

## **Wars that Shaped the Nation**

The American Revolution was but the first of many wars fought by the United States, several of which caused major territorial changes to the young country.

The first major war of the 1800s fought by the United States was the War of 1812. Although Americans had hoped that, following independence, they would be “enemies in war, in peace friends” with Great Britain, relations were poor. The British initially retained control over forts in the old Northwest territories and worked with and armed Native allies, with both hoping to stop American settlement and expansion into these lands. Jay’s Treaty, ratified by the US in 1795, finally pushed the British to withdraw from these territories (and ceded installations such as Fort Detroit), but did so at the cost of unpopular financial concessions by the Americans – so unpopular even Washington himself received condemnation.

The British soon had more pressing matters- specifically the efforts by the revolutionary French government, eventually led by Napoleon Bonaparte – to expand across Europe. To isolate the French and bring an end to the Napoleonic Wars, the British sought to block shipping, even from neutral countries, into France, threatening to seize any ship trading with their enemy. Unsurprisingly, this angered American merchants, and the embargoes and counter-embargoes seriously harmed the American economy. More provocatively, the British sought to effectively draft former British subjects, now American citizens, into serving in the British Navy against Napoleon – which from the perspective of Americans, meant British kidnapping of their fellow citizens.

Eventually, the Americans declared war. British forces (which at the time included Canadians) burned Washington, D.C.; Americans burned York (now Toronto), the capital of Britain’s Canadian holdings. The British blocked efforts to capture Canada; an army led by General Andrew Jackson defeated the British assault on New Orleans.

In other words, the war was largely a draw – no territory changed hands between the two countries – but it did establish America could defend itself against its former ruler, and so, in a sense, is sometimes remembered as the second war for independence. Relations generally improved between the two countries – though America and Britain had a boundary dispute in the northwest in the 1840s that could have turned into a war, it was settled diplomatically with the Oregon Treaty.

The next major war was the Mexican-American War. American settlers who had moved – initially at Mexico’s invitation – to the Mexican province of Texas had revolted in 1836 and sought annexation by the United States. But the complicated politics of slavery blocked their admission, and Texas became the independent Texas Republic for ten years. Eventually President James Polk pushed through the annexation started by his predecessor, John Tyler.

The Mexican government considered this action hostile, and many Mexicans called for war. Moreover, Texas and Mexico both claimed territory between the Nueces and Rio Grande Rivers. President Polk sent diplomats to negotiate American acquisition of that land – as well as New Mexico and California, all of which Polk had sought to add to America’s territory. Polk deployed U.S. troops to the border of the contested territory – ostensibly to guard the border, plausibly to provoke a war. As Polk hoped, a skirmish broke out when Mexican troops attacked. War was on.

The United States military launched a full invasion of Mexico, fairly rapidly occupying the capital. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war in 1848, not only confirming Texas would remain a part of the United States, but adding a vast part of Mexico's territory. (The Mexican cession took as much land with as few people as possible—about half of Mexico's territory, with roughly one percent of Mexico's non-Native population). This included not just (upper) California, but all or most of present-day New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, and Nevada and parts of Wyoming and Colorado too.

As Texas's roundabout path toward membership in the Union illustrated, the politics of slavery divided America in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. No longer did Americans expect slavery to fade out, as the Founders had hoped; instead, slavery's defenders began championing the practice as a positive good anchoring not just the southern economy but its way of life, too. At the same time, opponents of slavery grew more numerous, more organized, and more intense in their opposition to slavery, largely abolishing it in the North. The process of admitting states became, at best, politically contested, and at worst, low-scale paramilitary affairs, as in "Bleeding Kansas."

Anti-slavery activists coalesced around a movement to abolish slavery in the territories (while recognizing federalism meant the southern states could maintain it within their borders), and they bristled at southern efforts to use federal power to protect slavery. The election of Republican Abraham Lincoln, and his party's success in congressional races, on a platform seeking to end slavery in federal territories, triggered the secession of seven Deep South states who formed the initial Confederacy—South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. (Ironically, considering the later re-invention of the Civil War as supposedly about states' rights, Southerners bristled at recent northern uses of states' rights to oppose slavery, and their Confederate Constitution was more nationalist than the US Constitution in several features).

After Confederate forces fired on the besieged Union base at Fort Sumter near Charleston, South Carolina, the Civil War began. Four additional slave states—Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas-- seceded rather than joining the Union effort to put down the rebellion; some of the slaveholding Indian tribes in the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) also joined the Confederate war effort.

Not all slave states seceded; other "border" slave states - namely, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri - remained in the United States, since the objective was initially not to end slavery but simply put down the rebellion and preserve the Union. The continuing loyalty of these border slave states was crucial to the effort to preserve the Union. For example, in the first year of the war, President Lincoln wrote, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us." Eventually, especially after Lincoln used his commander-in-chief powers to issue the Emancipation Proclamation to apply to southern areas in rebellion, ending slavery became a cause for many as well.

Although the war initially did not go especially well for the Union, eventually the United States military turned the tide, led by skilled generals like Ulysses Grant and William T. Sherman and aided by the superior manpower and manufacturing of the North—to say nothing of the political leadership of Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet. The largest Confederate army, led by Robert E. Lee, surrendered at the Appomattox courthouse on April 9, 1865. The Thirteenth

Amendment, proposed by Congress in January, was ratified in December 1865, abolishing slavery throughout the United States.

Although the United States military fought in smaller campaigns, most notably against various Indians, the final major conflict of the 1800s was the Spanish American War. Cuba, which had long been a target for annexation, began a revolt against Spain, which many Americans sought to support, seeing Spain as an oppressive imperial power in the Western Hemisphere. President McKinley sent the USS Maine to Havana in 1898, ostensibly to safeguard American citizens there. An explosion soon destroyed the ship – perhaps an internal explosion, but whatever the truth the loss of the Maine was blamed on a Spanish mine. Although President McKinley had sought a negotiated peace for Cuban independence, Congress called for assistance to the Cuban cause (while disavowing annexation). The situation escalated from there, culminating with a Spanish declaration of war.

Combat was short, roughly three months. The Battle of Manila Bay captured the Philippines, while US forces assaulted Cuba, most famously Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" at the Battle of San Juan Hill. Spain agreed to cede Cuba (which would become independent), Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines (which was granted independence in 1946).