

Name _____ Date _____

The War of 1812

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b’

After the American Revolution, the United States became its own independent country. But Great Britain still had ties to American land. Before the Revolution, the British had built forts west of the Appalachian Mountains. They promised to hand over the forts after the war, but by the early 1800s they had not yet given them up. They still wouldn’t allow American settlers to move west. Plus, the British protected the Native Americans who lived on land the American settlers wanted. In November 1811, a group of Native Americans attacked troops led by William Henry Harrison, the governor of Indiana Territory, and were ultimately defeated. The ensuing Battle of Tippecanoe further damaged British-American relations, as Britain had supplied weapons to the Native Americans.

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Meanwhile, Great Britain was at war with France to put a stop to the French Emperor Napoleon’s takeover of Europe. The US remained neutral at first, continuing to trade freely with both the British and the French. But before long, British ships began blocking American ships from reaching France. In addition to preventing trade, the British started taking American sailors and forcing them to serve on British ships—essentially kidnapping them. This practice was known as impressment. The combination of impressment and the long-simmering resentment over the western territories outraged many Americans.

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Notes

2. b'

Notes

The War Hawks were members of Congress who clamored for war. Led by Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Andrew Jackson, they were largely younger Congressmen from the South and West who were interested in westward expansion. Congressmen involved in the sea trade, especially in New England, were more reluctant to go to war and see their commerce disrupted. The War Hawks eventually won out. In June 1812, President Madison asked Congress to declare war on Great Britain. The move passed narrowly. US forces invaded Canada, which was at the time a British territory. They attacked York, then the capital of Canada, and burned down the Parliament building, but did not ultimately gain any ground in Canada.

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For many years, Native Americans, including the Shawnee warrior Tecumseh, had been angry about White settlers' invasion and destruction of the land they inhabited. Tecumseh and his men ended up supporting Britain in the war in the hopes that a British victory would allow them to someday reclaim their homeland and traditional way of life. They helped British troops deliver a humiliating defeat of the United States in Detroit, Michigan. But in the Battle of the Thames the next year, British soldiers were outnumbered three to one by Americans, and Tecumseh was killed.

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3. b'

Notes

In 1814, Britain defeated France in the Napoleonic Wars and could now give their full attention to battling the United States. In retaliation for the US burning the Canadian capital two years before, British troops attacked Washington, DC. First they burned the Capitol Building and destroyed all the books in the Library of Congress. Then they headed for the White House. Although President Madison wasn't at home, his wife, Dolley Madison, was about to host a dinner party. When she heard that the British were planning to attack, she quickly gathered up as many valuables as she could, including velvet curtains, important papers, and silverware, in a wagon. She also made sure a portrait of George Washington was safe before she fled. When the British arrived, they ate the dinner she had planned to enjoy with her friends before setting fire to the White House.

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After sacking Washington, DC, the British attacked Baltimore. Baltimore was an important port where many American ships were docked. US General Samuel Smith convinced the ship owners to sink their ships into the harbor, creating an underwater barrier that the huge British warships could not cross. The British bombed Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor for 25 hours but could not gain control of the fort. Lawyer and writer Francis Scott Key witnessed the attack from aboard a British ship. When he saw the American flag still waving in the dawn's early light after the bombardment, he was inspired to write the poem that became The Star-Spangled Banner:

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O! say, can you see by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the Rockets' red glare, the Bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our Flag was still there;
O! say, does that star-spangled Banner yet wave,
O'er the Land of the free, and the home of the brave?

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News of the setback in Baltimore troubled the British public, who had grown tired of war and its economic toll. Americans were also realizing that the costs of war outweighed any potential benefits. On December 24, 1814, Britain and the United States signed a peace settlement in Ghent, Belgium. The Treaty of Ghent did not grant any major wins or losses to either country; the war ended in a stalemate. But there was one last battle. News of the treaty had not yet reached Andrew Jackson, whose army defeated the British in New Orleans on January 8, 1815.

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Although the War of 1812 did not end in victory for the US, it confirmed the new country's power as an independent nation. It boosted national self-confidence and encouraged the spirit of American expansionism that would shape the rest of the century. It also marked a turning point in Native Americans' struggle for independence. After the war, they never again found an external ally who could help them stop American expansion.

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