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How Britain won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812-1815

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William Dudley

Among the new books that have emerged coincident with the commemoration of the bicentennial of the War of 1812, Brian Arthur's *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockades of the United States, 1812-1815* is one that should win attention, both for its provocative title and its revelatory content. This is the most carefully researched book on the effectiveness of the British blockade of the United States during this conflict to have yet been published. Arthur demonstrates how a bold use of sea power, with its advantages of mobility and surprise, can be a very effective weapon.

One of the time-honored techniques of maritime warfare is the establishment of a blockade off an enemy's coast. It must be fairly clear that the nation which attempts a blockade must have sea control, at least in the immediate area of the conflict. The goals of naval blockade are to destroy or render useless an enemy's warships and to interfere with and preferably ruin that nation's seaborne commerce. The strategy of a sea blockade is two-fold. It assumes the blockading nation has sufficient naval vessels at hand to guard effectively the coast and its sea approaches. It does no good for a nation to declare a blockade it cannot or does not intend to enforce thoroughly. In application, it is designed to prevent or discourage an enemy's warships and merchant vessels from departing from or returning to a port. If rigorously applied, this strategy can throttle a nation's navy, trade, and damage its economy, thereby diminishing its resources and

undermining the morale of the enemy population. Depending on the number of ships available, the blockading nation may choose to establish a close or distant blockade or a combination of both if it has a sufficient number of ships.

Long before the War of 1812, the Anglo-Dutch wars provided a good example of what a blockade could do, with the Royal Navy's ships blockading the Dutch coast in 1653, thus creating havoc in the Dutch economy. The British blockade of the American coast during the American Revolution was somewhat less effective. The Royal Navy was obliged simultaneously to keep watch on the French fleet in the ports along the rock-strewn coasts of Normandy and Brittany, and in North America, to assist the British Army in amphibious operations. Both nations maintained ships to protect bases and trade in the West Indies. The Admiralty often lacked enough vessels to cover the American coastline thoroughly from Massachusetts to Georgia. A classic blockade was the British fleet's enduring and dangerous monitoring of French naval activities off the coast of Normandy, Brittany, and in the Bay of Biscay during the Napoleonic Wars, in addition to monitoring the naval base at Toulon on the French Mediterranean coast. This blockade was successful in preventing an invasion of the British Isles and bottled up French naval fleets and merchantmen, though it required keeping a large fleet in commission at great expense.

This prolonged conflict coincided with the onset of war between the United States and Britain. Given the great distance from Europe and the few regular troops Britain had in Canada, a naval blockade was essential in demonstrating to the United States that its government would pay a serious price for its declaration of war of 18 June 1812. During the first months of the war, the slender force of British Army and Canadian militia did well in repulsing the American military attacks and the US Navy, outnumbered though it was, had some stunning initial successes in single-ship actions. The British blockade under the command of Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren began to make itself felt in early 1813, and its impact increased thereafter, as the war in Europe came to an end and the Admiralty ordered its ships to reinforce the squadrons on the North American station. In August 1812, Admiral Warren's command had been united (expanded) to include all stations and commands from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland to Jamaica and the Leeward Islands, an area of vast extent. Complicating factors were the neutral trade as well as the British need for American grain and other goods to supply their armies in Portugal and Spain. The British consul in Boston was authorized to issue licenses to ship captains which allowed them to pass through the blockade. Until 1814, the Royal Navy allowed neutral vessels to enter Boston and New York in the hope of weaning the northeastern states away from their government at Washington.

Numerous historians have pointed to the damaging effects of the British blockade of the American coast during the War of 1812. Donald Hickey argues 'the British blockade had a deadly effect on the United States. Foreign trade dropped sharply and government revenue dried up ... the coasting trade became perilous, too, forcing American merchants to resort to overland transportation'.⁽¹⁾ The parlous American economy was thrown into chaos with prices soaring and unexpected shortages causing hardship. The Royal Navy's close blockade, particularly off the Middle Atlantic and New England coasts, forced the US Navy's commanders to use caution in dealing with the blockading vessels, which were usually either 74-gun ships or frigates operating in squadrons of two or more. During 1813 and 1814, the frigate *Constellation* was unable to leave its protected berth at Norfolk, and the frigates *United States* and *Macedonian* were bottled up in Long Island Sound by British warships hovering off Sandy Hook, Montauk Point, and Block Island. The frigate *Chesapeake* sortied from Boston harbor only to be captured by the frigate *Shannon* during a savage gun duel. The frigates *President*, *Constitution*, and *Congress* were occasionally able to escape from Boston through the blockade when conditions were favorable. In 1814, the sloop of war *Adams* escaped through the Chesapeake Capes blockade but only after a year's wait in the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay.

On the other hand, Wade G. Dudley (no relation) in *Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815* ⁽²⁾, attempted to establish that the blockade was quite ineffective in punishing the United States, pointing out areas where it was weakest, such as in the South and on the Gulf Coast. He remarked that, in 1814, 'the country as a whole was quite self-sufficient' no one starved, and the implements of war continued to be produced 'its government had little money, thanks to the tremendous expenses associate with warfare, Madison's embargo, and the blockade'. The blockade, he suggested, 'was

never the overwhelmingly successful operation painted by [Alfred Thayer] Mahan and numerous other historians?.

George Daughan's recent *1812: The Navy's War* (3) mentioned the naval blockade as an impediment to the US Navy but expends no effort to examine the British blockade's effectiveness in reducing the flow of trade, the lack of customs receipts, and the virtually bankrupt treasury which was forced rely on loans from its citizens to finance the war in its last two years.

In Arthur's book, we have a study that analyzes in detail the process of how the blockade was set up and to what degree it succeeded in grinding down the American war effort. Early in his account, Arthur poses a direct challenge to Wade Dudley's study about which he states "Dudley's conclusion that the British blockades [commercial and naval] of the United States were comparatively unsuccessful neither appraises their consequences nor bears close examination?". Arthur has garnered from Admiralty reports the numbers of American vessels captured, including name, rig and date of capture; the US Navy vessels blockaded, taken, or destroyed with date and place of the event; in other appendices, based on research in US historical statistics, we see lists and graphs of US imports, exports, customs revenues, the US national debt, rise and fall of various commodities' prices, wholesale prices, the yields of US direct taxes and internal excise duties, money supply and prices, net freight earnings, for the period, 1807-1815, and several other measures of American economic health during the war, as compared with the preceding period.

Through his careful scrutiny of these numbers, the author argues that British economic warfare had deprived the US government of the means of continuing the war into 1815. Dramatically lower customs receipts, a major source of government income, created budget deficits which forced the government to depend increasingly on public credit. The curtailing of American coastal trade meant that goods had to proceed to and from markets by land, taking more time and at greater expense. In Arthur's view, the result of all this was unemployment and currency inflation which created popular hardships and discontent with the war. The US Navy's few unblockaded frigates were unable to lift the British blockade and to prevent British amphibious landings. The number of American merchant ship owners willing to risk voyages declined sharply meaning there were far fewer vessels engaged in foreign trade. Most of this is no doubt true, and the year of 1814 was a dismal time from an economic point of view for most Americans.

But, paradoxically, this was a time of resurgence and renewal for the American military, who performed well in campaigns at Niagara and at Plattsburg, maintained control of Lake Erie, stood firm on Lake Ontario, and won a crucial battle on Lake Champlain. Despite British amphibious attacks on the shores of Chesapeake Bay, the burning of Washington and the ransoming of Alexandria, Baltimore's naval and militia defenders repulsed the British who withdrew quickly from the Chesapeake to shift their attention to New Orleans. The one major element Arthur does not seriously account for is American privateering enterprise, which was successful in both naval and financial terms, despite the blockade. Privateer owners were an interesting blend of profit-minded entrepreneurs and patriotic sea warriors. To license and hold them accountable, the government issued 517 commissions for privateer and letter of marque vessels, which captured 1,345 British prizes and inflicted an estimated \$45.5 million in damage on the British merchant fleet. The privateers sallied forth from Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Virginia, Louisiana, and Georgia. Indeed, many of the sailors who formerly had manned trading vessels signed on as privateersmen in major ports from Portsmouth to New Orleans. The large numbers of these swift-sailing, highly maneuverable schooners and brigs which slipped through the blockade, were a continuing irritation to the blockade commanders as they harried British convoys from the West Indies and took the war even to the chops of the Channel. Arthur minimizes the privateers' efforts as having little impact on Britain's aggregate overseas trade but whether by this he means global or North Atlantic trade he does not say. He balances the losses to privateers and American naval vessels by pointing out that the United States lost 1,407 merchantmen to the Royal Navy. But by this comparison, American privateers did fairly well.

There is much to recommend in this scholarly account of the British use of a naval and commercial blockade during the War of 1812. Arthur's use of historical statistics as an analytical tool is impressive and blends

well with his firm grasp of the Royal Navy's official correspondence in dealing with the North American Station. It is interesting to see that he does not condone the asperity with which Admiralty First Secretary John Wilson Croker treated Admiral Warren; indeed Arthur sympathizes with the admiral whose assignment was to guard a tremendous extent of coastline with a grudging allowance of vessels. Warren repeatedly asked for reinforcements to deal with the privateers which evaded his blockading vessels. His successor Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane received much more accommodating treatment from the Admiralty when the North American Station was re-divided into two separate commands and assigned more ships in 1814, following Warren's departure. For American scholars, this volume is one to be read, studied, and added to their bookshelves, for it fills a gap in the economic historiography of the War of 1812. The author did extensive research in primary and secondary sources in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Another flawed element is the title, which, whether it was the author's choice or that of the publisher, was bound to get the attention of American and Canadian readers. This book does not establish who 'won' the war, though it certainly explains well many of the difficulties the United States endured in not 'losing' the war.

Notes

1. Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Chicago, IL, 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Wade G. Dudley, *Splintering the Wooden Wall: The British Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815* (Annapolis, MD, 2003).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. George Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York, NY, 2011).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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