

Robert S. Quimby. *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997. viii + 1054 pp. \$85.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87013-441-8.



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The War of 1812 ranks as one of the most ineptly fought and poorly managed efforts in American history. According to Robert Sherman Quimby (1916-98), the “story of the War of 1812 is...a study in how not to conduct a war” (p. vii). American political leaders at the highest levels lacked, in many cases, even the remotest idea of their roles and responsibilities in war. Motivated by a desire to help and out of personal ambition, Secretary of State James Monroe and Secretary of War John Armstrong each took to field to lend a meddling, unskilled, and ignorant hand in directing the active operations of field armies. It is a story that is replete with gross political and military blundering and one with few lessons learned immediately by the Republic or by its army in the aftermath. That the United States was not soundly trounced by the war’s conclusion can be attributed to British global commitments occasioned by the Napoleonic wars, their own shortsightedness and misperceptions, and by the late rise of competent senior American officers. Most of these factors are well-known, but what is less familiar is how the United States Army, the states’ militias, and Indian auxiliaries planned and fought against the British army and its Canadian and Indian auxiliaries, as well as against the Red Sticks in the Creek War of 1813.

Quimby’s story begins with a brief background sur-

vey of the American military and political situation as it stood in 1812. President James Madison, Secretary of War William Eustis (Armstrong’s predecessor), and the Congress had shown little foresight or competence in preparing the nation for war, or even in maintaining an adequate military establishment for simple defensive purposes in a war that the Republicans knew was coming. Economy seemed to matter more for the Republicans and for Federalist opponents of the war than did preparation for that war. Even as the war approached, the federal government did little substantively to improve the nation’s military footing. The ill-prepared regular army was undermanned, understaffed, and geared more for frontier garrison duty than for active campaigning. Much of the senior regular leadership had first seen combat in the War for Independence and was, in any case, far too old for the demands of war. Because of the regular army’s condition, many of the Republic’s soldiers would be drawn from the ranks of the enrolled militia, itself a poor specimen of military prowess.

Geography, the need to defeat the British army quickly, and other related circumstances dictated that the United States invade Canada and hold it against any forthcoming British counteroffensives. Quebec and Montreal, as they had been throughout the eighteenth century, were the keys to Canada. Securing Quebec

would deny the St. Lawrence River to British supplies and reinforcements for Upper Canada (west and south of Montreal) and much of Lower Canada. Montreal commanded river entry into Upper Canada, as well as into the Great Lakes. Fighting an offensive war, however, only exacerbated American military shortcomings. In order to accomplish either of these objectives it was necessary that American forces gain control of the Great Lakes. However, this could not be accomplished without a navy. And as had been the case with the army, the navy had also suffered from Republican parsimony and military shortsightedness.

Quimby's rendering of events in the Northwestern and Eastern theaters admirably ties together the myriad details of the seesaw American and British campaigns and the challenges faced by the men of both armies. Only one senior American commander in the Northwest, William Henry Harrison, emerges with any credit to his record. Unfortunately for Harrison and for American fortunes in that theater, Secretary of War Armstrong saw fit to hamstring Harrison's efforts by interfering in the general's exercise of command. In the Eastern theater it was much the same story. American generals, transfixed by the Niagara Peninsula which could have been bypassed and isolated by capturing either Kingston or Montreal, fought for control of the frontier and accomplished little. Again, it was stalemate and, again, Secretary of War Armstrong avidly interfered with his field commanders and complicated their efforts. Despite the frustrations of these campaigns, they did result in the dismissal or resignation of a number of antedated officers which, coupled with a delayed expansion of the regular army, allowed for the rise of such leaders as Jacob Jennings Brown and Winfield Scott.

The United States Army certainly suffered from more than its share of internal problems as well as from its British and Indian opponents. But it also had to endure the well-intentioned but wholly troublesome participation in its affairs by members of the Executive branch. According to Quimby, Secretary of State James Monroe dreamed of covering himself with military fame. He hoped to be named as either Secretary of War or to be appointed lieutenant general, thereby assuming the senior post in the army. As it developed, John Armstrong succeeded William Eustis in the War Department and, until Armstrong retired from the office during the British campaign for Washington, he feuded with Monroe and impinged upon the authority of President Madison and several field commanders, including William Henry Harrison. Armstrong's machinations are too many and too

complex to be addressed in a review, but they all seem to have arisen from his ambition to become President of the United States.

In August 1814, as British forces approached Washington, James Monroe got his chance to earn a military reputation. More than once, the Secretary of State accompanied troops on reconnaissance missions of the British army, but it was at the Battle of Bladensburg that Monroe decided to test the mettle of his military acumen. As American forces prepared to defend the capitol city they were shifted about to several different positions before finally settling in to a position that Quimby judges to have "been as good as possible in the circumstances" (p. 683). In the final moments before the battle the army was yet again repositioned, but this time its dispositions were disastrous. The evidence, according to Quimby, indicates that Monroe rearranged the troops on his own initiative, and that he did it so poorly that he exposed the untrained Maryland militia to British observation and fire and that the second defensive line could not support the first. Except for the handful of regulars, sailors, and marines, the British quickly swept aside the American defenders and later razed much of Washington.

American fortunes in the South were slightly better, but nonetheless taxing for the army. Andrew Jackson had to deal regularly with the debilitating effects of desertion and mutiny in the Tennessee militia. More than once, Old Hickory quashed the efforts of mutineers through the sheer force of his personality. Throughout this work Jackson receives a good deal of praise from Quimby. There is a question, however, about the author's conclusion that a 23 December 1814 night attack by Jackson against the British army "somewhat equalized" the disparity between the green American troops and veteran Britons (p. 843). This assertion is open to debate. Night attacks were (and are) extremely fraught with the potential for failure and demand well-trained and confident soldiers in order to succeed. Luckily, Jackson shocked the British with his audacity and won a moral victory.

It is safe to say that the *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812* is the standard work on this subject and will remain so for some time to come. However, it must be pointed out that the work needs a more thorough editing to improve problems that interrupt the otherwise smooth flow of the narrative. Misspellings within the text like "aids" instead of "aides" (p. 693) or "Penscola" instead of "Pensacola" (p. 1033); the lack of map and text agreement like "Emucfau," "New Yorca," and "Tallushatchee" versus

“Emuckfa” and “New Yauca,” and “Tallashatchee” (map, p. 370; text, pp. 451, 429, 407); the constant substitution in racial designations of “Black” for “black,” but never “White” for “white” (pp. 150 ff.); referring to Indians as “savages” (pp. 387, 524); and the frequent use of first-person plurals like “we” and “our” (pp. 218, 225, 308, 515) are some of the more egregious examples. These criticisms are not meant to nit-pick and are undertaken with a degree of sensitivity because Quimby, a Professor Emeritus at Michigan State University, passed away the year after this work was published and he may not have been able to attend to the necessary corrections. These editorial issues notwithstanding, Quimby’s assessments are judicious and the clarity and scope of his narrative is a tribute to the author’s ability to tie together a number of often complex or contradictory threads in order to produce a clear and comprehensive story.

Compared to the battles of the Revolutionary and

Napoleonic wars, those of the War of 1812 were picayune affairs. Besides the war’s rather small scale, few military operations were models for emulation; indeed, most left much to be desired. Neither American nor British forces performed very creditably in offensive operations, and each contestant showed a penchant for conceiving and executing grandiose plans that were to be done on the cheap. *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812* is a welcome and important addition to the historiography of the War of 1812 and will be of great use and interest to academics, students, and the interested public. Its comprehensive look at American military operations has given us greater insight into the mindset of the nation’s political and military leadership and their relationship in making war.

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