Britain and America
Go to War
The Impact of War and Warfare in Anglo-America, 1754–1815
Edited by Julie Flavell and Stephen Conway
A “Species of Milito-Nautico-Guerilla-Plundering Warfare”

Admiral Alexander Cochrane’s Naval Campaign against the United States, 1814–1815

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The Anglo-American War of 1812 served as an embarrassing and unwelcome diversion for a British government struggling for survival against Revolutionary France and Napoleon. The ongoing contest on the European continent, which had time and again stretched Britain’s resources to the limit, during the summer of 1812 expanded into a troublesome conflict against the United States that left British policymakers facing a serious dilemma. Britain would have to continue operations against France, as well as defend Canada, protect British shipping from American warships and privateers, blockade the American coast to destroy commerce and hinder American naval operations, and aggressively take the transatlantic war to the shores of the upstart republic. These strategic objectives would tax a nation already reeling from the continued war with France and ultimately force military and naval officers to use innovative and aggressive unlimited warfare, or what Americans would term extreme and barbaric warfare, to achieve their objectives. And not surprisingly, both sides would vividly remember for years to come the “horrible species of warfare” that had been perpetrated during the conflict.

Admiral Alexander Cochrane’s role in the second war against America, not only his campaign but also the reasons behind his appointment as naval commander in chief, encapsulates the attitude of Britain as it went to war against the American Republic. Although Cochrane has sometimes been characterized in dismissive terms as an admiral whose first concern was prize money, his leading role in the conduct of the war deserves more serious
consideration. His open contempt for the new nation, his conviction that its people lacked patriotism and its authority was fatally weak, chimed in with the views of many in London and inspired Cochrane to adopt a strategy of unconventional war designed to break the American will to fight. Even after Wellington ruled out the practicability of a conventional war in America in early 1814, Cochrane and others remained confident that nontraditional offensive action—incitement of slave uprisings, Indian alliances in the west, naval blockades, small-scale attacks on the American coast, as well as initiatives in Louisiana and the exploitation of New England disaffection—could all combine to bring the Americans to heel, perhaps even topple their republican experiment. Cochrane’s tactics to some extent reflected British involvement in the violent and destructive wars sparked by the French Revolution, but echoes of the American War of Independence remained obvious as well. The Americans were believed still to be a people with little collective sense of their national interest, and whose immature government need not be taken seriously.

Although the war with the United States would always be a secondary theater of operations, once it began British policymakers and naval and military officers focused on how they could force the Americans into submission while protecting their colonial holdings in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, it quickly became apparent that Canada would serve an important role in British operations, as several commanders offered strategic assessments of the colony’s role. In November 1812, only five months after the United States had declared war, Sir John Borlase Warren, then British commander of the North American Squadron, proposed an operation against New Orleans to divert the American attack against Canada. He insisted that such a diversion would close the Mississippi River as well as “cut off the resources of the American Southern States, . . . who are now actively engaged against the Canadas.” The following year Warren again called for his country to strike against the South and to bring “forward the Indians and Spanyards [sic] . . . and a division of black troops to cut off the resources of the Mississippi.” This proposal represented one of the first suggestions about the forthcoming nature of the conflict.1

In 1813, other naval officers made similar suggestions for a British victory. Captain James Stirling sent a detailed memorandum on the geography of the Gulf of Mexico region to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Viscount Melville. According to Stirling, the conquest of Louisiana by British forces supported by Indians, blacks, and “displeased” Spaniards would place the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, and Virginia “at the mercy of Great Britain.” Likewise Admiral Henry Hotam, then the commanding officer at Bermuda, suggested that “the place where Americans [were] most vulnerable is New Orleans and . . . [its capture] will be the severest blow America can meet with.” Hotam also implied that an attack in the Gulf region would “check [the Americans’] operations against Canada.”

Each of these suggestions proposed bold action that the authors insisted would pay great dividends with little expense because they also employed the threat of servile rebellion, Indian uprisings, and the exploitation of discontented French and Spanish populations in the south. All of these options seemed expedient considering the limited resources available for the American war and the events that occurred during 1813. The fortunes of war in North America had worsened for Britain as army and naval forces suffered losses to Oliver Hazard Perry on Lake Erie and to William Henry Harrison at the Battle of the Thames. Moreover, British naval supremacy on Lake Ontario seemed to be threatened. Fortunately, the disintegration of Napoleon’s European empire soon freed seasoned, battle-trained troops for North American service and permitted the government to refocus offensive operations against the United States. But until the revised strategy could be put into effect, the Royal Navy had instructions “to institute a strict and rigorous blockade of [American] ports and harbours . . . and of the River Mississippi.”

The secretary of state for war and colonies, Lord Bathurst, wrote anxiously to the Duke of Wellington in late January 1814, requesting suggestions as to how Britain might strike some decisive blow and bring a speedy end to the war. Wellington’s discouraging reply maintained that even under the most favorable conditions, little could be achieved by a British offensive in North America. Apparently Wellington had been unimpressed by the naval raids undertaken by small forces of British marines and soldiers along the East Coast of the United States during 1813. Even so, the cabinet clung to the hope that boldly aggressive nontraditional offensive action might cause panic, demoralization, and physical damage among a people who were disparagingly dismissed by the prime minister, Lord Liverpool, as hopelessly divided and low-minded. Liverpool, unlike Wellington, had been greatly emboldened by reports of the material and moral effects of the coastal raids of 1813 in and around Chesapeake Bay under the energetic leadership of Rear Admiral George Cockburn. He and other cabinet colleagues, believing that small-scale operations might achieve disproportionate results, committed few naval and military forces to this strategy, even before Wellington replied. Limited, small-scale operations would not require large numbers of troops, ships, or resources.

Bold and aggressive small-scale offensive operations against the Ameri-
can coast did require more vigorous leadership than had so far been provided by Admiral Warren, the senior officer in American waters. Despite a good record as a young officer, some now described him as too secretive and, even worse, too cautious. Besides, he did not seem wholeheartedly committed to the American war. His successor, fifty-six-year-old Vice Admiral Sir Alexander F. I. Cochrane came to American waters with considerable small-boat experience in the Mediterranean. The uncle of the better-known Captain Thomas Cochrane—the frigate captain with the “Nelson touch”—appeared younger, more energetic, and very successful, having been knighted for his participation in the 1806 Battle of Santo Domingo.6

Cochrane possessed another quality that made him appealing to the British government. He absolutely and unquestionably hated the United States; this enmity stemmed from his brother’s death at American hands during the 1781 siege of Yorktown. Yet Cochrane’s prejudices mirrored more deeply the prevalent and bitter anti-American attitudes displayed by so many Britons who were directly or indirectly engaged in the war. Americans—whom writers in the press or speakers in Parliament variously described as irresponsible, dishonest, and puffed-up democrats—represented, in short, a menace to their own countrymen as well as to British interests. Most officers and government officials believed that they should not be accorded the “civilities of war” as practiced by the European powers. Captain David Milne, one of Cochrane’s subordinates, believed the Americans “a sad despicable set,” totally governed by “self-interest.” Cochrane called them a corrupt, cowardly, “whining, canting race” who lived in a ramshackle and easily disrupted federal republic about to fall apart. Almost as soon as taking command, he increased the intensity of the war by instructing his officers to “act with the utmost hostility against the shores of the United States.” Subordinate Admiral Edward Codrington reinforced Cochrane’s decision, suggesting that taking violence and suffering to the doors of the Americans would be the best way to win the war. Cochrane encouraged his officers to show the Americans that they were “at the mercy of an invading force” who could reduce American seaports to ashes and waste the surrounding countryside. This would provide some “retaliation for their savage conduct in Canada.”7

As the naval commander in chief at the critical stage of the war, Cochrane communicated with all major British figures involved in the fighting in North America, including the commanders of naval and military forces in Canada. He held responsibility for the disposition and use of a sizable North American fleet during the 1814–15 campaigns. He also communicated with London on questions of strategy, supplies, and reinforcements. Cochrane took a hands-on approach to the conflict in North America, unlike his predecessors. He had organized and directed the 1801 British amphibious landings at Aboukir Bay, sent to dispose of the French army deserted by Napoleon in 1799. During the following months his naval force had also kept the invading British army supplied; this has been described as one “of the classic instances of a well-planned, well-conducted, and completely successful conjoint operations.” Afterward Cochrane played an active role during the capture of the French West Indian islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, using his contacts with free blacks and slaves as well as with other disaffected peoples to isolate the dominant white French elite and so hasten the fall of the islands. No one could question his active managerial style or his attention to the smallest organizational detail.8

Although the Admiralty office considered Cochrane the right man for the job, not all agreed. His subordinate, Rear Admiral George Cockburn, who overshadowed Cochrane during the 1814 operations in the Chesapeake and most notably during the assault on Washington, perceived his commander’s talents to be administrative rather than operational. Cochrane has also fared poorly in most histories of the Chesapeake campaign and the ill-fated attack on New Orleans, either being accorded a minor role

Figure 7.1. “Bird’s-Eye View of the Battle of New Orleans, January 8, 1815. From a sketch by Latour, Jackson’s Chief Engineer.” Taken from Benson J. Lossing, The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869), 1047. Reproduced with the permission of the Newberry Library.
or accused of excessive interest in prize money and loot. Admiral Codrington emphatically proclaimed in October 1814 that prize money was Cochrane's "last consideration." As such Cochrane deserves more serious consideration because an examination of his role, in British operations along the coast of the United States during 1814–15, in short, provides insights into the cultural as well as the political, logistic, and military dimensions of the war and helps define the parameters of warfare during the War of 1812.9

During the spring of 1814, Cochrane critically examined the resources at his disposal. The well-placed naval station of Bermuda, some 640 miles to the east, lay within reach of the Chesapeake and other objectives. It had a better climate—an important attribute given the high death rate in the Caribbean—than the West Indies, and did not lie on the main hurricane routes. One government spokesman reported to Parliament in March 1816 that Bermuda "formed the great security of Canada, and was a point from which a British fleet might sweep the whole extent of the coast of North America." While Cochrane might have agreed with this assessment in terms of its potential value, the reality he found in Bermuda during the spring of 1814 appeared somewhat different.10

Bermuda actually consisted of low-lying islands separated by a maze of straits with many treacherous shallows. A brig, HMS Carnation, had fallen victim to these in 1810, and navigation proved even more difficult for large ships. Cochrane initiated an extensive dredging program to clear the approaches, but soon found that easier access to St. George's only highlighted the harbor's inadequate fortifications—an enterprising enemy could easily take advantage of the deepened channels with little fear of shore bombardments. Additionally, the little town with its white houses seemed aesthetically pleasing but offered naval personnel scant entertainment. Prices were also high, and food was often in short supply because the islands relied on easily interrupted provisions from the West Indies. In fact, the United States had been an important source of supplies before the war. Cochrane soon found that the increased number of ships taxed the island's supplies too greatly, forcing him to send HMS Bulwark to the coast of New London, Connecticut, in the hope that money-grabbing Americans would sell fresh food for cash. Although he laid out $2,000 for this purpose, he found it necessary to advertise in Bermuda for additional money to supplement the monotonous salt meat and biscuit diet of his crews with fresh provisions. Then an unexpected drought exposed the inadequacy of the existing storage water tanks. Similar difficulties occurred in October and November 1814 when Cochrane temporarily used Jamaica as a staging base for the New Orleans campaign. Fortunately, a timely convoy arrived with much needed provisions, little of which could be procured locally.11

The dockyard in Bermuda also proved to be perpetually short of labor and full of defects. Cochrane had to redirect several ships to Halifax, only to find that it, too, could not meet the needs of the ships on the station. In fact, the shortage of British or Canadian skilled labor forced the shipyard to employ American carpenters and coopers. Cochrane's efforts to improve the Bermuda yard proved equally difficult. During the fall of 1814 he found only eight shipwrights to assist in the refitting of his flagship and the other ships needing attention. He had to acknowledge that the station had inadequate facilities, as most of the stores of masts and timber remained exposed without cover as late as 1815. The sick and wounded also had to be housed in temporary accommodations whose lease would expire in September 1814. Although a permanent building had been authorized, its design did not suit the local conditions or building skills, forcing Cochrane to build three traditional wooden Bermuda "pavilions" with proper ventilation.12

Desertion proved another pressing problem with Cochrane soon complaining that seaman disappeared at a truly alarming rate. He blamed the merchants in St. George's, with their offers of better wages, and enlisted the military garrison to try to recover the men. Not surprisingly, desertion proved even more problematic in Halifax, as many men soon found their way to the United States. Even Admiral Cockburn, who supposedly had won the loyalty of his marines, found a slight desertion problem. He believed desertions could be eliminated by enlisting former American slaves as marines as they, at least, would not desert. David Milne, describing his ship as one of the more fortunate ones, complained he had an inadequate multinational crew—British, European, and American—that included ex-clerks, grooms, watchmakers, and grocers. He dismissed the marines as "positively the refuse of the corps." Even the Americans noted Cochrane's problems. On March 3, 1813, the Norfolk Herald reported nine cases of desertion within three days, including one seaman who supposedly had been continuously at sea for fourteen years.13

Cochrane sent several desperate appeals to London, pleading for more men to offset the losses from desertion, injury, and illness. He also confronted numerous requests from the naval commander on the Great Lakes to help man a new squadron to challenge the American flotilla in those waters. In fact, Cochrane had to send most of the 1st Marine battalion to Canada even though he initially planned for these men to be used in raids against Georgia and South Carolina at the end of 1814. Nor did matters improve with the termination of the European war. First Lord of the Admi-
ralty Melville regretfully explained in October 1814 that he could not send additional marines to North America because he feared discontent would erupt into violence among the many sailors impatient for their postwar discharges, especially following their discharges after the first overthrow of Napoleon.14

Like his predecessor, Admiral Warren, Cochrane also complained that he did not have enough ships to meet his needs. Warren, who had more than ninety warships available to him during the spring of 1813, begrudgingly acknowledged that half of his fleet had to remain in the Caribbean to confront the French threat, while many of the remainder had to serve on convoy duty to protect against American privateers. The American fleet also posed an immediate threat, especially after the five impressive victories scored in single-ship actions against supposedly comparable British warships early in the war. These American victories, according to George Canning, broke "the sacred spell of the invincibility of the British navy." Furthermore, the fourteen American warships, manned by excellent captains and crews, were fast, well constructed, and heavily armed vessels that had to be contained, if for no other reason than to revive British morale. Warren and Cochrane both successfully concentrated their complement of British warships off the U.S. coast to reduce the naval threat, but in doing so enterprises American privateers—putting to sea from virtually any port, harbor, or inlet—eluded the blockade and wreaked havoc among British merchants. Warren had constantly warned the British government "of the imposibility of our trade navigating these seas [between the St Lawrence and the West Indies] unless a very extensive squadron is employed to scour the vicinity." But the Admiralty was unwilling to send Warren enough warships to blockade adequately the almost 2,000 miles of American coastline. In fact, Admiralty reports constantly reiterated that Warren had an overwhelming numerical superiority in ships, as well as several powerful ships-of-the-line, of which the Americans had none. Warren simply lacked enough vessels to institute an effective blockade of the United States, and as a result privateers drove up insurance rates to a level twice that during the recent wars with France.15

Cochrane, too, pleaded to the Admiralty for more ships, especially if they expected him to maintain the blockade and undertake serious attacks on the American coasts. The naval blockade restricted forays by the larger American warships, but the elusive privateers continued to harass British shipping. Even so, the blockade disrupted the commerce and economy of the Atlantic states, increasing the prices for scarce foreign goods and greatly reducing government revenues. And while the blockade's extension to New England during the spring of 1814 increased the demands on the British fleet, Cochrane believed that the region's lack of enthusiasm for the war could be used to his advantage. Perhaps the blockade, if judiciously exercised, could cause enough material loss and emotional aggravation to intensify New England aloofness from the more belligerent states to the south and west. On the other hand, Cochrane faced pressure from Nova Scotia merchants to protect their highly profitable New England trade. They had built up large stocks of goods in expectation of its continuance. In this instance, the government gave Cochrane discretion to proceed as he thought best, and he chose to permit safe passage to some American skippers in return for information on hostile military deployments or for fresh food for his crews. Unfortunately, British privateers ignored the safe passage arrangements and seized American merchant ships, thus alienating the Americans and reducing the possibility of encouraging New England neutrality, ultimately forcing Cochrane to discontinue the use of passes.16

These difficulties underscored the problems encountered by Cochrane as he tried to organize adequate and effective naval operations for the Chesapeake Bay during the summer of 1814 and for later attacks against New Orleans, Georgia, and South Carolina. Facing such circumstances, Cochrane and other British officers worked diligently to restore their own reputations and that of their service. They willingly used all means at their disposal to secure speedy and dramatic victories, which unlike the war in Europe gave an extra edge to fighting in North America. The officers of the fleet also drew encouragement from Cockburn's 1813 operations in the Chesapeake. The Bay, a virtual inland sea that stretched north for some 200 miles from its narrow Atlantic inlet, offered the British easy access to the coasts of Virginia and Maryland and to the cities of Baltimore, Annapolis, and Washington, while also providing an ideal base of operations for demoralizing and humiliating the American war effort.

The goal of breaking the American will to fight inevitably provoked charges and countercharges of unnecessary violence and incendiarism from British participants in the campaign as well as from critics in London. British conduct in North America during the War of 1812, however, differed very little from the unlimited warfare that had been practiced in Europe since August 1793. The French Revolution had introduced new levels of destruction and violence that by the beginning of the nineteenth century had surpassed that imposed on the small-scale armies of the eighteenth century. Americans claimed that this new destructive intensity violated customary or legal warfare and contrasted sharply from traditional forms of war practiced by civilized nations. Yet British officers felt they were following Euro-
pean standards of warfare based on the desired objectives of the campaign. In some instances excessive violence and lack of discipline provided a means to an end, while in others strict discipline and control were directed only against targets of genuine military importance. Throughout, Cochrane and other British officers insisted that their illegitimate or “unsporting” acts of war simply represented a response to similar American actions. Americans had looted and burned the Canadian town of York, reportedly set booby-traps including drifting mines or torpedoes, poisoned food and water, and used individuals posing as civilians to fire random shots at British units. This unlimited form of American warfare forced the British to respond appropriately, climaxing with the temporary August 1814 occupation of Washington—with the controversial incidents of arson that accompanied it—and the unsuccessful attempt to do the same at Baltimore and New Orleans.¹⁷

British accounts of events sometimes offered the reasoning, prejudices, and emotions that led to specific acts of vengeance. The Annual Register of 1814 announced that it was “not to be expected that the war between America and Britain would be carried on in the most humane and honourable mode, especially by the Americans.” It added that British “gentlemen” viewed the American “democrats” as their social inferiors, while many Americans vividly remembered the British use of Indians and Lord Dunmore’s November 1775 pledge to free all slaves who would take up arms for King George III during the War for Independence. That conflict had also provided plenty of other precedents. Disillusioned Tory captain William Lovell, a naval officer whose father and uncle had both fought in the War for Independence, recalled his War of 1812 service in a caustic 1839 memoir. Writing of his disgust at American conduct during the War of 1812, he maintained that plundering by British forces had been forbidden. Any unconventional British acts of violence, he retorted, came only in response to the April 1813 American burning of the Canadian town of York, which had not deserved such harsh treatment. Lovell’s anti-American feelings had become even more incensed because of the American use of “torpedoes,” explosive devices used by Americans to blow holes in the hulls of British ships below the waterline. In late June 1813 Captain Thomas Hardy of HMS Ramillies had encountered an abandoned merchant ship off New London, Connecticut; when Hardy sent a party to board the schooner, the vessel suddenly exploded, killing Lieutenant John Geddes and ten seamen. Lovell insisted that he, too, had encountered concealed explosives on small coasting vessel with lines rigged to detonate the craft when boarded by British forces. British officers thought that such use of “Infernal Machines” was absolutely despicable.¹⁸

During the mid-1830s Lieutenant James Scott produced a three-volume account of his naval career, in which he narrated at some length his experiences in the Chesapeake during 1813–14. He reported that Cockburn, whom he greatly admired, never faltered in his generosity to the weak and helpless. When a British raiding party unjustly despoiled an American’s property, Scott maintained that the admiral reimbursed him. The pro-Federalist Connecticut Mirror reported that during the attack on Portsmouth, Virginia, British forces seized cattle and sheep but that Cockburn paid for the livestock, and he even paid a Mrs. Wallace a doubloon for each day that he stayed in her house. On another occasion, when the British seamen intercepted a stagecoach traveling from Philadelphia to Baltimore, Cockburn intervened on behalf of a milliner who had been robbed of her purse. In still another instance, Scott related how Cockburn paroled an American militia officer of genuine breeding—supposedly a real and rare gentleman—and returned his splendid horse. Yet Scott fully approved when Cockburn punished the enemy, such as when he ordered that livestock be taken without payment because Americans had fired on his troops while trying to purchase them. When the Americans resisted, Cockburn instructed his men to kill the cattle not needed by his army and burn their carcasses.¹⁹

Scott also derided Americans as being too ready to make a few dollars by trading with the British “whenever their own interest intervened between them and the public weal.” He even mockingly described a group of American officers who visited his ship under a flag of truce in June 1813. “They were in regimentals, but certainly the fashion and cut of them rendered their exact rank and calling somewhat dubious.” Moreover, the three officers’ “sported red coats, silver epaulettes, and silver mounted side-arms, white linen waist-coats, and trousers of the same material” appeared ill-fitting and slovenly. Unshined Hessian boots and “old-fashioned French cocked-hats, with feathers, that might, from their towering height, have served for sky-scrapers, completed their attire.” The appearance of the American officers combined with “the stiff unbending formality . . . , their starch-upright figures, placed in contact with the easy demeanour of the gentlemen they accosted, rendered the scene truly ridiculous” and, according to Scott, made it difficult for the British officers to keep a straight face.²⁰

Scott also recalled another meeting under a flag of truce with one particularly uncouth American officer who chided him about recent British surprise night attacks to try to capture American six-pounder field pieces.
The American boldly challenged Scott to steal one from a fort that he commanded, adding, "But tarnation seize me in the bramble-bush if I don't blow you to hell within a mile of my command... I would give you such a whipping as would cure you from rambling a-night, like a particular G--d----d tom-cat." Scott remembered that he used a former slave as a guide, led a party of seamen to the fort, and took it by surprise. After only a few shots the Americans fled, their commander in his shorts. Scott later gave the American officer's clothes and regimental colors to a sergeant in the newly formed British black "Colonial Marines." The fort commander, outraged and insults that his clothes were being worn by a "G--d----d black nigger," declared that this represented "the unkindest cut of all." Although the story may be apocryphal, Scott’s account is instructive nonetheless because it sheds light on the attitudes of some British officers toward their American opponent even years after the events had taken place.21

Not all British participants agreed with Scott. Naval officer Frederic Chamier wondered in evident disgust whether "some savages, and perhaps men dressed one degree better than savages, commence a system of barbarity and desolation in the north; [that] we, pretending to be the most civilised nation on the face of the earth, must imitate their ravages in the south." Chamier had seen British units burning American property without cause or on the feeblest of excuses, namely, that all men of a certain age, whatever their dress, were likely militiamen. Chamier also recalled how raiding parties experimented to find the quickest way to burn a building, soon deciding that a fire to leeward was the most effective because this type of fire drew in air in such a way as to fan the flames into the heart of the house. The June 1813 sacking of Hampton, Virginia—when an Independent company of French Chasseurs, or "desperate Banditti," as one British officer referred to them, raped innocent women, pillaged the town, and murdered in cold blood an American militia officer who had surrendered—represented the type of heinous barbaric type of warfare that Chamier so despised.22

Chamier also questioned the inconsistencies in British behavior. Apparently the approved practice, although not necessarily always observed, was for British forces to purchase food and live cattle even if below market value, whereas they were instructed to burn American houses. Yet at sea, everything seemed to be fair game as far as the American war was concerned. Chamier instead took a very different position on the conflict: "It has been held by many very good and clever men that, during war, private property should be respected: this is a very great mistake. Every man during war pays something towards the support of it: if this man is ruined he ceases to contribute, and thus the exchequer is impoverished: ergo, the more you

ruin in a war, the more you hurt the nation at large." Adam Smith had written some years earlier that those who supported war from the safety of their homes should have to shoulder more of the expense. If confronted with such a burden, they might be more inclined to peace. Youthful subaltern George R. Gleig, who fought in both the Peninsular War and in North America, suggested that noncombatants be respected in wars between monarchies, but he also vowed that in wars against democracies the voters should experience "the real handicaps and miseries of warfare": "Burn their houses, plunder their property, block up their harbors, and destroy their shipping in a few places; and before you have time to proceed to the rest, you will be stopped by entreaties for peace." In addition, electorates would soon reject their war-making leaders.23

Cochrane wanted to take the war to the Americans in precisely this heavy-handed, destructive way. Captain Milne and Admiral Codrington were equally committed to Cochrane's plans. Admiral Cockburn's actions in 1813 also spoke far louder than any words. During the spring and early summer, his forces sacked Hampton, burned an important flour depot on the Elk River, and destroyed the Cecil or Principic cannon foundry on the Susquehanna River, all of which had important military value. Cochrane had also instructed his troops to burn several private homes and farms in Havre de Grace and along the Sassafras River (both in Maryland), from which Americans had fired against his troops. If American citizens continued to resist, they would have to suffer the consequences of war.24

Many senior British army officers expressed reservations about the way the war had been conducted. Colonel Sir Thomas Sydney Beckwith and General Robert Ross, each with only a few thousand soldiers at their disposal, could not be easily persuaded to embark on a destructive offensive operation into the heart of enemy territory without substantial intelligence of enemy strengths and deployments. While both officers worried about their lines of communication and logistics, Cockburn seemingly conducted haphazard raids that lacked discipline, order, and the most obvious military precautions. Cockburn's unorthodox campaign relied on speed, surprise, accurate information secured from locals and slaves, as well as the expectation that the American militias would offer little, if any, serious resistance. Regardless of his preparation and planning, Cockburn's tactics against civilian targets shocked some army officers. General Sir Henry Smith, taken aback by the occupation of Washington, surmised that Cockburn would have burned the entire city if possible. Writing of the dismay expressed by many of his fellow officers, he compared the Duke of Wellington's "human warfare in the south of France" and the incendiary Chesapeake warfare of
the “Red Savage of the woods,” Colonel Arthur Brooke rejoined that torching the city was a justified act of war, resulting from the civilian attacks against British troops; Lord Bathurst defended the burning of the city because the Americans had attempted to assassinate General Ross. He insisted that the whole affair “was as fine a thing as done [during] this war and a rub to the Americans that can never be forgotten.”

These predatory British operations in the Chesapeake ignited hostile American feelings that would not be soon forgotten. As early as the spring of 1813, the American newspaper Niles’ Weekly Register had labeled Admiral Warren as the “spoiler in the Chesapeake,” whereas Cockburn would soon be demonized as “Go-burn.” The paper likened Cockburn to “Satan in his cloud, when he saw the blood of man from murdered Abel first crimson the earth, exulting at the damning deed, and treating the suppliant females with the rudest curses and most vile appellations.” A naturalized Irishman, supposedly a James O’Boyle from Virginia, even offered $1,000 for the head of “the notorious incendiary and infamous scoundrel, ... British Admiral Cockburn, or 500 dollars for each of his ears on delivery.” Yet Cockburn felt it necessary to take extreme actions against a populace who would go to any length to harass his forces. The American militia he faced had fired on his troops, then melted away into the countryside and posed as civilian noncombatants. The British therefore relied on extreme, unorthodox tactics aimed at intimidating and overawing the American people with deliberate acts of “frightfulness” and destroying the material things that Americans needed to fight. As a result, the war devolved into “a vicious little war,” with both sides perpetrating numerous outrages.

The war in North America became even more vicious during the spring and summer of 1814. Long before assuming command, Cochrane had drafted a strategic plan and discussed it at length with the Admiralty Office. He suggested that New Orleans and Virginia were the two most vulnerable places in America and that both could be taken. New Orleans and the Mississippi River watershed served as the outlet for western American commerce, and Cochrane thought that seizing the port and river would weaken the United States so as to divide the Atlantic from the trans-Appalachian states. The resulting internal pressure would bring down the American government. In Virginia he proposed two targets: the state’s few cities and the black slave population. Cochrane had reported, and Cockburn had proven, that most Virginia cities could be assaulted easily with small mobile forces because of the abundance of navigable rivers. These attacks would throw the Virginia countryside into disarray. He also asserted that the slave population, who were “British in their hearts, ... might be of great use if war should be prosecuted with vigor.” Slave labor girded the southern economy and provided the underpinning and structure of society, and Cochrane understood that any disruptions would leave Virginians in a state of panic.

During the spring of 1813 Admiral Warren had acknowledged the potential importance of a servile insurrection. He had reported that “the Black population of the countries evince ... the strongest predilection for the cause of Great Britain” and that “the White inhabitants have suffered great alarm from the discovery of parties of Negroes ... exercising with arms in the Night.” Moreover, the presence of British warships in American waters had emboldened slaves, who deserted in increasing numbers. Warren learned that the slaves made valuable local guides and, not surprisingly, that the “Blacks of Virginia and Maryland would cheerfully take up Arms and join us against the Americans.”

The possibility of interjecting a racial component that would unquestionably escalate the war in North America may have appealed to military commanders in hostile territory running short of men and supplies, but it did not appeal to the Ministry. Lord Bathurst had included guidelines for dealing with American slaves in his secret March 1813 orders to Colonel Beckwith, and these instructions firmly ruled out inciting slave revolts. Bathurst’s directive did permit individual slaves who became involved in British operations to be removed from the United States for their own safety and to be given protection and granted freedom. The secretary clearly hoped that the numbers would be small, since “the Public became bound to maintain them.” Yet these orders proved inadequate because they underestimated the considerable number of slaves that would escape their bondage. In fact, the Bermudan Legislative Council pleaded as early as mid-August 1813 that no more refugees be sent to the island, since the growing number might undermine the social and economic stability of the island community.

Bathurst revised his opinion in January 1814 when he advised the Admiralty to assist all slaves wishing to leave the United States. Possible recruits for the West India regiments—perhaps as many as 5,000—from Georgia and South Carolina should be sent to Bermuda. By August 1814, both Bathurst and Melville had again reconsidered, now warning Cochrane against encouraging slave uprisings for fear of atrocities. Indeed, Melville feared a corps of slaves might prove as dangerous or injurious to British as to American interests. Bathurst still believed that only those fearing for their safety or wishing to enter British colonial regiments should be accepted, and that number would be manageable. Cochrane, himself a slave owner in Trinidad, cherished hopes of recruiting slaves from the southern plantations...
to bolster his West Indian regiments, although he later reported that they would not "volunteer their services to the West India Regiments." Even so, Cochrane believed that using slave combatants would be "more terrible to the Americans than any troops that could be brought forward."  

Cochrane possessed several pieces of information that helped form his judgment, but one of the most important may have been a November 1813 letter sent from Captain Robert Barrie to his predecessor. Barrie reported that he had some 120 slaves from Virginia and Maryland aboard HMS Dragon and that he was convinced even more would "cheerfully take up arms and join us against the Americans." Such optimism prompted Cochrane to issue a bold proclamation in early April 1814, offering freedom for any slave who would enter "into His Majesty's Service" or relocate "as Free Settlers into some of His Majesty's Colonies." They and their families would be received in British posts or warships, and all who enlisted in military or dockyard service would receive a bounty of twenty dollars, as well as the same pay and clothing allowance as the marines. Since Cochrane did not need additional seamen, those who enlisted for naval service received a bounty of only ten dollars. This promise of freedom and employment—much like Lord Dunmore's during the American War for Independence—lured an untold number of southern slaves from their American bondage, with some 600 signing up as "Colonial Marines" and many others taking passage to Bermuda, Nova Scotia, Trinidad, and other British colonies.  

Cockburn, in contrast, initially expressed doubts, thinking it necessary for the British to establish themselves in force on the mainland before slaves would rise in any considerable numbers. But once Cochrane issued his proclamation, Cockburn immediately had to find a suitable island in the Chesapeake that could serve as a British base of operations and as an accessible receiving station for runaway slaves. By mid-May, Cockburn had occupied Tangier Island, begun constructing a fort and barracks, and sent slaves to the mainland to report on British activities. Within days, slaves began arriving at the island, and by September some 300 had agreed to join the Colonial Marines. Trained and commanded by Sergeant William Hammond, the former slaves participated in British operations from May 1814 onward, even marching on Washington with Ross's army in late August. Although Cockburn initially thought that these new soldiers were "naturally neither very valorous nor very active," he soon admitted that he had underestimated their qualities and potential. They had responded so well to British training that he now preferred them to his own marines. Sergeant Hammond, acknowledging their "steadiness," reported that they would soon "equal their brother soldiers in the performance of every part of their duty." Cockburn quickly realized that they were fitter and stronger; in operations ashore they committed no outrages; accustomed to hot weather, they withstood long marches and arduous labor better than the average marine. Captain Charles B. H. Ross reported that during one operation the Colonial Marines had performed well, "their conduct marked by great spirit and vivacity, and perfect obedience." Lieutenant Scott also welcomed their knowledge of local terrain, claiming that they made excellent scouts and reliable guides. Admirable in nighttime operations, their knowledge and experience made it easier for small raiding parties to elude or surprise American forces.  

If in the end fewer slaves arrived than Cochrane expected, the British nonetheless had acquired a very tough and loyal auxiliary force, and this army of runaway slaves made an indelible mark on the psyche of American planters. It apparently "caused a most general and undisguised alarm" or a fear that bordered on panic and paranoia. Cockburn declared that the Americans "expect Blacky will have no mercy on them and they know that he understands bush fighting and the locality of the woods as well as themselves and can perhaps play at hide and seek in them even better." The mere presence of the British fleet off the coast created a double-edged problem for American planters. It emboldened slaves to flee while also making the countryside virtually indefensible. Should the militia be called out to confront a British threat, then slaves would have free rein to flee or rise against their masters. The British benefited in either case, and Cockburn took great pride in noting the degree of alarm among the planters as revealed in the local press.  

The Colonial Marines saw their first action on the morning of May 30, 1814, when Cockburn sent a small force under Captain Charles Ross to take an American battery on Pangoteake (Pungoteague, Virginia) Creek, opposite Tangier Island. During the assault, "though one of them [Colonial Marines] was shot and died instantly in front of the others at Pangoteake, it did not daunt or check the others, but on the contrary animated them to seek revenge." In short order, the British burned three barracks and captured a small-caliber field gun that later would be awarded to the Colonial Marines for their service. In fact, Cockburn praised "the Colonial Marines, who were for the first time, employed in Arms against their old Masters, and behaved to the admiration of every Body." The former slaves participated in a number of other operations throughout the summer, including a series of June attacks in which a group of thirty burned more than 2,500 hogsheads of tobacco in Benedict and Marlborough, Maryland. Again, they...
In early August, Cockburn himself led a force of some 500 men, including 120 now-experienced members of the Colonial Marines, into Virginia where they encountered an American militia force on the Kinsale Heights near the mouth of the Potomac. Cockburn achieved another quick and speedy victory with few losses, but he acknowledged it could have been far different because his army ventured through well-wooded country, ideal for an enemy ambush. But no such ambush or attack occurred, convincing him that a march on the American capital was eminently feasible given the limited capabilities of the local militias.

The Colonial Marines—or “platoons of uniformed negroes” as they were derisively called—had excited great angst in the southern American states. Cochrane’s decision to mobilize them had exposed a tremendous American weakness, which Cockburn exploited. Throughout the summer of 1814 local, state, and federal leaders grappled with the possibility that Cochrane and Cockburn would foment a full-scale slave insurrection, and this preoccupation opened the door for Cockburn to ravage the Virginia and Maryland coastline while encountering virtually no opposition. By August Cockburn had become convinced that with anticipated reinforcements—as many as 30,000 supposedly coming from Gibraltar, Sicily, Bordeaux, England, and Ireland—they could easily seize major targets such as Washington and Baltimore. Even though Cochrane surmised that the “desertion of the black population . . . backed with 20,000 British troops,” would hurl Madison from his presidential throne, he suggested the first major attack be directed at Baltimore, followed up with assaults against Philadelphia, Annapolis, and Washington. Cockburn explored the approaches to each city, before concluding that Washington offered the most advantages and the easiest accessibility. In late July and early August Cockburn made nine diversionary raids in Virginia and Maryland, distracting Americans and greatly damaging their war-making ability. These types of tactics played well into Cochrane’s overall objectives, for he had ordered his commanders “to destroy and lay waste” to all towns within their reach. Cockburn was doing exactly as instructed.

The most difficult objective that Cockburn had was convincing Cochrane and General Robert Ross that the city of Washington should be their primary objective. Cochrane still believed that capturing one of the major seaports would be far more destructive to American morale. General Ross, meanwhile, was extremely reluctant to place his 4,000 men in the middle of hostile territory with a long supply line. Cockburn described the success of previous naval raids and even offered to let Ross participate in a planned raid against an American factory on St. George’s Island in the Potomac. During the August 16 assault, British forces destroyed the facility and returned without encountering opposition, vividly demonstrating to Ross what could be achieved with limited resources and risk. Ross became convinced that an attack against Washington could be carried off successfully.

The late August 1814 campaign against Washington, spanning thirteen days and involving only 4,500 men, was an unqualified British success that represented the high-water mark of the war. British forces easily invaded and captured the American capital, burned public buildings including the capitol and president’s house, and returned to the safety of British warships while suffering very few casualties. Cochrane and his naval forces had brought the war to the United States as effectively as the war had been taken to Napoleon. In doing so, Cochrane had given Cockburn’s marines and Ross’s soldiers the chance for glory and success. Aside from Commodore Joshua Barney’s men, who had destroyed their gunboats and retreated to Bladensburg where they put up a spirited defense, British forces encountered no serious resistance. Despite the ease of the Washington campaign, Cockburn encountered further objections before Cochrane and Ross agreed to attack Baltimore—in this instance their reservations were justified, as the Americans had the fortifications and men to offer a stiffer resistance, ultimately forcing a British retreat.

Cochrane exercised great caution before and during each operation because he had learned that, even though the war had ended in Europe, he would receive very few reinforcements. Also, he had far larger concerns as commander of the North American station than simply the operational details of the Chesapeake campaign. He had to deal with the daily responsibilities of manning and provisioning a sizable squadron on a distant station with few bases of supply. He held responsibility for tightening the blockade of the American coastline, seizing shipping, and destroying the enemy’s economy. Throughout, he remained committed to harassing the coast of New England, the Carolinas and Georgia, as well as the Chesapeake Bay. In fact, Cochrane was still convinced that his plan to strike, destroy, and ransom would break the American will to fight. Yet he also had strategic responsibility for the entire North American war, and by the late summer of 1814, his thoughts had turned to the next theater of operations—an attack on New Orleans and increased raids along the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. And while some writers have suggested that Cochrane’s interest in booty and prize money motivated his attack on New Orleans, his correspondence reveals serious hopes of wresting the city and
the mouth of the Mississippi permanently from American control, which in the end would severely damage the American war effort. 38

Soon after his appointment, Cochrane had boasted that with “15,000 of Lord Wellington’s Army all the country south west of the Chesapeake might be restored to the dominion of Great Britain.” He also boldly proposed that a small force—of regulars, Indians, black slaves, Baratarian pirates, and disaffected citizens—could “take possession of N. Orleans by which we should have considerably weakened the [American] efforts against Canada.” Cochrane’s ambitious plan, virtually the same as Warren’s the year before, resonated strongly with the Lords of the Admiralty, especially after the summer 1814 reports of victorious raids against the American coast. In late July, Viscount Melville requested a confidential opinion from Admiral Sir William Domett about a possible Louisiana campaign, and the officer suggested an operation with troops assembling during the fall of 1814 reports of victorious raids against the American coast. With that endorsement, the Admiralty in early August 1814 approved the year, pending the availability of Wellington’s Peninsular veterans. In the meantime, Cochrane was allotted twenty shallow-draft vessels and additional arms for his anticipated Indian allies. 39

Cochrane had learned during the spring of 1814 that the southern Indians were also fighting against the United States, but he lacked accurate and timely information. For example, he did not know that one tribe, the Creeks, had been fighting a civil war in which one faction remained loyal to the United States and that the other had suffered a devastating defeat against Andrew Jackson in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend on March 27, 1814. Unaware of the fate of the Creeks, Cochrane signed a proclamation to assist the southern Indians the day following the battle at Horseshoe Bend. Cochrane also did not realize that the other major southern tribes—the Cherokees and Choctaws—had sided completely with the Americans. Knowing only that a sizable number of Indians were still fighting a common foe, Cochrane had sent Captain Hugh Pigot and a small complement of men to the Gulf with arms and supplies for the Indians. Brevet Captain George Woodbine stayed among the southern Indians throughout the summer and fall of 1814, training and drilling, supplying and feeding, as well as trying to recruit additional warriors. Throughout, Woodbine reported to Cochrane that the Indians were potentially powerful allies who could be counted on during the Louisiana campaign. Cochrane learned in early December that the southern Indians hostile to the United States could actually contribute very little to British operations. 40

During the Chesapeake campaign Cochrane had experienced considerable success encouraging slaves to run away and arming many against their former masters. Cochrane had become convinced that “thousands of slaves will join upon their masters’[!] horses” simply because of “their hatred to the citizens of the United States.” He had found so little difficulty recruiting and employing slaves that he anticipated similar results along the slaveholding Gulf. Besides, reports from Florida and Louisiana already indicated that there was “a strong and irresistible party in the free people of colour, and the slaves who to a man will join” the British. True, slaves fled from Georgia and the Mississippi Territory to the British base on the Apalachicola River in Spanish Florida, but never in enough numbers to undermine American morale or alter the outcome of the Louisiana campaign. More important, very few of the Louisiana slaves that Cochrane anticipated would don red coats actually assisted the British, and fewer still participated in the Louisiana campaign. Instead, Andrew Jackson guaranteed “a full and entire pardon” to slaves who helped defend the city and promised a monetary and land bounty to those “sons of freedom”—or free blacks—who agreed to support the American cause. Jackson’s proclamations ultimately denied to Cochrane another important source of much-needed manpower. 41

Jean Lafitte and his Baratarian associates represented a third potential source of manpower that Cochrane wanted to employ during the Louisiana campaign. Based on the Island of Barataria to the south and west of New Orleans, this lawless group supplied slaves and other contraband goods to the settlers of Louisiana. They blatantly plundered foreign merchant ships, disregarded international neutrality laws, and violated American revenue laws. The U.S. government could do little to suppress their lawless activities. Cochrane seized on the idea that the Baratarians could provide assistance either by joining the British expedition or by remaining neutral, and in early September 1814 he sent Captain Nicholas Lockyer to meet with Jean Lafitte. For two days the two men discussed the prospects of an alliance in which the Baratarians would provide their assistance and knowledge, and in return the British would offer to protect and aid Lafitte and his associates in their struggle against the United States. Lafitte ultimately refused the British offer and instead chose to join the Americans, depriving Cochrane of an important source of manpower as well as vital information regarding the geography of the region. 42

Unsuccessful in recruiting the Baratarians, Indians, or runaway slaves, Cochrane turned to the disaffected populations of Louisiana and Spanish Florida, whom he mistakenly thought were “very anxious to get rid of the
Americans." He had been led to believe that the disposition of the region's inhabitants toward Great Britain was "as various and as motley as" the population itself. He had been informed that the Spaniards supported their country and the French theirs, but both groups would work against the Americans. This suggestion convinced Cochrane that the expeditionary force might "find in the inhabitants a general and decided disposition to withdraw from their recent connexion [sic] with the United States."

If he, indeed, found this attitude, Cochrane had instructions to secure both "their favour and co-operation," which would provide the British "the whole Province of Louisiana from the United States."

Cochrane again encountered difficulty, as he did not find a population eager to assist his force. The September 1814 British and Indian invasion of Pensacola, Florida, provided a more realistic indication of what Cochrane might find in Louisiana. British commanders believed that the Spanish in Florida would appreciate and readily accept military support. Instead, they found that officials and citizens refused to cooperate or assist with preparations to defend the town. British forces responded by dealing harshly with merchants, citizens, and officials. They threatened to destroy the city, and they took with them slaves and the Spanish garrison without permission in November 1814 as they evacuated the city, which angered and alienated the people of Pensacola. When the Americans entered the city, Andrew Jackson made sure that Spanish citizens were treated fairly, which both surprised and pleased them. News of the American and British occupations and of the treatment of Spanish citizens, not surprisingly, found its way across the Gulf to New Orleans and helped create enmity and suspicion, driving Louisiana firmly into the American fold and again depriving Cochrane of another important source of support.

Cochrane failed to gain the support he anticipated from the Indians, slaves, Baratarians, and discontented population, and without this help, he had to modify his operational plans. Initially, he had wanted to land troops at Pensacola or Mobile and proceed overland against New Orleans. But the failed September 1814 attack against Fort Bowyer (at the entrance of Mobile Bay) and loss of the frigate Hermes, combined with the November evacuation of Pensacola, left Cochrane with reduced options. British activities along the Gulf—especially Major Edward Nicolls's recruiting of slaves and Indians and fortification of Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River—had also frightened Americans in the region into acting. Cochrane's inability to secure the necessary small boats that he needed for the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mexico created still another problem. He had known for some time that he could not reduce New Orleans without shallow-draft vessels, and throughout the summer he had instructed his officers to collect all the small craft that they could; the Admiralty had also ordered twenty shallow-draft vessels be made available for the Louisiana expedition. But by December Cochrane admitted that he was still "deficient in Flat Boats or the means of transporting Troops into shallow water." Regardless of the setbacks, British operatives along the Gulf continued to offer rosy forecasts for the campaign, promising Cochrane "jam tomorrow, but never jam today."

Cochrane had a personal interest in the southern campaign, but he also had to focus on the larger strategic picture. The conquest of New Orleans would relieve American pressure from Canada and also foment division within the United States. He had also outlined his plans to the Admiralty for the early months of 1815. Confident that New Orleans and the Gulf region would be subdued before the end of the year or shortly thereafter, Cochrane suggested in early October 1814 that some 6,000 troops should descend on the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. "Satisfied that these two states will be at our Mercy," he maintained that he could raise additional companies of Colonial Marines during the winter and by April "recommence our operations in the Chesapeake." He sent Admiral Cockburn to seize Cumberland Island off the south Georgia coast, harass coastal towns, and recruit slaves and Indians into his ranks. Cockburn's aggressive strike-and-retreat warfare—nothing more than a diversionary attack along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina—would stimulate and support Cochrane's operations in the Gulf while also satisfying his larger strategic objectives, ultimately permitting him to expand the swath of destruction that would bring the Americans to their knees.

Some accounts of the disastrous New Orleans campaign hint that the operation represented an end in itself rather than the means to an end. But that was not the case. Throughout the fall of 1814, Cochrane had continued operations along the Atlantic, intensified the blockade of New England, and expanded the war to Georgia and South Carolina. The New Orleans campaign, which would relieve the pressure on Canada, represented but one more operation within his broader strategy of harassing the Americans until they begged for peace. In this instance New Orleans also offered important material and territorial possibilities. Regardless, the campaign against New Orleans failed for a variety of reasons, including the limitations of using Jamaica as a base, the nonarrival of the shallow-draft vessels needed to move and supply the army, the inability to recruit additional
troops along the Gulf, as well as the loss of speed and surprise as Jackson received sufficient warning to halt a British land advance beside the Mississippi on January 8, 1815.47

The disillusionment shared by many of Cochrane’s military counterparts did not seem to faze him. He encouraged General John Lambert, who assumed command of British forces after Pakenham’s death, to renew the attack, and later sent a squadron of ships up the Mississippi River to bombard Fort St. Philip, hoping that its capitulation would open a water route to the city’s doorstep. Neither succeeded. Doubtless Cochrane felt he had done his duty. His seamen had made extraordinary efforts to ensure that the army was placed on the east bank of the Mississippi River and to provide it with reinforcements, supplies, and artillery. At this point, the task of capturing the city rested solely with the soldiers, and they had failed—or so it must have seemed to Cochrane, who remained some distance from the problems of facing an army on a narrow front and strongly fortified with superior artillery. After the failed January 8, 1815, attack on the Plains of Chalmette and subsequent attack against Fort St. Philip, Cochrane focused on other operations in the Gulf, as well as off the coast of Georgia, South Carolina, and New England. In early February 1815, British forces captured Fort Bowyer at the entrance to Mobile Bay, which offered a foothold along the Gulf Coast from which the army could march inland against New Orleans. Before British forces could secure the city of Mobile, news arrived indicating that the British and American governments had concluded the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814, and that the two governments had ratified the agreement.48

Cochrane’s operations in the Gulf had yielded poor results, while those in New England paid considerable dividends. After intensifying the northeastern blockade in April 1814, Cochrane learned that Federalist leaders of the region were not committed to the war. Most had anticipated that the war would end shortly after the fall of Napoleon and liberation of France, and the European peace would permit them to continue their profitable trade with Nova Scotia. Instead, Cochrane tightened the blockade, instructing his commanders to exert just enough economic pressure to encourage New England neutrality, if not separatism. He also encouraged his officers to reach mutually advantageous understandings with local merchants and shippers and to continue monitoring New England attitudes concerning the war. Meanwhile, Admiral Edward Griffith led a joint army-navy attack against Eastport and Castine, Maine, giving the British control of 100 miles of coastline as well as several coastal islands. The occupation of Maine also brought the offensive war of the Chesapeake north, prompting many to believe that the district would serve as a base of operations for continued coastal attacks throughout the region, which heightened American fears and fueled rumors of New England separation. Admirals Hotham and Griffith reported mixed signals from Rhode Island, plus confidential oral proposals—supposedly from Massachusetts—for a separate peace or at least for a discontinuance of hostilities. Those rumors gained credence between December 15, 1814 and January 5, 1815, when Federalist leaders convened in Hartford, Connecticut.49

Cochrane indicated on January 5, 1815, that he was willing to lift the blockade against all states that would separate themselves from the Union. He also hinted that he might relax the blockade if states simply withdrew from the conflict. Yet the results of the Hartford Convention did not meet Cochrane’s expectations. The Convention had made no “irrevocable” step leading to disunion or separation, instead only listing their grievances and calling for a second meeting before June 1815. Those grievances would never be presented to President Madison or the federal government, and the Hartford Convention, unlike the victory at New Orleans, would quickly be overshadowed by news of the Treaty of Ghent. Cochrane had reason to feel that he had been robbed of another opportunity to weaken the United States. In fact, Codrington, who regretted the discreditable war and Britain’s failure to give the Americans a drubbing “in the open,” reported that Cochrane was “most amazingly cast down by this peace.”50

The War of 1812 revived intense passions first generated during the American War of Independence, and echoed the overt anti-American passions of some British officers and politicians. Despite great animosity on both sides, the conclusion of the war settled none of the main differences between the two peoples, leaving many to believe that another conflict loomed on the horizon. David Milne, a strong critic of most things American, posited in May 1815 that, although peace with the United States was desirable, he believed that American naval power should be “nupt in the bud” or none of the British West Indies would be safe. Furthermore, if Cuba fell under American influence or control, he insisted that the United States would become a great naval power. Other British officers and politicians believed it inevitable that the United States would grow in overall strength. As early as the 1820s, Foreign Secretary George Canning was using U.S. mercantile and naval potential to persuade his reluctant colleagues to recognize the new Latin American republics and to secure British interests in the southern continent.51

The Admiralty, sufficiently impressed by the American naval threat, favored and at times even roughly achieved a three-power navy. And in the
days preceding the War of 1812, politicians, and naval and military officers contemplated the character of a forthcoming war with the United States. One of Lord Palmerston’s responses at the time of a war scare with the United States in 1834 could have been lifted straight from Cochrane’s papers forty years earlier. If the Americans resorted to privateering, he angrily remarked, Britain should “retaliate by burning all their Sea Coast Towns.” The following year he argued even more vehemently that Americans were highly vulnerable in “their Slave States, and a British Force landed in the southern part of the Union, proclaiming freedom to the Blacks, would shake many of the stars from their banner.” Admittedly, Palmerston often blustered but even the more tactful Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon in 1856 referred to Americans as “that nation of pirates” who should be made to observe “the usages of civilised nations.” Americans, too, also feared British naval raids for years to come. In the aftermath of the war, Congress appropriated money for a series of fortifications to be built along the Atlantic and across the Gulf of Mexico to prevent the depredations of the coast as had occurred during the War of 1812. As late as 1837, Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett reported to the Senate the need for coastal defense, urging additional appropriations lest the United States again suffer from invasions and the uncivilized warfare perpetrated during the second war with Britain.12

The War of 1812 had been fought from different perspectives. The Americans had harkened back to the eighteenth century and based much of their expectations on lessons learned from their victory over the British during the War for Independence. American ideas, goals, and even weapons were, in fact, modeled on the anachronistic eighteenth century. Since the American War for Independence, the British had fought in the Netherlands, West Indies, India, Egypt, Portugal, and Spain, and by 1812 had incorporated new forms of unlimited warfare. They learned guerilla-style fighting from the Spanish, economic warfare and how to live off the land from the French, and even the destructive capabilities of a full-scale slave insurrection from events in Santo Domingo. During the North American war, they employed Indian allies who in instances showed Americans no quarter, even burning and killing those who surrendered to British officers. Moreover, Cochrane’s forces along the Atlantic coast and in the Gulf of Mexico tried to break the Americans’ will to fight by burning public and private property, looting, requisitioning livestock, and at Hampton, Virginia, even committing unauthorized rape and murder. This “species of milito-nautico-guerrilla-plundering warfare,” as Sir Harry Smith described the War of 1812 and Cochrane’s campaign in North America, left an indelible mark on both sides of the Atlantic that would be remembered for years to come.13

Despite the losses and the accusations, the war changed British attitudes about their former colonies very little, as many Britons still viewed Americans as ungrateful degenerates who should be chastised and punished for their pretensions in any way possible. Not for them the ill-grounded euphoria and refurbishment of national character that caught hold in America. But British administrators thereafter admitted that in dealing with even the ramshackle American Republic, “half-measures would not succeed.”14 Although perceptions would change very slowly, never again would Britain so underestimate its overgrown offspring as to think it could be militarily subdued or politically overthrown by a mere campaign of terror and harassment.

Notes


11. See correspondence in CP, MS 2348, fos. 7–9; MS 2330, fos. 21–26, 32.

12. See 1814 correspondence of the admiral in Halifax, CP, MS 2327, fos. 11, 42, 68, and CP, MS 2348, fos. 7–8.


14. For correspondence, see CP, MS 2326, fos. 188, 270–71; Melville to Cochrane, October 14, 1814, CP.

15. For more detail, see Marcus, Age of Nelson, 456–59, and Dudley, Splintering the Wooden Walls, 81–85.

16. See CP, MS 2345, fos. 2–5, 5; MS 2326, fos. 106–7, 180–81; MS 2348, fos. 89–91; MS 2349, fos. 185–86; MS 2574, fos. 89–90, 101–2; see also Reginald Horsman, The War of 1812 (London, 1969), 144–45.


A "Species of Milito-Nautico-Guerra-Plundering Warfare" 1


24. Cochrane to Melville, March 10, 1814, CP, MS 2345, fo. 1 ff.; Cochrane to Cockburn, April 28, 1814, CP, MS 2349, fo. 30; HMC, Milne Home MSS, 165; Bourchier, Memoir of Codrington, 1:313; Roger Morriss, Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853 (Columbia, S.C., 1997), 91–93.


27. Draft by Cochrane, ca. April 27–28, 1812, CP, 2574, fo. 3; Cochrane to Melville, July 17, 1814, CP, 2345, fo. 13; Dudley, Splintering the Wooden Wall, 118–19; Morriss, Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition, 96–99.


30. Goulburn to Croker, January 19, 1814, copy in CP, MS 2342, fos. 63–66; Melville to Cochrane, August 10, 1814, CP, MS 2574, fos. 169–70; Bathurst to Cochrane, October 26, 1814, CP, MS 2327, fo. 260; Cochrane to Bathurst, July 14, 1814, PRO WO 1/141.
31. Robert Barrie to Warren, November 14, 1813, PRO ADM 1/505, 66–67; Cochrane’s Proclamation, April 2, 1814, PRO ADM 1/508, 579; Cochrane to Cockburn, April 29, 1814, CP, MS 2349, fo. 29.

32. Cockburn wrote a series of letters to Cochrane between April 2 and June 25, 1814, CP, MS 2574, fos. 99–139; MS 2333, fos. 18–138; Morriss, Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition, 98–99; RM 7/7/13 Order Book, October 25, 1814, Royal Engineers Museum, Swansea; Charles B. H. Ross to Cockburn, May 29, 1814, PRO ADM 1/507, 68–70; Scott, Recollections, 3:115, 120–21.


34. Robert Barrie to Cockburn, June 19, 1814, PRO ADM 1/507, 81–86; Cockburn to Cochrane, May 10, 1814, CP, MS 2574, fo. 103; Cockburn to Cochrane, June 25, 1814, CP, MS 2574, fo. 135; Scott, Recollections, 3:253–64; Christopher T. George, Terror on the Chesapeake: The War of 1812 on the Bay (Shippensburg, Pa., 2000), 80.

35. John P. Hungerford to James Barbour, August 5, 1814, Calendar Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1, 1808 to December 1, 1835, Preserved in the Capital, at Richmond (Richmond, 1892) 10:367; Cockburn to Cockburn, July 1, 1814, CP, MS 2346; Cockburn to Cochrane, June 25, 1814, CP, MS 2574, fo. 135; Cockburn to Robert Barrie, June 26, 1814, Barrie Papers, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Morriss, Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition, 100–102; Keith S. Dent, The British Navy and the Anglo-American War of 1812 to 1815 (M.A. thesis, University of Leeds, 1949), 326.

36. Morriss, Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition, 100–102; George, Terror on the Chesapeake, 81; Gleig, Narrative of the Campaigns of the British Army at Washington and New Orleans, 148.

37. Contemporary critics of the British burning of Washington included some of the service personnel who took part as well as a number of members of Parliament: See T. C. Hansard, ed., Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time, vol. 29, November 8, 1813, columns 16–18, 34–40, 70–73, 75. Whitbread, the most outspoken critic of the American war, railed that the conflict was “abhorrent to every principle of legitimate warfare.” He also condemned the burning of Washington, remarking, “We had done what the Goths refused to do at Rome.” The best accounts of the Chesapeake campaign are George, Terror on the Chesapeake; Anthony S. Pitch, The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814 (Annapolis, Md., 1998); and Joseph A. Whitehorne, The Battle for Baltimore, 1814 (Baltimore, 1997). For an abbreviated account of the campaign, see Mahon, War of 1812, 289–316, and Hickey, War of 1812, 195–204.

38. Melville to Cochrane, May 22, 1814, CP, MS 2574, fos. 130–31; Dudley, Splintering the Wooden Wall, 113–19.

39. Cochrane to Melville, March 10, 1814, CP, MS 2345, fos. 1–5; Cochrane’s Observations to Lord Melville Relative to America, 1814, War of 1812 MSS, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington; Lord Melville to William Domett, July 23, 1814, and Domett to Melville, July 26, 1814, both in Melville Castle Muniments, GD 51/2/2531–2, National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh; John Wilson Croker to Alexander Cochrane, August 10, 1814, PRO, WO 1/141, 15–24.


43. Edward Nicolls to Cochrane, July 27, August 12, 1814, CP, MS 2328; Bathurst to Robert Ross, September 6, 1814, PRO, WO 62/9, 1–3; Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812 (New York, 1869), 1026.


45. Nicolls to Cochrane, August 12, 1814, CP, MS 2328; Cochrane to Hugh Pigot, June 9, 1814, Cochrane Papers, MS 2346; Edward Codrington to Mrs. Edward Codrington, June 7, 1814, Sir Edward Codrington Papers, COD/7/1, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; Cochrane to Admiralty, October 3, 1814, CP, MS 2348, fos. 86–87.
The War of 1812 holds a special place in American history. Some of the nation’s most powerful national icons emerged from this conflict: the national anthem and the glorification of “Old Glory,” Jackson at New Orleans and Perry at Lake Erie. The war created a generation of national leaders: Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Richard M. Johnson, and Winfield Scott. Yet the war itself is rarely discussed, except within terms of these national symbols. Almost completely forgotten is the humiliation of the burning of the nation’s capital and the generally abysmal performance of U.S. forces against smaller British contingents. To avoid explaining the disasters, historians often focus on the same set of iconic stories. Even defeats, such as the militia’s refusal to cross over into Canada to aid American troops pinned down by British regulars, are translated into principled actions in defense of Constitutional interpretation. Public memories become an invented tradition of heroism, while source documents from the war evidence a very different set of experiences.

The veterans of the War of 1812 found little worth reporting or remembering.1 Where those who had served in the American Revolution, no matter how briefly, could always find meaning in their service,2 the experience of war in the years 1811–14 seemed meaningless and boring. This variation in the structure of the experience of warfare does not mean that the War of 1812 was in some way even more pointless and dull than other wars; rather, it is to suggest that those who served during the War of 1812 seldom succeeded in placing that conflict in any sort of coherent narrative. The vast majority of those who served in the War of 1812 had no idea why the United States was at war with England or what the goal of their service in that war might have been, nor could they make much sense of their sacrifices. In this regard, it was a war like no other in American history, a war without meaning or even usable rhetoric.
About the Contributors

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