



MLI's Great Canadian Debate on the War of 1812

Historian Michael Bliss (centre) moderates The Great Canadian Debate on the War of 1812, between Jeffrey Simpson (right), who argued for the affirmative that it had been “overhyped”, and J.L. Granatstein, who argued for the No. MLI photo.

On November 7, in a debate hosted by the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, sponsored by the *Ottawa Citizen* and moderated by historian Michael Bliss, the *Globe and Mail's* Jeffrey Simpson and Canadian historian J.L. Granatstein debated the resolution, “The War of 1812 has been overhyped.”

À l'occasion d'un débat organisé par l'Institut Macdonald-Laurier, parrainé par le *Ottawa Citizen* et animé par l'historien Michael Bliss, le journaliste Jeffrey Simpson du *Globe and Mail* et l'historien ca-

nadien J.L. Granatstein ont discuté le 7 novembre dernier de l'hypothèse d'une « surestimation de l'importance donnée à la guerre de 1812 ».

HAS THE WAR OF 1812 BEEN OVERHYPED? **YES**

Jeffrey Simpson

History, to be properly understood, should be studied in the round. Historical narratives are seldom a straight line between two points. Lessons are often complicated, even contradictory. Unintended consequences can abound.

Governments, however, have a straightforward agenda: to be re-elected by appealing to particular segments of the elec-

torate. So they are sometimes tempted, as the Harper government has been, to seize not history with all its complexities, but fragments of history and to build a narrative around them consistent with the one the government wishes to sell to the country for its own political purposes.

So it has been with the War of 1812, a mostly forgotten war, except by a handful of professional historians on both sides of the Canada-US border, and by handfuls of people who live near battlegrounds of yore.

To the Harper government, however, the War of 1812 blended two political objectives: to revivify admiration for things military in Canada and to accentuate the British connection in Canada. Hence, the decision to spend \$40 million – at

a time of cutbacks across the government, including for almost all other programs helping Canadians (and foreigners) appreciate the country's culture and history – to hype this 200 year old conflict and to rescue it from the relative obscurity in which it had nestled for so long.

A government keen on all aspects of Canadian history could have highlighted other anniversaries in 2012 that spoke much more directly to Canadians than the War of 1812. This is the 50th anniversary of the introduction of medicare in Saskatchewan, and the 30th anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Poll after poll, seeking to discover which symbols are most important for Canadians, reveal the top two choices to be medicare and the Charter.

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A highly partisan government determined to use history for its own political purposes would never contemplate banners, stamps, and television advertisements hailing T.C. Douglas or Pierre Trudeau, for these were of the other political parties. So it has to settle for General Isaac Brock and Laura Secord and Tecumseh and their roles in the potted version of the War of 1812 presented by the assortment of government sponsored programs designed to pump up our collective chests about battles fought long ago in a war that ended in a draw.

To suggest, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper did recently, that the Canadian military's roots lay in this war was a complete rewriting of history, such as we might expect but do not deserve.

There was no Canadian army, although there were Canadian volunteers serving with the British, for the Canadian colonies were governed by the British. Especially in what is now Ontario, plenty of people wanted the Americans to win the war and gave aid and comfort to the invaders when they could. For them, newcomers from the United States lured north by the promise of free land, the British were haughty, arrogant, and anti-democratic.

On the US side, war provoked political combat between populist Republicans who favoured it and Federalists who denounced it.

One supposes the only argument in favour of saying the War of 1812 has not been overhyped is that by frustrating the Americans, Canada was saved as a sovereign nation. But of

course there was no such thing as a sovereign Canadian nation at the time of the war.



A packed and lively audience at the Canadian War Museum took part in a Q&A following the Great Canadian Debate on the War of 1812. MLI photo.

We should study the War of 1812 largely as a testament to folly and we should commemorate it, if we must, not as a military triumph but as a salute to 200 years of ensuing peace between two great countries. What we should not do, in the interests of true history, is allow a government – any government – to use and abuse history for its own political purposes, as this government is doing with this war.

Jeffrey Simpson is a national affairs columnist for the Globe and Mail.

HAS THE WAR OF 1812 BEEN OVERHYPED? **NO**

J.L. Granatstein

Jeffrey Simpson is one of Canada's most prominent columnists, but sometimes even the best of pundits get it wrong. Simpson argued in October last year that the War of 1812 was a stupid war marked by confused objectives, bad leadership, and wobbly populations in both the Canadas and the United States.

He was not wrong in those comments. There is no doubt that the large numbers of American immigrants to Upper Canada – the "late Loyalists," as some sardonically labelled them – came not to escape the Great Republic but for free land.

They would have been happy if the Americans won the war, and some fought for the US or supplied intelligence. In the US itself, the New England states and New York were against the war wanted by the hawks in Congress who thought it a chance to hit Britain, caught up in the Napoleonic Wars, and to smash the Indians who resisted American westward expansion (and who were helped by the British).

This year's bicentennial commemorations, Jeffrey Simpson said, risk turning the war into contemporary nationalistic propaganda, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper "relentlessly

attempts to appropriate and invent symbols of Canadian pride.” To spend millions on commemorating this war is, he says, shameful, especially when the inhabitants of the Canadas in 1812 “had no sense of being ‘Canadian.’” The important point for Simpson is that the war led to two centuries of peace.

On much of this he is correct. The objectives, certainly those of the Americans, were confused, the military leadership was terrible on both sides, with the exception of General Isaac Brock, and the populations were badly divided. Most of the fighting by our side was done by British regulars, and the Canadian militia, their successor regiments now getting largely unearned battle honours, did almost nothing and sustained very light casualties. There were a few exceptions in the Niagara units and in quasi-regular units in Lower Canada, but on the whole, the untrained militiamen wanted only to go home or to be captured and given their parole. And, as usual, the Indians on both sides got screwed.

But I would suggest that the war deserves commemoration at whatever financial cost to the Harper government. Simpson is right that the inhabitants of Upper and Lower Canada had “no sense of being Canadian.” But they were – except for the recent American immigrants – loyal to the Crown, and many had suffered for this during the American Revolution, only 30 years before. They had a sense of themselves as not being Americans, not republicans, and they hated the “mobocracy” of the United States. They did not want to be swallowed whole. Nor did the French-speaking Roman Catholic inhabitants of Lower Canada, though most were not prepared to fight for the British side.

For all its folly, therefore, the war was vitally important for British North America. Without the war’s result – in effect a stalemate that saw the US defeated in its invasions of the Canadas, and Britain checked in most of its objectives on

Even for the US there is a tipping point. For too long the political class in both Europe and the US has relied on their central banks to do the job for them. In both cases, ultimately, the European Central Bank and the Fed will run out of gas.

land to the south – the Canadas would have been absorbed into the United States as eventual states (unless a peace treaty gave them back to Britain, which we cannot say with certainty would ever have occurred). The rest of British North America – New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland – might have survived for a time, or perhaps not. Certainly many in Nova Scotia had far more ties to “the Boston States” than they did to the rest of the British possessions in North America.




J.L. Granatstein argued “the War deserves to be commemorated.” MLI photo.

What is certain is that the Dominion of Canada would never have been created if the War of 1812 had resulted in an American victory. For this reason alone, for the fact that Canada exists, the war deserves commemoration here.

The real thrust of the argument Simpson makes is his attack on Stephen Harper for “relentlessly attempting to appropriate and invent symbols of Canadian pride.” God forbid that a prime minister should be interested in history and that he should try to use the past to bolster Canadians’ sense of themselves.

But let us call a spade a spade. The real thrust of the argument Simpson makes is his attack on Stephen Harper for “relentlessly attempting to appropriate and invent symbols of Canadian pride.” God forbid that a prime minister should be interested in history and that he should try to use the past to bolster Canadians’ sense of themselves.

Every government in Ottawa, whatever its political stripe, would have celebrated the bicentennial, but the Harper government has done it well and suffered some mean-spirited and historical criticism. Including Jeffrey Simpson’s. 

J.L. Granatstein is a Canadian historian and former director of the Canadian War Museum.