The British Blockade

Review by Donald R. Hickey


The naval war of 1812 has attracted less interest than the land war of 1812, but it has certainly not been ignored. For the United States this is hardly surprising because the contest was a defining moment for the American navy. U.S. squadrons defeated British squadrons on two inland lakes—Erie and Champlain—and both victories had a decisive impact on nearby land campaigns. No less impressive was the performance of the navy on the high seas, where U.S. warships won a series of duels in 1812-13 that lifted sagging American morale and stunned the British. The success of the U.S. frigate Constitution was particularly notable. After outrunning a British squadron in a heroic 57-hour race at the beginning of the war, the Constitution defeated four British warships in subsequent cruises. Earning the nickname “Old Ironsides,” the Constitution remains in commission today. Restored to its 1812 appearance, it is arguably the best-known ship that has ever flown the U.S. flag. The U.S. frigate President also enjoyed success early in the war, capturing the British frigate Macedonian, which remained a trophy ship on the rolls of the U.S. Navy until 1875. This served as a reminder to the world that the young republic had once gone toe-to-toe with the Royal Navy and come out on top.

Although few Americans have acknowledged it, in the end, the Royal Navy gave as good as it got in the war on the high seas, with about as many victories as defeats. The British frigate Shannon defeated the U.S. frigate Chesapeake in fifteen minutes and for many years thereafter enjoyed nearly the same reputation in Great Britain as the Constitution in the United States. In addition, a British squadron headed by the frigate Endymion captured the U.S. frigate President near the end of the war and built an exact copy that remained on the rolls of the Royal Navy until 1903. This was Britain’s reminder to the world that even the heavy frigates of the young republic were no match for the mighty Mistress of the Seas.
For all the ink spilled on it, U.S. success on the high seas had only a marginal impact on the course of the war. The British ordered their frigates not to engage in duels with the heavy U.S. frigates, and the threat posed to their trade by American warships and privateers forced them to adopt a convoy system in the Atlantic. Only near their ports in the West Indies, the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the British Isles were British merchantmen permitted to travel without an escort. American depredations, especially in waters near those ports, were costly and drove up British insurance rates, and British merchants raised a howl of protest. But the U.S. war on British commerce was more of an annoyance than anything else and had no discernible influence on the outcome of the war.

Much more significant than the contest on the high seas was Britain’s decision to blockade the U.S. coast. The British established an informal blockade of South Carolina and Georgia in late 1812 and over the next twenty months gradually extended this blockade to the rest of the Atlantic coast as well as to the Gulf coast. Although the British blockade lacks the glamour and excitement of the naval duels on the high seas, it was the preeminent use of naval power in the war, and it had a huge impact. Americans were then a maritime people, with the livelihood of most people tied, directly or indirectly, to the sea. The British blockade cut sharply into U.S. foreign and coastal trade and undermined government revenue, which was heavily dependent on trade. This left the government scrambling for money at a time when expenses were soaring from the cost of the war.

Naval historians have traditionally paid little attention to the blockade. For those who served on blockading ships, there was much boredom, and their memoirs are more likely to be filled with stories of the predatory raids they took part in or the prize ships and goods they captured. The impact of the British blockade can only be understood by studying U.S. economic and financial history, and that holds little appeal for most naval historians.

The leading British naval historians in the nineteenth century, attorney William James and Royal Navy officer Edward Brenton, focused on the war on the high seas, and this despite the fact that during the war the former had seen firsthand the effects of the blockade as an enemy alien in America and the latter had served on a warship assigned to the American station. Their American counterparts, novelist James Fenimore Cooper and future president Theodore Roosevelt, also ignored the blockade.

Even Henry Adams, who published what is arguably the first modern history of the War of 1812 in 1889-91, did not devote much space to the blockade. Adams’ treatment of the war is in many ways comprehensive. Fully three-quarters of his nine-volume history of the United States from 1801 to 1817 is devoted to the war and its causes. Adams was no military historian, and his treatment of the battles and campaigns is probably the weakest part of his study. Much stronger is his examination of U.S. domestic history, and Adams understood the crushing impact of the British blockade. “No ordinary operations of war,” he said, “could affect the United States so severely as this inexorable blockade.” But he chose not to develop this theme fully. In nearly 750 pages on the war in the modern edition, only a half dozen are devoted to the impact of the blockade.
Alfred Thayer Mahan did a better job in his two-volume examination of the impact of sea power on the war published in 1905. Mahan’s overarching interest was to show the many ways in which naval power could be used to promote national interests, and he understood that the British blockade was a crucial part of the story of the War of 1812. Hence, at several points in his study he looked at the effects of the blockade.

Although far from complete in its treatment of the subject, Mahan’s work remained the last word on the blockade for nearly a century. Then in 2003 Wade C. Dudley published Splintering the Wooden Wall, which was the first monograph devoted exclusively to the subject. Dudley argued that even under the best of circumstances, blockading the U.S. coast was no easy matter. The coast was both long—1,900 miles—and rough, and many of the Royal Navy charts were outdated. In the north, winter storms could blow blockading ships off station or make it impossible to spot vessels slipping into or out of American ports; in the south, the ever present danger of tropical disease could decimate a navy crew. Nor was it easy to service the blockading fleet. The British naval bases at Halifax and Bermuda were often too far away to be useful and could not undertake major refits when they became necessary. For this Royal ships had to return to dockyards in the mother country. Even more frustrating for those on the American station, the Admiralty showed little appreciation of these problems.

Following Mahan, Dudley posits two types of blockades: (1) a military or tactical blockade that seeks to control the movement of enemy armed ships; and (2) a commercial or economic blockade, which aims to shut down enemy trade. In practice, the main difference between the two blockades is that military blockades are looser and less formal. Simply posting warships near any enemy port may establish an effective military blockade. A commercial blockade, on the other hand, requires a regular and continuous naval presence to make it legal under international law. It also requires formal notice before neutral ships can be seized for seeking to trade with a blockaded port.

Dudley is primarily interested in the British blockade as a military or tactical measure. As a vehicle for keeping U.S. warships and privateers in port, he concludes that it came up short. The Admiralty simply did not provide enough ships to do the job right, and those ships that were assigned to the task had other duties, such as convoying British merchantmen and raiding the coast, that reduced their effectiveness as blockading ships. As a result, armed U.S. ships were able to operate effectively throughout the war. In fact, in his concluding chapter Dudley argues that the blockade against the United States was less effective than Britain’s blockades against France in the European war.

Rather than admit that the force assigned to the job was inadequate, the economy-minded Admiralty preferred to blame the failure of the blockade on the commander on the station, which for most of the war was Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren. This criticism appeared in orders sent to Warren by the acerbic first secretary of the Admiralty, John W. Croker. In his influential Naval History, William James called Warren “too old and infirm to carry on the war,” thus codifying the Admiralty’s judgment. Dudley challenges this view. Arguing that the admiral was “a solid officer [who] earned an undeserved reputation during his time in command,” Dudley makes a persuasive case for the rehabilitation of the Warren’s reputation.
Some of Dudley’s claims, however, are unpersuasive. Dudley almost surely underrates the British blockade’s effectiveness against armed American ships, and he dismisses its impact on U.S. commerce, claiming that the republic voluntarily withdrew from international trade during the conflict. But this withdrawal, which had a devastating effect on both the U.S. economy and government revenue, was far from voluntary. Even so, Dudley must be credited with shedding considerable light on the theory and practice of naval blockades, particularly the one associated with the War of 1812. He not only drew much-needed attention to this important dimension of the War of 1812, but he also showed that the judgments of the Admiralty cannot always be taken at face value. Just because Croker’s orders to Warren were sharply critical of the admiral’s actions does not mean they were fair.

Brian Arthur’s new book on the British blockade is more ambitious and more comprehensive. Based on a broad range of sources, statistical as well as literary, Arthur presents a more complete picture of the blockade and its impact. And he concludes that it was a success in every way. It kept most armed American ships in port, and it had a dramatic impact on American trade and finance. In fact, Arthur believes the blockade had such a huge impact on the U.S. economy and public finance that it was a game-changer. It won the war by forcing the United States to give up its war aims and agree to peace on the basis of the status quo ante bellum.

Arthur’s work is certainly meaty. It contains 209 pages of densely-packed text, 40 pages of appendices (consisting mostly of lists, tables, and charts), and nearly 70 pages of notes and bibliographical references. The work is filled with useful information on how the blockade affected the United States. It bottled up ships (armed and unarmed), it created economic hardship, it drove up prices, and it deprived the federal government of much-needed revenue. The case for the success of the blockade as both a military and commercial measure is overwhelming, and Brian is to be applauded for moving this important story to center stage in so convincing a manner. He also completes the rehabilitation of the reputation of Admiral Warren begun by Dudley.

Arthur’s claim, however, that the blockade won the war and forced the United States to make peace is debatable (5, 181). The blockade doubtless played a role because the lack of money affected just about every aspect of the U.S. war effort, from recruitment to supply. Still, it is far from clear that it was decisive. The United States in 1814 still possessed the men and material needed to wage war. The challenge was finding a way to transfer them from the private to the public sector. The nation had faced the same challenge in the American Revolution with far fewer tools at its disposal and fewer resources to draw upon, and yet it had found a way to continue the war.

In 1814 the government met the crisis by imposing new taxes, and it considered several other expedients, such as a national bank. Many southerners favored issuing paper money. Jefferson thought that the economy could absorb $200-300 million without more than doubling prices, and he was not alone.11 As Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina was fond of saying, “paper money never was beat.”12 But this was a dubious expedient. People could still remember that the Continental dollar had lost all value during the Revolution, and the short-term Treasury notes that the administration was relying on in the War of 1812 were circulating at a discount.
and the number of government contractors willing to accept them was dwindling. Hence, there was no guarantee that the southern solution would have worked without generating significant resistance and causing considerable hardship. Fortunately, it was not put to a test.

Despite the huge impact that the British blockade had, Great Britain’s success in the war is better explained in a different way. Initially, it was due to the ability of British regulars, Indian allies, and Canadian militia to fend off the invasions of 1812-13. It was this mixed force that saved Canada. By 1814, however, the whole character of the war had changed. With the end of the war in Europe, the United States found itself alone in the field against Great Britain. James Monroe, the new secretary of war, still had visions of raising a large army by conscription to drive the British from Canada, but few Americans shared his optimism. Congress rejected conscription, and despite a handsome bounty ($124 plus 320 acres of land), U.S. army enlistments could not keep pace with surging British military strength in Canada.

With the United States on the defensive, the national slogan changed from “Don’t give up the ship” to “Don’t give up the soil.” Under these circumstances, almost everyone realized that winning any meaningful concessions from Great Britain was impossible. This realization, more than the blockade or anything else, explains why the administration surrendered its last war aim—an end to impressment—and sought peace on the basis of the status quo ante bellum.

Arthur’s work also suffers from far too many mistakes. His treatment of international law in the opening chapter is garbled. Although he suggests that nation states did not agree on the legitimacy of international law, the real problem was that they interpreted the law of nations—which all agreed was legitimate—in different ways (7). Arthur incorrectly states that the Rule of 1756 was needed to uphold a commercial blockade (12), and he conflates the issue of contraband with what constituted enemy property and the doctrine of free ships—free goods (16-17). Arthur’s work is littered with references to the American trade restrictions adopted before and during the war, and assessing their impact is an important part of his analysis. But he repeatedly misstates the thrust of these restrictions. Each restriction targeted a particular branch of trade, and Arthur seems unable to get this part of the story right even though it is clearly laid out in the secondary literature.

There are other factual errors. Newfoundland is misplaced on one of the maps and Northern Maine is erroneously listed as a state (xiii). Arthur also misstates the pound-dollar rate of exchange, confusing the “nominal par” (a kind of official rate) with the market rate, which fluctuated considerably during the war (xvi). The Chesapeake affair in mid-1807 had no impact on President Jefferson’s decision earlier that year to reject the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty (20), and U.S. trade with the West Indies did not violate the Jay Treaty because the pertinent provision (Article 12) was suspended from the final agreement at the insistence of the U.S. Senate (51). Henry Dearborn, not William Hull, signed the armistice of 1812 (62), and the Battle of New Orleans was fought in 1815, not 1814 (xxii). The Battle of Lake Erie was fought in 1813, not 1814, and it was a more of a strategic than a tactical victory (xxiii). The United States never prohibited the ransoming of vessels captured by the enemy during the war (113), and the banks in New England never suspended specie payments (178). The British right to stop and search neutral vessels was never contested by the United States (206), and the Orders-in-Council that were repealed in 1812 were issued in 1809 (not 1806) and the repeal was accomplished by the ministry acting through the King in Council, not by Parliament (29, 206). Finally, France
played no role in reviving the Armed Neutrality of 1800 (17), and William Adams did not head
the British delegation at Ghent (206)

There are also anomalies in Arthur’s notes. He cites Mahan’s work and the biography of
James Madison by Irving Brant (misspelled as Brandt) in his bibliography, but in his notes he
cites these works indirectly as cited by other secondary works (see 251n1 and 255n75). He relies
on Wade Dudley’s dissertation on the blockade even though Dudley’s book on the subject has
been available since 2003 (281n2). He also cites both the original Naval Chronicle as well as the
truncated and inadequate modern edition (256n79 and n80). In general, Arthur seems to rely too
heavily on secondary sources that he has not read carefully enough and that often rely on other
secondary sources. This opens the door to too many mistakes

These errors and oddities do not vitiate Arthur’s important and useful work, but they do
suggest a carelessness and an undue haste to get the book into print. This is all too common
today. Without proper vetting or editing, manuscripts that are inadequately researched or poorly
written are published, sometimes even by established and respected presses. In Arthur’s case, a
second edition would allow him to correct his errors, but second editions are rare and require a
strong demand for the first. Given the price of this book, that demand is unlikely.

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winning author, he has written six books on the War of 1812, most notably The War of 1812: A Forgotten
Conflict, Bicentennial edition (2012), and Don’t Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812
(2006). He is also series editor for Johns Hopkins Books on the War of 1812.

1 William James, A Full and Correct Account of the Chief Naval Occurrences of the Late War between Great
Britain and the United States of America (London, 1817), and The Naval History of Great Britain, From the
Declaration of War by France in 1793 to the Accession of George IV, rev. ed., 6 vols. (London, 1826); Edward P.
Brenton, The Naval History of Great Britain, From the Year MDCCCLXXXIII [1783] to MDCCCXXXII [1822], 5
vols. (London, 1823−25), and The Naval History of Great Britain, From the Year MDCCCLXXXIII [1783] to
MDCCCLXXXVI [1836], 2 vols. (London, 1837). For James’ Naval History, I have used the modern edition
prepared by Andrew Lambert and published in North America in 2002.

2 James Fenimore Cooper, The History of the Navy of the United States of America, rev. ed., (Philadelphia, 1841);
Theodore Roosevelt, The Naval War of 1812, 3rd ed. (New York, 1883). Roosevelt’s work is available in numerous
modern editions.

3 Henry Adams, History of the United States [during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison], 9 vols. (New
York, 1889−91). Adams revised this work slightly for an edition published in 1901−4. The most authoritative
version of the revised edition is Henry Adams, History of the United States of America during the Administrations


5 Ibid., 2:640−41, 802−3, 908, 1208.

6 Alfred T. Mahan, Sea Power and Its Relations to the War of 1812, 2 vols. (Boston, 1905).

7 Mahan, Sea Power, 2:14−26, 177−87, 192−209.
8 Wade C. Dudley, Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815 (Annapolis, MD, 2003).

9 James, Naval History of Great Britain, 6:300.

10 Dudley, Splintering the Wooden Wall, 159.


15 On the rate of exchange, Arthur followed what I said in the first edition of The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, 3, but he should have consulted the corrected figures I presented in Don’t Give Up the Ship! Myths of the War of 1812 (Toronto and Urbana, IL, 2006), xxix.