

## **The Making of a Nation – Program No. 39**

### **James Madison, Part Four: The End of the War of 1812**

From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

We have been talking about the War of 1812 between the United States and Britain. In the summer of 1814, the two countries opened peace talks at Ghent, in Belgium. But Britain was in no hurry to agree on a peace treaty. This week, we tell the story of how the war ended.

British forces were planning several campaigns in the United States in the autumn and winter of 1814. Successful military campaigns could force the United States to accept the kind of treaty Britain wanted.

British representatives to the talks demanded that the United States give control of its Northwest Territory to the Indians. They also asked that the United States give part of the state of Maine to Canada, and make other changes in the border.

The Americans made equally tough demands. The United States wanted payment for damages suffered during the war. It also wanted the British to stop seizing American sailors for the British navy. And the United States wanted all of Canada.

The British representatives said they could not even discuss the question of stopping impressment of Americans into the British navy. And the Americans would surrender none of their territory.

Most of America's representatives had little hope the talks would succeed. But then Britain received word that its military campaigns had failed at Baltimore and Plattsburgh. After that, the British representatives became easier to negotiate with. They dropped their demands for American territory. The Americans then dropped their demands for Canadian territory.

The issues that had led to the war no longer existed. Britain's war with France had caused the British and French to interfere with neutral American trade. And Britain had needed men for its navy. Now, the war with France was over. No longer was there any reason to interfere with the trade of any nation. And no longer was there any need to seize Americans for service in the British navy.

On December 24, the day before Christmas, in 1814, the United States and Britain signed a simple treaty. Each side agreed to stop fighting. They also agreed to settle all their differences at future negotiations.

The war had ended. But one more battle was to be fought before news of the peace treaty reached the United States.

During the autumn of 1814, British soldiers at Jamaica began preparing for an attack against New Orleans, a city at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Late in November, this force of about 7,500 men sailed from Jamaica to New Orleans.

The British soldiers were commanded by General Edward Pakenham. The general did not take his men directly to the mouth of the Mississippi River. Instead, they sailed across a lake east of the city.

Early during the afternoon of December 23, General Andrew Jackson, the commander of American forces at New Orleans, learned that the British force was near.

General Jackson was a good soldier and a great leader. He fought in the Revolutionary War, then studied law. He moved west to Nashville, Tennessee. The general also served in both houses of the United States Congress.

When war broke out in 1812, he was elected general of a group of volunteer soldiers from Tennessee. Jackson was a rough man. His soldiers feared and respected him. They called him "Old Hickory," because he seemed as tough as hickory wood.

Jackson was given responsibility for defending the coast along the Gulf of Mexico. Earlier in the year, he had attacked Pensacola, in Florida, and forced out several hundred British marines. Jackson believed the British would attack Mobile before attacking New Orleans. He left part of his forces at Mobile and took the others to the mouth of the Mississippi.

Jackson was a sick man when he got to New Orleans. And what he found made him feel no better. Little had been done to prepare for the expected British attack. Jackson declared martial law and began building the city's defenses.

Most of the work on the defenses had been completed when Jackson got word that the British were only a few kilometers from New Orleans.

"Gentlemen," Jackson told his officers, "the British are below. We must fight them tonight."

The British soldiers rested. They believed it would be easy to capture the city the next day. But Jackson rushed up guns and men, and attacked the British by surprise just after dark. Then, the Americans retreated to a place about eight kilometers south of the city.

Jackson had chosen this place carefully. On the right was the Mississippi River. On the left was the mud and water of a swamp that could not easily be crossed. In front of the American soldiers was an open field.

For two weeks, the British soldiers waited. They tested the American defenses at several places, but found no weaknesses. Every day, Jackson had his men improve their positions. At night, small groups of Jackson's soldiers would slip across the field and silently attack British soldiers guarding the other side.

Finally, on January 8, the British attacked. They expected the Americans to flee in the face of their strong attack. But the Americans stood firm.

Jackson's artillery fired into the enemy. When the British got as close as 150 meters, the Americans began to fire their rifles. The rain of bullets and shells was deadly. General Pakenham was wounded twice and then killed by a shell that exploded near him. Only one British soldier reached the top of the American defenses.

The British finally retreated. They left behind more than 2,000 dead and wounded. Five hundred other British soldiers had been captured. Thirteen Americans were killed. It was a great victory for the United States, but one that was not necessary. The war had ended, by treaty, two weeks earlier.

Historian Alan Taylor says the peace treaty saved the United States from a "very grim situation."

"The American government was bankrupt. It had lost its credit, it could not raise enough in taxes for the war effort, and most creditors were refusing to lend any more money to the United States. And so it was very unclear how the Americans would conduct another campaign in 1815, because it looked like it wouldn't have the money for it."

The Senate acted quickly to approve the treaty. On February 17, 1815, President Madison declared the war officially ended. It had lasted two years and eight months, and united the American people.

On the Fourth of July in 1815, the nation celebrated its thirty-ninth anniversary of independence. In Washington, the man who wrote the "Star-Spangled Banner," Francis Scott Key, spoke at the celebrations.

Historian Alan Taylor says many people call the War of 1812 America's second war for independence. But he calls it America's first civil war. He says the country had been divided throughout the war. But things changed after Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans.

"And so, Americans concluded the war had really been a glorious occasion that had defended national honor and proved the merit of their republican institutions. And they were so relieved by all of this, they decided to celebrate the war in their memories."

Albert Gallatin, Madison's treasury secretary and one of the negotiators at Ghent, said people felt "more American" after the war. "They feel and act more like a nation."

Alan Taylor says the War of 1812 was very difficult for the United States, yet Americans remember it as a “feel-good war.”

At the same time, he says the War of 1812 also united Canadians.

“Despite all their divisions during the war, they felt so relieved they had fended off an American invasion that they remembered the war as a glorious victory over the more powerful United States.”

As a result of the war, Alan Taylor says both Americans and Canadians felt a greater sense of nationalism. And, because of that, the two nations could relate more peacefully. Each believed it could survive without having to defeat the other.

“And today the U.S. and Canada are each other’s primary trade and security partners in the world.”

But not everyone benefited from the end of the war. The opposition Federalist Party found itself greatly embarrassed by the peace. Its leaders had long denounced the war and said Britain could not be defeated. Many of the Federalists had traded with the enemy. Some had worked with the British against their own country. They had even threatened to break up the Union.

Once the war was over, the Federalist Party lost its supporters. And then the party itself soon disappeared, even in the New England states, its base of support.

The end of the Federalist Party changed politics in the United States. The changes started as early as the next presidential election, in 1816. James Madison continued the tradition, begun by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, of serving only eight years as president. The man who followed him will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us next time for The Making of a Nation – American history from VOA Learning English.