INDIANA
MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

VOLUME LX JUNE 1964 NUMBER 2

The War Hawks and the War of 1812

Editor's Note

Historians have differed widely about the underlying causes of the War of 1812. Their writings concerning its background, however, have emphasized four basic factors: the prolonged controversy and conflict over neutral rights during the two decades preceding the War of 1812; English impressment of American seamen during these two decades; the role of the English in supporting the Indians of the Old Northwest against the Americans from the 1780's; and the desire of Americans to gain part or all of Canada as a result of conflict with England. Some writers have given their attention to all of these factors, while others have devoted their emphasis mainly to questions concerning neutral rights and impressment.[1]

Most historians have given the War Hawks a major responsibility for the congressional declaration of war against England in June, 1812. Two historians, Professors Reginald Horsman and Roger H. Brown, presented papers at a session on "The War Hawks and the War of 1812" at the fifty-sixth annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association held at Omaha, Nebraska, May 2-4, 1963. The two articles which follow are modified versions of these papers, but the basic views and conclusions of the authors remain unchanged. The comments on the articles by Professors Alexander DeConde and Norman K. Risjord have also been reworded, but their basic views and conclusions are also unchanged. The articles and comments are presented in the order in which they were given at Omaha.

Horsman, Brown, DeConde, and Risjord have all given substantial time to research and writing regarding the period of the War of 1812. Horsman's book, *The Causes of the War of 1812,* is cited in both the following articles. He has written

[1] The monographs, articles, and texts cited in the following two articles will give additional general background for the War of 1812.

two articles dealing with the war period;[2] a new book, dealing with the question of British involvement with the Indians in the period from the American Revolution through the War of 1812, will be published by the Wayne State University Press. Horsman received the doctorate in history from Indiana University in 1958. Brown, who received the Ph.D. degree from Harvard University in 1961, has taught at Harvard and Dartmouth colleges. The accompanying article is a condensed version of a portion of his book, *The Republic in Peril: 1812,* published this year by Columbia University Press. DeConde did his graduate work in history at Stanford University, where he received the Ph.D. degree in 1949, and taught at Stanford, Whittier College, Duke University, and University of Michigan before assuming his present position. His most recent books are *The American Secretary of State,* published by Praeger in 1962, and *A History of American Foreign Policy,* published by Scribner in 1963. Risjord's article, "1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation's Honor," is cited in both the following articles. He received his doctorate in history from the University of Virginia in 1960; in September, 1964, he will join the University of Wisconsin history department.

These articles and comments do not attempt to evaluate the fundamental or underlying causes of the War of 1812. Instead, attention is focused on two questions: was there a group in the first session of the Twelfth Congress[3] with enough cohesion and consensus to warrant the appellation of War Hawks and, if so, did the War Hawks have a major role in bringing on the War of 1812? All other questions raised in the articles and comments are subordinate to these queries. Horsman's article is largely a statistical and analytical study of the voting records of members of the House of Representatives on eleven "measures leading toward war" during the first session of the Twelfth Congress. Brown's attention is mainly on the views expressed by twenty-seven members of this session of Congress, senators as well as representatives, in contemporary personal letters and records.

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[2] "Western War Aims, 1811-1812," *Indiana Magazine of History,* LIII (March, 1957), 1-18; "British Indian Policy in the Northwest, 1807-1812," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review,* XLV (June, 1958), 51-66.

[3] The first session of the Twelfth Congress convened on November 4, 1811, and adjourned on July 6, 1812; the second session began on November 2, 1812, and ended March 3, 1813. Most of the members of the House of Representatives had been elected in their respective states during the summer and fall of 1810, although some were elected as late as the spring of 1811. Senators at that time were chosen by the state legislatures.