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“Difficult to Relinquish Territory Which Had Been Conquered”: Expansionism and the War of 1812

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Abstract

The myth that U.S. expansionism drove the War of 1812 has proven resilient. Histories attributing the war to a U.S. desire to absorb Canada continue to be published despite relative consensus among experts that the primary U.S. objective was the repeal of British maritime restrictions, and even experts often include caveats regarding possible expansionism underlying U.S. motives. This article finally lays this myth to rest. The Madison administration and Congress initiated the War of 1812 because six years of economic sanctions had failed to bring Britain to the negotiating table, and threatening the Royal Navy's Canadian supply base was their last hope. Expansionism would have made sense given the precedent of the Revolution, British military preoccupation with Napoleon, and the material gains to be had by annexing Canada, but U.S. leaders feared the domestic political consequences of doing so. Notably, what limited expansionism there was focused on sparsely populated western lands rather than the more populous eastern settlements.

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