

After 1812: betrayal

British relied on First Nations to win the war and then dumped them.

by Paul Smith

As the Harper government ramps up public events to commemorate the War of 1812, most Canadians are unaware of the full import of the role of First Nations and the pivotal role that war played in the history of Canada's treatment of aboriginal peoples. June is Aboriginal History Month and June 21 was National Aboriginal Day. Let's take a look.

Many historians believe that Britain would have lost the war without the aboriginal military strength. Canada's very existence depended on First Nations and Métis co-operation.

Native peoples in the US were experiencing the brutal expansionist US manifest destiny, of which the War of 1812 was yet another expression. Terror and carnage was being unleashed on native peoples in the US that would not end for over a century, if ever.

American history is replete with "Indian Wars" to crush First Nations — along with politicians and military heroes who made their mark as brutal "Indian fighters." Native leaders like Tecumseh hoped for an alliance with Britain to help prevent the elimination of First Nations at the hands of the US. The British proclamation of 1763 had meant British recognition and accommodation of aboriginal peoples, setting the stage for their military alliance against the Americans.

After the War of 1812, the tide turned. The aboriginal military force was no longer needed. Suddenly, British treatment of native peoples emulated the US model, where First Nations were used and then abandoned — or worse.

These themes should be highlighted during the anniversary of the War of 1812. We are all woefully ignorant of Canada's aboriginal history and this is a chance to shed light on it. Most Canadians reduce their interest to a simple glib question of "who won?"

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In the United States, the aftermath included the start of forced Native removal from the east, brutal "Indian Wars" in the west, and the rise of high profile "Indian fighters" like Andrew Jackson, Daniel Boone and Kit Carson. In Canada, the legacy was perhaps less dramatic but equally devastating.

After decades of treating aboriginal peoples as partners in the fur trade and then as military allies, the British and then Canadians pursued policies of containment, treaties for land, suppression of culture, assimilation, and reserves where every aspect of life was controlled by white "Indian agents." Then there were the now well-known residential schools in both countries, aiming to "kill the Indian" in native children.

In 1812, this continent was more the aboriginal "Turtle Island" than a colonized North America. Aboriginal people still outnumbered Europeans. Colonialism had not subdued all the 500+ sovereign First Nations across Turtle Island (North America). Because relatively few treaties of land transfer had been signed in Canada, Aboriginal people controlled most of the continent.

On paper, European powers had divided up much of North America, based on a so-called Doctrine of Discovery. This was a 13th century idea that non-Christian peoples had no rights and did not actually own their land, but only occupied the land, so it was free for the taking by Europeans upon "discovery". Archaic as it may sound, this doctrine was a basis for some US Supreme Court decisions in aboriginal land disputes.

So aboriginal support was vital to the British in most military matters — as is now acknowledged widely by mainstream historians. Many historians believe that Britain would have lost the war without the aboriginal military strength. Canada's very existence depended on First Nations co-operation.

But why did aboriginal peoples largely align with the British and not the Americans?

First Nations built an economic and social partnership of the French, and later the British, due to the fur trade — which played a far more dominant role in the early history of Canada than in the US. In fact, the Métis became a separate intermediary culture in Canada, born of the fur trade, bridging the two cultures with unions between European men and First Nations women.

After the British defeated the French and took over their colonial interests, the British learned hard lessons about building relationships with First Nations. Initial British policies unfavourable to natives led to fierce First Nations resistance in the Great Lakes region, headed up by the legendary Chief Pontiac.

As a result, the British issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which marked a major change in their policy toward First Nations and still plays a significant role in aboriginal law in Canada today. Great Britain recognized First Nations' rights and established a land reserve for them in the Great Lakes basin and Ohio valley. The Proclamation constrained the growth of the 13 American colonies and contributed to the friction between colonists and Britain that led to the American Revolution.

At that point, the colonists were more aggressive toward First Nations than the British establishment, gripped by what later became known as the "Manifest Destiny" doctrine — the desire to conquer the entire continent. The same philosophy encouraged Americans to remove native peoples by whatever means necessary and to conquer Canada in 1812.

Tecumseh, the remarkable Shawnee hero of the War of 1812, and his brother Tenskwatawa, emerged as leaders seeking to create a pan-Indian confederacy to establish a First Nations territory, separate and sovereign from both British and American governance — a dream that would have transformed the history of the continent.

Under the Treaty of Ghent that ended the War of 1812, Britain abandoned the First Nations allies who had helped them immeasurably in the war. Initially, Britain sought a sovereign aboriginal territory between what is now Canada and the US. But the US adamantly opposed such a territory and Britain acquiesced to the status quo before the war, selling out their allies.

In the US, not long after the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson, an "Indian fighter" and major player in the Battle of New Orleans against the British, became President. He passed the Indian Removal Act that began the forced removal of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations from the southeast to west of the Mississippi River — a long and brutal confrontation between the US government and society and indigenous peoples.

Looking back, it is abundantly clear why aboriginal people would have supported the British in the War of 1812 to attempt to preserve their way of life, cultures, families, communities and spiritual traditions from the ravages of the Manifest Destiny. But the British — and the French — were not reliable allies, just colonialists with a slightly different stripe.

These are themes that should be highlighted during the anniversary of the War of 1812. Stephen Harper has said Canada has "no history of colonialism." He is wrong. Canada does have a long and nasty history of colonialism and the War of 1812 is smack in the middle of it.

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