



The significance of the War of 1812 in Maryland

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The year 2012 will witness the bicentennial of the War of 1812, often called the “Second War for Independence.” To commemorate the War, in 2007, Governor Martin O’Malley issued an Executive Order creating the [Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission](#). The purpose of the Commission will be to “stimulate and coordinate investment in the commemoration of the bicentennial of the War of 1812 for maximum benefit to Marylanders.”

The [Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission](#) published a plan of action late last year that addressed the significance of the state’s involvement:

The Chesapeake Campaign of 1814 is significant in and of itself and represents key turning points in American social and political history. The events of the invasion contributed to the preservation of a young nation and its Constitution.



Nationalism/Patriotism

The Chesapeake Campaign fueled a nascent sense of nationalism in many Americans. Americans took tremendous pride in their victory over the British at the Battle for Baltimore. The poem "The Star-Spangled Banner," written to commemorate the victory, was set to music and rapidly circulated. The flag and the song -- later the National Anthem -- came to symbolize the nation. They have retained their iconic status through the ongoing evolution of the country and remain important national symbols in the United States and the rest of the world. It was as a result of the Chesapeake Campaign that, for the first time, many Americans began to think about what it meant to be an American. After the Battle for Baltimore, Americans had a moment to take stock and recognize that this significant victory and the survival of the Republic were worth celebrating.

The National Capital

The Chesapeake Campaign took aim at the seat of the American government. The British blockaded the Chesapeake and invaded Washington, not only because it was the capital

but also to take the war to the Virginia-based politicians whom the British held responsible for the war. By contrast, the northern states, largely opposed to the war, traded with and supplied the British until the naval blockade was extended. The lack of defense of Washington, DC, the rout of the government, and the destruction of the capital were deeply embarrassing and demoralizing. This generated debate about moving the seat of government back to Philadelphia. Congress' narrow vote to keep the capital in Washington meant that the center of government would continue to be surrounded by slave states, rather than return to a northern city that had power in the anti-slavery movement. This fueled the intractable, sectional debate on the politics of slavery that loomed for many years to come. ...

Slavery

The campaign exposed the military and economic vulnerability of a nation dependent on slavery. An inconsistency in leadership between those protecting the institution of slavery and those fighting to abolish it existed in the United States. The British recognized this vulnerability and took advantage of it during the Chesapeake Campaign.

While the primary purpose of the American defense was to protect the country, a secondary and distracting purpose was to defend whites against potential slave insurrections. Although the militia tried to prevent slaves from defecting, the British were successful in recruiting a number of slaves into military service. The British emancipated 4,000 slaves and used several hundred in their forces. After the war, these former slaves resettled in Canada and the West Indies, and later established a colony in Sierra Leone.

Defense Policy

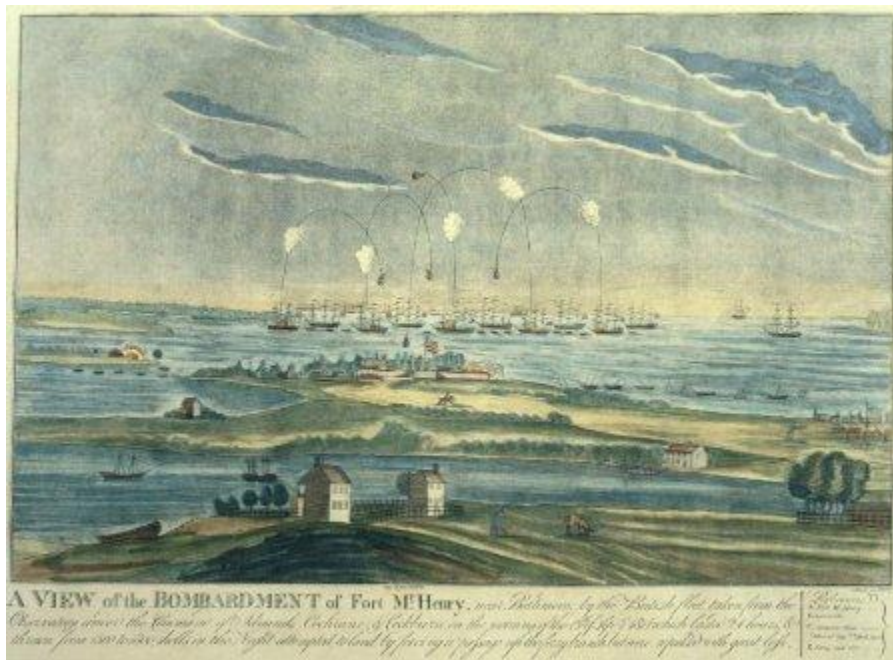
In the summer of 1814, even though British expeditionary forces threatened the region, American leaders did not adequately prepare the defense of the region and made a series of miscalculations and poorly executed defensive measures. The Americans suffered a major defeat at Bladensburg; the government was evacuated from Washington; and the President, his family and his Cabinet were forced to flee. A number of public buildings, including the Capitol and the White House, were burned and the Secretary of War was forced to resign.

These events led to the recognition of the need for a sizable national military defense, particularly a navy and coastal fortifications. A major lesson learned on the Chesapeake was that, without adequate coastal defenses, the country was open to attack and blockading that would impair national and international trade. For the rest of the century, coastal defense dominated defense spending.

A second lesson of the campaign was that the country could not depend on militia, but needed a strong regular army. The campaign forced the young government to recognize the importance of central command and to adopt regulations that shaped the American military establishment for years to come.

Trade and Commerce

Baltimore's trade and commercial prowess made the region a target for the British invasion, affecting trade patterns and the future of Anglo-American commerce. In the first months of the war, the depredations of private armed vessels, or privateers, many from Baltimore shipyards, prompted the British Admiralty to declare the entire east coast under naval blockade. The British blockade of shipping, particularly on the Chesapeake Bay, forced the nation from its dependence on trade with foreign markets toward westward expansion to the interior of its own continent. Additionally, the American victory in the campaign forced other powerful countries to recognize and respect the United States' maritime rights. ...[\[1\]](#)



[\[1\]](#) Maryland War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission, *Star-Spangled 200: A National Bicentennial in Maryland*, ([Baltimore]: Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, Division of Tourism, Film, and the Arts, 27 October 2009), pp. 14-15; accessed online at <http://www.starspangled200.org/About/Documents/Action%20Plan%20final%201.pdf>, 29 Apr 2010.