Chapter 10 Lesson 4

The War of 1812

Defeats and Victories

When the war began the War Hawks were confident that it would not last long. Unfortunately, the Americans were unprepared for war.

The fighting force was small and ill-prepared. The regular army had fewer than 12,000 soldiers, 5,000 of whom were new recruits. The state militias had between 50,000 and 100,000 poorly trained soldiers. The commanders of the American Revolution were too old to serve and not everyone supported “Mr. Madison’s War.” The Americans also underestimated, or misjudged, the strength of the British and their Native American allies.

In July 1812, the war began. Gen. William Hull led the American army from Detroit into Canada, where they met Tecumseh and his warriors. Fearing a massacre by the Native Americans, Hull surrendered Detroit to the British. Several other attempts to invade Canada also failed. Gen. William Henry Harrison led one of these unsuccessful efforts. He decided that the Americans could make no headway as long as the British controlled Lake Erie.

US Naval Strength

The US Navy had 3 of the fastest frigates, warships, afloat. When the Constitution destroyed two British vessels early in the war, Americans rejoiced. Privateers, armed private ships, also captured many British vessels, boosting American morale.

Oliver Hazard Perry, commander of the Lake Erie naval forces, had his orders. He was to assemble a fleet and seize Lake Erie. The battle came on September 10th 1813. British ships sailed out to meet the American forces. In the bloody battle that followed, Perry and his ships destroy the British naval force. After the battle, Perry sent Gen. Harrison the message, “We have met the enemy and they are ours.”

Lake Erie was under American control, the British and their Native American allies were forced to pull back from the Detroit area. Harrison and his troops cut off their withdrawal. In the fierce battle that followed, the Battle of Thames, Tecumseh was killed.

American forces went on to attack York (present-day Toronto), burning the parliament. Still, though America had won several victories by the end of 1813, Canada remained under British rule.

Defeat of the Creeks

Before his death in the Battle of the Thames, Tecumseh had talked with the Creeks in the Mississippi Territory about forming a confederation to fight the US. With his death, hopes for such a confederation ended. The British-Native American alliance came to an end.

In March 1814, Andrew Jackson led US forces in an attack on the Creeks in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. More than 550 Creek people died in the battle, and the Creeks were forced to give up most of their lands.

The British Offensive

Before fighting broke out with the US, the British had already been fighting the French. Fighting two wars was difficult. Britain had to send soldiers and ships to both France and the US. In the spring of 1814, British fortunes began to improve. After winning the war against Napoleon, Britain was free to send more forces against the US

August 1814, the British sailed into Chesapeake Bay and launched an attack on Washington D.C. British troops quickly overpowered the American militia on the outskirts of the city. They then marched into the American capital. “They proceeded, without a moment’s delay, to burn and destroy everything in the most distant degree connected with the government,” reported a British officer. Among the buildings set ablaze were the Capitol and the president’s mansion. Fortunately, a thunderstorm put out the fires before they could completely destroy the buildings.

The British did not try to hold the city, instead they headed out to Baltimore. They attacked the city in mid-September, but the people of Baltimore were ready and held firm. A determined defense and fierce artillery fire from Fort McHenry in the harbor kept the British from entering the city.

As the bombs burst over Fort McHenry during the night of September 13, local attorney Francis Scott Key watched. The next morning he saw the American flag still flying over the fort. Deeply moved, Key wrote a poem that became known as “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Congress designated “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the national anthem in 1931.

A Turning Point at Plattsburgh

While British forces were attacking D.C. and Baltimore, British Gen. Sir George Prevost was moving into New York from Canada. Leading more than 10,000 soldiers, his goal was to capture Plattsburgh, a key city on the shore of Lake Champlain. An American naval force defeated the British fleet in September 1814. Fearing the Americans would surround them, the British retreated into Canada.

The Battle of Lake Champlain convinced the British that the war in North America was too costly and unnecessary. They had defeated Napoleon in Europe. To keep fighting the US would result in little gain and was not worth the effort.

The End of the War

In December 1814, American and British representatives met in Ghent, Belgium, to sign a peace agreement. The Treaty of Ghent did not change any existing borders. There was no mention of impressment of sailors. Even neutral rights had become a dead issue sine Napoleon’s defeat.

One final ferocious battle happened before word of the treaty reached the US. On January 8, 1815, the British advanced on New Orleans. Waiting for them were Andrew Jackson and his troops. The redcoats were no match for Jackson’s soldier, who hid behind thick cotton bales. The bales absorbed the British bullets, while the British advancing in the open were easy targets for American troops. In a short but gruesome battle, hundreds of British soldiers were killed. At the Battle of New Orleans, Americans achieved a decisive victory. Andrew Jackson became a war hero whose fame would help him win the presidency in 1828.

Nationalism and New Respect

From the beginning Federalists had opposed “Mr. Madison’s War.” These unhappy Federalists gathered in December 1814 at the Hartford Convention in Connecticut. A few favored secession, but most wanted to remain in the Union. To protect their interests, they made a list of proposed amendments to the Constitution.

The Federalists’ grievances seemed unpatriotic in the triumph following the war. The party lost the public’s respect and disappeared as a political force, leaving only one significant party. The War Hawks took over leadership of the Republican Party and carried on the Federalist belief in a strong national government. The War Hawks favored trade, western expansion, the energetic development of the economy, and a strong army and navy.

Americans felt a great sense of patriotism and a strong national identity after the War of 1812. The young nation also gained new respect from other nations around the world.