January 8, 1815. The overconfident British had no idea what they were in for. Wading through the mud of Louisiana swamps and thwarted by Jackson's hastily constructed, but formidable, ramparts, one British charge after another was cut down by deadly accurate American artillery and rifle fire.

When it was over, it amounted to the worst defeat in British military history.

No two accounts of the battle would agree on the exact casualty count, but all agreed it was stunningly high. According to one British infantry captain, "three generals, seven colonels, seventy-five officers... a total of seventeen hundred and eighty-one officers and soldiers had fallen in a few minutes."

The American losses amounted to no more than a dozen dead.

The War of 1812, America's second war of independence, began badly and only got worse. But it ended with one of the greatest victories in American military history.

It made Jackson a national hero and set up his successful run for the presidency thirteen years later. Even more, it guaranteed the western expansion of the United States would proceed without interruption.

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