

HIST 5453 – New American Republic

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1812: The War that Forged a Nation

Response Paper

The first theme I discovered when reading Walter R. Borneman's *1812: The War that Forged a Nation* is the implications of politics. This came into my viewpoint when Borneman discussed Great Britain's two war fronts during the War of 1812. Even if the situation was coincidental, the strategy of the United States using the war between Napoleon and Great Britain to their advantage was a game changer. Great Britain had to split its focus between the war in the United States and the war in Europe. This caused Great Britain to divide its forces on both war fronts and make the false assumption that the newly formed United States had a weak army. Great Britain assumed it could focus on the war in Europe more than the United States, causing them to send fewer troops across the Atlantic. On pages one and two of the book, Borneman states, "Indeed, Great Britain might have easily crushed the upstarts it had brought its full weight to bear on the matter, but the British were preoccupied with Napoleon's maneuvers in Europe, and the American war in North America remained a sideshow for its first two years." A second example of the political theme is Borneman's discussion on Aaron Burr's downward spiral of his reputation. Reading between the lines, it came to fruition that this was a distraction within the United States government, allowing Britain to find a weak point within the United States government. International politics were fragile between the two countries. War was bound to happen.

Violence is the second and more common-sense theme I discovered while reading *1812: The War that Forged a Nation*. War is a bloody and violent endeavor. This war had multiple battle fronts. It was fought on the sea, the Great Lakes, and land. On page 34, Borneman discusses the volatile tensions between the local government and the native tribes of the area. Violence erupted in the western frontier when Harrison, governor of the Indian Territory, decided to destroy a native village framing another native tribe. The violence during the War of 1812 seemed more intimate than other wars because the British focused on specific targets. The most memorable target of the British during the War of 1812 was the burning of the White House and the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. This was the first and only time it was attacked in such a manner until the terrorist attacks of 9/11 targeting the Pentagon. There have been other minor attacks throughout United States history, but not of this magnitude. “So with the Capitol in flames, Ross Cockburn, and an advance guard rode northwest down deserted Pennsylvania Avenue to the President’s House...after pillaging the Madison’s personal possessions on the second floor, British sailors set multiple fires throughout the building...As the flames roared out of the windows of the President’s House, the invaders moved on to the nearby Treasury building. It, too, was soon in flames.” The British invaders decided to make a statement showing their forces' power to the United States citizens. The scrutiny of these actions suggests this could be an act of revenge for losing the Revolutionary War. The British destroyed the icons that represented the American government.

A third theme is international relations. The War of 1812 was not just between Great Britain and the United States. France was a prominent player in the conflict. Borneman informs readers about the trade fiasco between France, Great Britain, and the United States. Great Britain was capturing US ships, and eventually, France followed suit. Great Britain set up blockades on

the coast of the United States. On page 175, the author states, “Naturally, the tightening British blockade had an equally restrictive impact on the movements of America’s minuscule navy” These are the tensions that initiated the War of 1812. Another major player, in a sense, was Canada. The fight over Canada as a territory was at the forefront. The United States decided to fight Great Britain by trying to gain control over Great Britain’s territory, Canada. If the United States could take control, the land would expand the country. The Barbary Pirates of the Mediterranean were also a distraction for the United States when causing trade issues (78). Finally, different nations were battling for allegiances from the native tribes living in the United States. “Just as British influence among the Indians in the northwest was a frequent point of contention, Spanish intrigue among the southern tribes—both officially and unofficially—both real and imagined—left friction among all parties (144).” The American Revolution had somewhat of an international stage, but the War of 1812 brought involvement from multiple countries, turning this into, to some extent, a world war.

Walter R. Borneman’s *1812: The War that Forged a Nation* was comprehensive war history that proved informative. This detailed book talks about strategy and war tactics in a way that someone unfamiliar with that style of language and study can understand if the reader’s focus is there. His writing style is very academic and lacks any initiative to draw the reader in if the reader is not an academic. This detailed book reminds me a bit of *The Spirited Resistance*, in which both books had a large timespan and multiple players involved. However, I think Borneman handled the complexity better with the balance of attention and organization with the different groups. The War of 1812 was unfamiliar until I read Borneman’s book. He could clearly describe the cause and effect of the war from beginning to end. *1812* is a straightforward book

that caters to history-centric classes. This book can be used in military history, war strategy, historiography, world history, or American Republic history class.