Saving Mr. Tompkins’ War: From Reluctant Warriors to War Hawks in the 1814 Election. By Harvey Strum

British warships cruising off Sandy Hook in the spring and summer of 1813 produced panic in New York City. “Hostile ships of war are...cruising within 25 miles of this city,” the Common Council anxiously noted in its appeal to Washington for military aid, and the Council warned “with a favorable Wind Ships of the line can come up to our Wharves in two hours.” Fear of Indian attack in western New York forced the Society of St. Tammany to drop to use of Indian dress and nomenclature. While the British refrained from attacking New York City in 1812-15, the fear of an attack on western New York became reality by the end of 1813. (1)

Perceived danger did not lessen Republican-Federalist mutual animosity. Fourth of July celebrations became an opportunity for partisan attacks. Republicans toasted to the Federalists as allies of Great Britain, and Canandaigua Republicans advised the New England clergy to “study their Bible more and the principle of treason less.” Gouverneur Morris delivered an oration in New York censuring the war as “folly...madness.” In New York Federalists toasted to the Republicans “if you wish to see their courage go to Canada. If you wish to see their mercy, go to Baltimore.” When Philip Van Vechten started an anti-war speech in Albany Republicans shouted him down and engaged in “other riotous conduct.” Federalists denounced the incident as “a flagrant violation of the liberty of speech,” while Republicans justified the silencing of Van Vechten for his abusive and anti-American speech. With apparent satisfaction, Lieutenant-Governor John Tayler concluded “so much for orator Van Vechten---a chip off the old block.” (2)

Political conflict got played out in the streets as well. In September 1813, a Washington County customs officer aided by a pro-war vigilante mob fought with a local sheriff and an anti-war mob over smuggled goods. A Lansinburgh Federalist rejoiced that “Uncle Sam’s Party...retired from the conflict with many a broken head and bruised limb leaving the Men of New York in possession.” In November Republicans and Federalists fought each other in the streets of Hudson. Politics in New York during the War of 1812 included bitter exchanges in the press, silencing the opposition, and fists. (3)

Meanwhile, Governor Tompkins tried to stop the widespread violations of the state militia law. Frustrated at the “impunity of those of the Militia who neglected to rendezvous, or who put the laws in defiance in 1812” he suggested special court martial courts to try militia delinquents. Unfortunately for the Governor many New Yorkers refused to comply. When the British raided Sackets Harbor in May 1813 many of the militia ran into the woods. In St. Lawrence County, Assemblyman Roswell Hopkins found his constituents opposed to serving. “In every town I have heard from, have manifested a determination to resist: the militia draft,” peaceably if they can, but forcibly if they must.' Thomas Oakley reported that in Dutchess County “so great was the patriotism of the people and their love of this righteous war,” that local militia men when called for duty “marched east... upon Connecticut.” (4)
Governor Tompkins called out 5,000 men with 3,000 from the Middle and Eastern Senatorial Districts but only 400 heeded the Governor’s call up. Of the 600 apportioned to Columbia County, for example, 60 appeared. Only 1,500 of the 5,000 called up statewide showed up for duty. Observing the massive evasion of the militia draft Federalist Ebenezer Baldwin observed that “patriotism appears to operate in the minds of none of either party. The fines for disobedience the last season have not been enforced, and the delinquents do not seem to apprehend any trouble.” Only twenty-five of the 1,550 who appeared agreed to serve with General Wade Hampton’s drive on Montreal and volunteered to cross the border into Canada. The rest returned to Albany “barefooted, without money or provisions.”

Recruiting for the U.S. Army proved virtually impossible in Federalist towns although recruiters did better in Republican areas. Desertion appeared difficult to stop. In Sackets Harbor the Army built three large gallows and publicly executed deserters, including a fourteen-year-old boy who fell asleep on guard duty, to discourage mass desertions. When a firing squad refused to execute deserters from their own unit, Winfield Scott turned cannon on the firing squad. Troops stationed at Sandy Hook mutinied in March 1814. They agreed to go on parade only after an officer ordered two six pounders placed in front of their barracks, loaded them, and gave the men ten minutes to report or he threatened to open fire.

Meanwhile, during the November 1813 municipal election in New York City voters had an opportunity to vote on the war. Republican newspaper editor Henry Wheaton appealed to New Yorkers to “wipe off from your city the disgrace of being governed by friends of Great Britain.” By contrast, Seventh Ward Federalists expressed their “disapprobation of this cruel and ruinous war.” During the campaign, a riot broke out when African-American Federalists tried “to excite confusion and riot” at an African-American Republican meeting. Voters elected ten Republicans and ten Federalists, hardly a ringing endorsement of the war, but Republicans interpreted the results as a Republican victory and an endorsement of the war. While Republicans exaggerated their gains in the city elections they could legitimately boast of taking control of a Congressional seat in the by-election fought between an anti-war Federalist Peter A. Jay and pro-war Republican William Irving in December 1813, a harbinger of future gains in the 1814 Congressional elections.

On December 18, 1813, British troops and their Native American allies attacked Lewiston and on the 29th-30th Black Rock and Buffalo burning the settlements along the Niagara Frontier. The panic of the militia and Native American attacks on civilians sent settlers and militia fleeing. Fear of the British and Indians led to the depopulation of the Niagara Frontier as twelve thousand settlers abandoned the region west of Batavia. Citizens throughout the state raised funds for the refugees. As an example, at the sole Jewish congregation in the state, Shearith Israel, hazzan Gershom Seixas appealed to the congregation for financial aid for the “12,000 souls…who after seeing their houses burnt…nearest connexions (sic) massacred by ferocious savages” faced a winter “deprived of every earthly comfort.” Private individuals, churches, city governments in Albany and New York, and the state legislature contributed. The British attacks on the Niagara Frontier worked to the advantage of the Republicans in 1814 because whether New Yorkers liked or not New York had become a battleground of the war.
Many of the citizens of New York City also needed relief. The War of 1812 created mass unemployment and led to a sharp increase in the prices of flour, sugar, coffee, tea, coal, and firewood. As a local editor observed, “these articles are now beyond the reach of the great body of the people.” Middle and upper income New Yorkers formed citizens committees to distribute food and fuel to the poor. Poor New Yorkers suffered greatly during the winters of 1813-14 and 1814-15. In fact, during the last year of the war, the city government provided cash, food, and firewood to 19,000 people, one fifth of the city’s population of which 16,400 received outdoor relief. During the war, appropriations for poor relief became the largest item in the city budget. Due to the slow economic recovery from the war as late as February 1817, 15,000 people received public or private assistance or both. (9)

Republicans hoped that the attacks on the Niagara Frontier would spur volunteers and in the region west of the Cayuga-Onondaga line “something like public spirit exhibits itself,” reported Peter Porter, but he acknowledged east of Cayuga County “the most disgraceful apathy prevails.” In Oneida County Joshua Hathaway observed, “men will not volunteer” for the militia and U.S. Army. William Rochester lamented that in Steuben County “with utmost stretch of my exertions” he could only raise five volunteers. The lack of enlistments for the militia and army led Peter Porter to wonder how New Yorkers could “remain at ease and see the lives and property’ of their countrymen ‘sacrificed and make no effort for their protection.’ New Yorkers remained reluctant warriors in the spring of 1814 despite the disaster on the frontier. (10)

When the legislature met in January 1814 Governor Tompkins requested “legal power for enforcing…obedience to…the militia law” and recommended the state pay its share of war taxes to the federal government. Republicans in the Senate approved and urged support for the war. However, the Federalist Controlled Assembly attacked Tompkins and the war. Even Federalist Ebenezer Baldwin admitted the 1814 campaign “commenced in our legislature with virulence…unprecedented.” A draft of the reply to the Governor strongly criticized the Madison Administration and contained “personal invective and satire,” noted Baldwin that exceeded “the bounds of…respect” due a governor, but reflected the deep divisions the war created in New York that would be played out again in the 1814 elections. (11)

Federalists opposed giving the federal government money to wage the war. When the Federalist Controlled Assembly refused to vote for funds for the federal government, Governor Tompkins vented his rage to the Secretary of War John Armstrong. Tompkins wrote that the Assembly ‘has too much of the Massachusetts leaven in it to do anything favorable to the support of the country.’ Federalist John Jay hoped that their opposition to war taxes would have a beneficial impact on the voters because “there…are many on whom the visitation of Taxes…will make more impression than the efforts of wisdom and eloquence.’ Gouverneur Morris took a stand that Thoreau would take against taxes during the Mexican-American War for he considered it a moral issue. Morris considered taxes to finance “this unjust War…a Violation of Duty to God.” Federalists tried to turn taxation into a major issue in the 1814 campaign. (12)

During the 1814 campaign the Federalists made the war the chief issue. Federalists blamed the Republicans for the destruction of the Niagara Frontier. Due to Republican blunders “the war whoops awaken the sleep of the cradle” and the British burned “our towns and villages.” If the war did not end soon the war taxes would drive New Yorkers into poverty. The
war produced debts and taxes with no tangible gains. Federalists satirized Republican claims of conquering Canada. (13)

A group of pro-war Federalists split off from the party during the campaign. Oliver Wolcott, Jr. Hugh Maxwell, Gulian C. Verplanck and Thomas Morris joined by Jacob and Peter Radcliff led approximately one hundred Federalist dissidents. They fielded a separate pro-war American Federalist Assembly slate in New York City. While Federalist editors believed that “the open defection of certain individuals…Washington Federalists…deserves the highest reprobation” local Republicans adopted the splinter group. Joined by some former supporters of De Witt Clinton led by Republican Ambrose Spencer the “Coodies” shifted the close Assembly race from Federalist to Republican allowing the Republicans to gain the eleven New York City seats and control of the Assembly. (14)

Republicans expressed their support for the war and made the election a referendum on the war. They assailed the Federalist opposition to the foreign policies of the Jefferson and Madison administrations as the primary cause for the war and the subsequent military disasters. Assemblyman John Savage of Washington County complained that “our federalists are of the Boston stamp and will do nothing to aid the General Government in the present war.” For the Republicans, the War of 1812 was the second struggle for freedom and independence. Assemblyman Samuel Young of Saratoga County believed “we had suffered outrages and aggressions from Great Britain of a more aggravating and intolerable kind than inflicted on her Colonies in ’75.” Republicans wrapped themselves in the legacy of the Revolution and argued as they had for two years that American victory would prove the worth of republicanism against monarchy. (15)

Voters gave the Republicans a landslide. Republicans captured seven of the eight State Senate seats up for election, won a two to one majority in the Assembly, and carried twenty-one of the state’s twenty-seven Congressional seats. Federalists lost thirteen Congressional seats and twenty Assembly seats. Voters repudiated Federalist opposition to the war. Quite likely the burning of Buffalo, Federalist intransigence in the Assembly and Congress, and the removal of commercial restrictions aided the Republicans. High prices for agricultural produce in western New York also assisted in the recovery of the Republicans. (16)

To illustrate the changes let’s look at several of the races. In Dutchess/Putnam district, a manufacturer of machinery and cotton goods, Abraham Schenck, Republican won the election. For the first time since 1806 a Republican won in the district. A huge jump in Republican vote in both counties and a drop in Federalist votes from 1812 turned a previously safe Federalist district into a landslide for the Republicans, carrying the district 54% to 46% for the Federalists. By contrast, in the Columbia County-northwestern Dutchess district Federalist Congressman Thomas P. Grosvenor defeated the well-known Republican Edward P. Livingston by 62% to 38%. Compared to 1812 the Federalist vote doubled and total voter turnout tripled. The Republicans narrowly lost the Ulster-Sullivan district in 1812, but in 1814 Republican Samuel Betts, Judge Advocate of U.S. Volunteers, won 57% of the vote because of a 23% increase in Republican totals from 1812.
The pattern of higher voter turnout in 1814 compared to 1812 also occurred in two safely Federalist districts. In Albany John Lovett won 64% of the vote and his vote total increased 42% over his 1812 run for Congress. Incumbent Federalist Congressman Hosea Moffit defeated Clintonian Republican Josiah Masters with 58% of the vote in Rensselaer County. Moffit got 19% more votes in 1814 than 1812 and voter turnout doubled in the district from 1812 when he ran unopposed. By contrast, Federalist incumbents Elisha Winter and Zebulon Shipherd went down to defeat in the North Country. Assemblyman John Savage, a staunch defender of the war, and his colleague Benjamin Pond, a former Assemblyman, took the district by 51% to 49% for the incumbents. A 32% increase in the Republican vote in Clinton County and 19% increase in Republican totals in Warren-Washington counties allowed Savage and Pond to take the district. Similarly, in Herkimer-Madison district incumbent Federalist William S. Smith lost to Republican Dr. Westel Willoughby by 59% to 41% in the Onondaga/Cortland district. Finally, as one more example, in 1812 the Federalists easily carried the Broome-Chenango-Otsego district with 53% of the vote but in 1814 Republican lawyer and later political historian Jabez Hammond and lawyer James Birdsell won 56% of the vote as Otsego County went Republican for the first time since 1811. In this district, it looks like the Republicans won back the loyalty of voters who supported the Federalists in 1812-13 as sentiment shifted in support of the war. The election returns for Congress indicated a major shift of voter support from 1812 from the anti-war Federalists to the pro-war Republicans. Higher voter turnout in 1814 benefited the Republicans.

Of the 112 seats in the Assembly the Federalist won forty and the Republicans seventy-two. Federalists lost twenty seats they carried in 1813: Kings (1), Otsego (4), Schenectady (2), Madison (1), New York (11) and one seat in Montgomery due a split in Federalist ranks. Federalists gained two seats in Richmond and Westchester. The loss in New York City was in a tightly contested race, Republicans (50%), Federalists (49%), and Coodies (1%). Oliver Wolcott, Jr, claimed that the Coodies consisted of a “powerful body of independent electors...too numerous to be crushed under the Chariot wheels of the Peace Men.” a gross exaggeration since they represented a miniscule percentage of the Federalist vote in the city, but with the return of Richard Riker’s band of Clintonians to the Republican Party in 1814 it allowed the Republicans to narrowly win the eleven New York City seats in the Assembly. Republicans also captured seven of the eight state Senate seats up for election with only Federalist George Tibbits winning a seat. Clintonian Solomon Southwick ran with Tibbits in a joint Clintonian-Federalist slate but Republican voters in 1814 rejected Republicans tainted with Federalism as they also refused to vote for Clintonian Philip Van Cortlandt for Congress in Westchester. (17)

Illegal voting for the Senate by ineligible Assembly voters took place, as in previous state elections. Most flagrant violations of the electoral laws occurred in western and northern counties, especially Essex, Franklin, Jefferson, Allegany, Chautauqua, Niagara, and Genesee. Voter participation remained high in the Senate contests reaching about 85% (74, 402). This represented an increase from vote total of 67,500 in 1812, but a decline from the high of the 1813 gubernatorial election when 83,000 voted. Returns for the Assembly and Congressional races indicated generally high voter participation in 1814. A total of 110, 547 citizens voted representing 73% of the electorate of 151, 876 eligible voters.
The voting behavior of men eligible to vote only for Congress and the Assembly did not differ from voters who owned freeholds worth $250 or more required to vote for the Senate and Governor. In some counties differences did emerge. Republicans did better among tenants and lower income freeholders in Orange and Dutchess counties and did better among mechanics and laborers in New York than with more prosperous senatorial voters. Federalists fared better with tenants and small freeholders in Ulster, Delaware, Columbia, Clinton and St. Lawrence counties.

In 1814 the state conducted an electoral census. Property qualifications for voting disenfranchised citizens from voting for Governor and Senate most heavily in New York City where only 22% could vote. Other counties impacted were Allegany (22%), Niagara (29%), Genesee (19%), Steuben (32%). Essex (40%), Franklin (40%). By contrast the counties with largest percentage of the electorate eligible to vote for Governor/Senate were Suffolk (78%), Rockland (73%) and Richmond (71%). Frontier farmers and inhabitants of New York City suffered the most from property requirements. However, a safety valve existed on the frontier to ameliorate this problem—widespread illegal voting of Assembly voters for the Senate and Governor. Several counties in western New York produced over 100% turnout in the 1814 Senate elections as Republican politicians routinely ignored election laws. Federalists were not shy about ignoring election laws in towns they dominated, but repeatedly criticized Republicans during the early national period for ignoring the state’s laws. Both parties ignored the laws in New York City where considerable voting irregularities took place on a regular basis. Legally, 58% of the electorate in the state could vote for Governor/Senate while 39% as tenants and 3% as small freeholders could vote for Congress and the Assembly. (18)

Historians such as Robert Brown, Chilton Williamson, Jackson Turner Main, and Alexander Keyssar among others debated the extent that property qualifications disenfranchised white males over twenty-one in the colonial period and early national period. Property qualifications severely restricted the right to vote in New York for Governor and State Senate as indicated above. If you compare population of men over 18 than in most counties 37% to 51% of the white male population over eighteen could legally vote for those two offices. In New York City only 16% could. About 1,500 free African-Americans in New York were over 18 and about 500 could vote primarily for Congress/Assembly. Allegany with 17%, Genesee with 14%, and Niagara with 22% were the upstate counties with the lowest percentages of males over eighteen eligible to vote for Governor/Senate. When Ontario and Rensselaer Republicans petitioned the legislature in 1811 and 1812 to enlarge the franchise and permit men without property to vote they estimated that 20% to 25% of the males over twenty-one could not vote for any public office. A comparison of the electorate in 1814 with the total white male population over eighteen substantiates these contemporary observations of the impact of the property qualifications upon restricting the electorate. Probably one quarter to one third of the males over eighteen in each county could not participate in the electoral process. Statewide about 67% (151,876) of the white males over eighteen (226,833) could vote for the Assembly and Congress and 39% (87,541) for Governor.

For two years Federalist control of the Assembly and two-thirds of the Congressional delegation gave the Federalists the opportunity to block Governor Tompkins and the Republican majority in the Senate from effectively prosecuting the war and aiding the federal government financially. Federalist control of the majority of the Assembly and Congressional seats provided
legitimacy for their opposition to the war since they controlled the more popularly elected branches of government. In 1812 the Federalists won 19 of 27 seats for Congress but after the 1814 election they held only 6. In the Assembly, they retained 40 seats but the Republicans had a 30-seat majority with over 70 seats.

After reading the election results, Federalist Congressman Charles Goldsborough of Maryland wrote Albany Federalist Harmanus Bleecker, “so complete a change…does not appear to be satisfactorily accounted for by the treachery of the Clintonians, and the…apostasy of Oliver Wolcott of which…I have heard the failure of the federalists imparted.” Something else, “something more powerful and extensively operating cause” must explain the results. The destruction of the Niagara Frontier in the winter of 1813-14 creating 12,000 refugees, the lifting of the embargo just before the 1814 election, Federalist intransigence in the Assembly and Congress, and a rise in prices for agricultural produce created by troop needs in western New York contributed to a change in public sentiment. A certain element of inconsistency lingered on. Men of New York did not flock to the militia or join the U.S. Army after the disasters on the Niagara Frontier. Recruiters found it difficult to raise troops in 1813-14 and after the Republicans took control of the Assembly and Congressional delegation the situation did not improve. Most voters kept their feet at home by the fireside and did not rush to join in the conquest of Canada, but gave the supporters of the war a definite vote of confidence with the Republican landslide of 1814. It looked like the Republicans crushed the Federalists and the public strongly endorsed the war. New Yorkers repudiated the anti-war Federalists, but only for a season as New Yorkers appeared to turn from reluctant warriors to war hawks. (19)
End Notes

1 Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, VII (1813), 486-87; New York Commercial Advertiser, January 19-20, March 26, April 12, July 9, 1813; Nicholas Fish to General Izard, May 7, 1813, Nicholas Fish to Governor Tompkins, May 10, 1813, Fish Family Papers, Columbia University.

2 Canandaigua Ontario Repository, July 20, 1813; Canandaigua Ontario Messenger, July 13, 1813; New York Spectator July 5-14, 1813; New York Commercial Advertiser, July 14, 1813; Philip Van Vechten, Oration...Albany, 1813, (Albany, 1813); John Tyler to John Taylor, July 16, 1813, Box T, John W. Taylor Papers, New-York Historical Society; Albany Argus, July 13, 1813; Albany Gazette, July 13, 1813.

3 Salem Northern Post, October 14, 1813; Poughkeepsie Journal, October 20, 1813; Lansingburgh Gazette, reprinted in the New York Evening Post, October 1, 1813; New York Columbian, November 11, 1813.

4 Governor Tompkins to General Wilkinson, August 31, 1813, Hugh Hastings, ed. Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins, Governor of New York State, 1807-17. 3 vols. (Albany, 1898-1902). Citation, III, 383-84; Albany Gazette, February 1, 1813; Morgan Lewis to the Secretary of War, August 3, 1813, Reel 54, Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Record Group 107, National Archives; Thomas Oakley to Daniel Webster, September 8, 1813, Daniel Webster Papers, Library of Congress.

5 Ebenezer Baldwin, to Simeon Baldwin, September 11, 1813, Box 16, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale University; Troy Post, September 21, 1813; Lansingburgh Gazette, September 7-28, 1813; Hudson Bee, September 21, 1813

6 New York Mercantile Advertiser, March 30, 1814. See Lawrence Schoolcraft to Henry Schoolcraft, May 13, 1813, Reel 1, Henry Schoolcraft Papers, Library of Congress; Ebenezer Baldwin to Simeon Baldwin, April 4, 1814, Box 16, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale; and Morgan Lewis to the Secretary of War, June 14, July 13, 1813, Reel 54, War, RG 107, NA.


10 Peter Porter to Nathan Williams, May 6, 1814, Nathan Williams Papers, Oneida County Historical Society, Utica; Joshua Hathaway to Peter Porter, April 20, 1814, William Rochester to Peter Porter, April 22, 1814, Reel 2, James McNair to Peter Porter, May 15, 1814, Reel 3, Peter Porter Papers, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo.

11 Tompkins, III, 426-435; Ebenezer Baldwin to Simeon Baldwin, February 3, 1814, Baldwin Family Papers, Yale.

12 Daniel Tompkins to the Secretary of War, March 30, 1814, Reel 14, War, Unregistered Series, RG 107, NA; John Jay to Gouverneur Morris, August 17, 1813, Jay Papers, Columbia University; Gouverneur Morris to Robert Oliver, February 17, 1814, Reel 3, Gouverneur Morris Papers, Library of Congress.

13 George Washington Warner, Oration Delivered Before the Washington Benevolent Society of the County of Columbia...February 22, 1814 (Hudson, 1814); J.E. Chapin, Oration Delivered...Canandaigua...22nd of February 1814 (Canandaigua, 1814); New York Commercial Advertiser, February 24-27, 1814; New York Gazette, February-April 1814; Canandaigua Ontario Repository, February-April 1814; Buffalo Gazette, February-April 1814; Utica Patriot, February-April 1814.


15 John Savage to John Taylor, February 9, 13, 1814, John Taylor Papers, New-York Historical Society; Samuel Young to John Taylor, July 21, 1814, Taylor Papers, NYHS; Address to the Electors of the State of New York by the Republican Members of the Legislature (Albany, 1814); Fifteen Republican Citizens to William Bouck, March 30, 1814, Reel 4, William Bouck Papers, Cornell University; Notes and Resolutions of Republican General Meeting at the Capitol, April 14, 1814, Reel 2, Martin Van Buren Papers, Library of Congress; Albany Argus, February-April 1814.
Cooperstown *Otsego Herald*, February-April 1814; Hudson *Bee*, February-April 1814; New York *National Advocate*, February-April 1814.


17 Oliver Wolcott to Tobias Lear, May 11, 1814, Wolcott Papers, CHS; Charles Goldsborough to Harmanus Bleecker, June 11, 1814, Harmanus Bleecker Papers, New York State Library.

18 Electoral census taken from *Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York, 1815*, (Albany, 1815), 233-273, 503.

19 Charles Goldsborough to Harmanus Bleecker, June 11, 1814, Bleecker Papers, NYSL.