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THE FOG AND FRICTION OF FRONTIER WAR:  
THE ROLE OF LOGISTICS IN  
AMERICAN OFFENSIVE FAILURE  
DURING THE WAR OF 1812

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THE theme of American offensive defeat has been a pervasive and enduring one in military historiography of the War of 1812, for American armed forces failed to accomplish their overriding strategic mission of conquering British North America.<sup>1</sup> To some extent another theme has counterbalanced it: American pride and honor were snatched from the jaws of defeat through the limited successes of William Henry Harrison and Oliver Hazard Perry in the Old Northwest, Andrew Jackson's defeat of the Indians in the Old Southwest, a few dramatic tactical victories on land and the high seas, and the defensive victories that came at the end of the war at Baltimore, Plattsburg, and New Orleans. Nevertheless, Americans did fail to conquer Canada; and in the attempt to explain it military historians have suggested at least five major military causes of offensive defeat. First, Americans were so strategically ignorant they did not clearly recognize those geographical points in Canada which would have been most strategically efficacious; consequently, they attacked the wrong places. Second, American wartime leadership was incompetent, especially in the theater of war and on the field of battle. Third, Americans put excessive reliance on citizen militia and volunteers, as opposed to well-trained regulars. Fourth, Americans lacked adequate logistical capability. Fifth, the British and Canadians made a small but effective defensive effort.<sup>2</sup>

The charge that Americans were strategically ignorant rests on the assertion that they did not appreciate the relatively greater strategic and logistic importance of Northeastern, as compared with Northwestern, targets of invasion. As J. F. C. Fuller put it, Americans "had overlooked the fact that the his-

toric front door to Canada was to be found on Lake Champlain and not at Detroit or Niagara." From this point of view the problem of conquering Canada was metaphorically similar to the hewing of a tree whose trunk was the St. Lawrence River, for Upper and Lower Canada depended for their defense on the flow of men and supplies that came upriver from Montreal and Quebec. "The best strategy," according to Harry L. Coles, "would have been to concentrate on severing the trunk as near the roots as possible. . . . The taking of Montreal . . . would have assured the fall of all that lay above."<sup>3</sup>

There is abundant evidence, however, that Americans were very much aware of the relative importance and promise of Northeastern Canadian objectives. The plan of invasion for the year 1812, for instance, which many historians have taken as a prime example of the allegedly unfortunate American propensity to squander resources and energy in the Northwest, did in fact look to the capture of Montreal and ultimately Quebec. On paper at least it was a unified plan with interrelated parts, calling for four simultaneous offensives. Major attacks were to be aimed at Montreal in the East and Fort Malden in the West; in the center, minor, diversionary, holding attacks were to be directed against Kingston and the Niagara peninsula on either end of Lake Ontario. The plan failed; but as President James Madison reminded Major General Henry Dearborn, these "simultaneous invasions of Canada at several points, particularly in relation to Malden and Montreal, might have secured the object of bringing all Upper Canada and the channels communicating with the Indians under our command, with ulterior prospects towards Quebec." Explaining the plan to Thomas Jefferson, he wrote: "It would probably have been best, if it had been practicable in time, to have concentrated a force which could have seized on Montreal & thus at one stroke have secured the upper Province and cut off the sap that nourished Indian hostilities. But this could not be attempted without sacrificing the Western & N.W. Frontier." Thus, the purpose of Brigadier General William Hull's offensive was primarily to defend the Northwest against the "inundation of savages under the influence of the British establishment near Detroit. Another reason . . . was that the unanimity and ardor of Kentucky & Ohio [militia] promised the requisite force at once for that service, whilst it

was too distant from the other points to be assailed."<sup>4</sup> In 1812 and in subsequent years Americans were not oblivious to the strategic advantage of concentrating their effort against Montreal. But in the circumstances of the time they felt they had to take other strategic, political, logistical, and manpower considerations into account while choosing their targets and implementing their plans.

If in fact it can be said that Americans attacked the wrong places, it was not because they lacked the ability to identify military objectives.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it was because they lacked either the ability to attack them, or, if attacking, the ability to capture, hold, and exploit them. In what did this inability consist? Unfortunately, the best answer that can be gleaned from the history books is what is left when the above first cause is removed: offensive failure was due to some combination of all the other causes—incompetent leadership, unreliable militia, poor logistic capability, and British/Canadian resistance. In their predominantly narrative accounts, historians have rarely attempted to explain in any systematic, analytic way the nature of the relationships between and the impact of these contributory causes of offensive defeat.<sup>6</sup> Logistics, of all the causes, has probably received the least scrutiny, for historical narratives usually focus on leadership, tactics, and strategy. Those historians who have paid it some attention have tended to view its delimiting impact on strategy narrowly, as simply a matter of excessive supply costs in the face of chronic specie scarcity, or as a question of naval superiority on the Great Lakes, etc. But if understood as the administrative and transportation means by which the armed forces were supplied with subsistence and materiel in order to accomplish their strategic and tactical aims, logistics played a more complex and significant role in American offensive defeat.<sup>7</sup> Americans were attempting to wage an offensive war on a thousand mile frontier, directing and supplying it from coastal towns several hundred miles away during the pre-industrial, pre-railroad, pre-telegraph era. Their administrative and transportation systems, operating across long distances over poor roads through wilderness areas, severely limited their ability to support armies on the northern frontier that were large and powerful enough to overcome the inherent advantages of defensive warfare. This logistic delimitation was probably the

most important—though not the only—contributory cause of American offensive failure.

As Leonard D. White noted in his monumental study of Jeffersonian administration: "Given the state of the means of communication from 1800 to 1830, it may be doubted whether it would have been physically possible to mount an effective campaign on any substantial scale. Even where integrity, good will, and harmony of purpose prevailed, nature, not yet subdued by man, interposed stupendous obstacles." But this was only a tangential remark, one which White did not analyze. Even though he recognized that overland communication was a "fundamental handicap" to effective management of offensive war, he failed to explore its functional interrelationships with command and administration. Instead, he focused his attention on the incapacity of leaders, the weakness of administrative doctrine, and the structural anomalies of the administrative system. "Apart from the incapacity of men," he argued, "it was the lack of system and comprehension of the function of top executives and commanding officers in a military situation that is impressed upon the mind." Not one of the top leaders, including the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, and the generals, "performed correctly the function which his office imposed upon him. No one had . . . a reasoned conception of function and duty that would have provided an intelligent means of coping with the emergency."<sup>8</sup>

White also pointed an accusing finger at the organizational deficiencies of the administrative system itself, especially as they related to supply. The key element in the system was the Secretary of War, for the person holding the office was both the army's chief supply officer and its chief strategist. He was both by default, there being no military chief of the administrative, or "housekeeping," staff and no general-in-chief as there had been during the Revolution. The dual nature of the office held out the possibility of successfully coordinating strategy and logistics, but unfortunately for the Americans there were certain statutory and structural weaknesses in the command and administrative system which hampered the secretary in performing his dual role. As White pointed out, he was overburdened with routine administrative duties while lacking sufficient administrative and clerical assistance to free him for more important duties. In addition, he had to cope

with such functional incongruities as the overlapping of Quartermaster General and Commissary General responsibilities, which in effect meant that he, the Secretary of War, had the onerous and fallible task of specifying the kinds of supplies purchased by each department in the varying circumstances at the frontier areas. When Congress enacted a new law creating an administrative general staff of the army in March 1813, the act also eliminated the confusing language which had led to the duplication of quartermaster and commissary functions. However, the overall logistical impact of the reform was negligible, because the disunified, decentralized general staff did not serve to coordinate the activities of the many subordinate staff officers throughout the country, most notably those of the assistant quartermasters and commissaries. By default that task also remained the direct responsibility of the Secretary of War.<sup>9</sup>

Without doubt these onerous, routine administrative duties adversely affected the performance of the secretary as chief supply officer and chief strategist. They were probably not as important, however, as those problems which White did not examine, those which resulted from the simple fact that the secretary resided in Washington, D. C.; and the campaigns were fought hundreds of miles away. One of the most serious difficulties sheer distance presented was the inevitable lag in communications between the secretary in Washington and his generals in the field, for even under the best of circumstances it could take a letter between one and two weeks to cross the distance between the capital and the frontier. On 18 June 1812 Secretary of War William Eustis compounded the problem when he sent notification of the declaration of war to General Hull through the regular mail service. Hull's army was then plodding through the northern Ohio wilderness toward Detroit. The letter finally arrived at Hull's camp on the Maumee River on 2 July, one day too late to prevent disaster. On 1 July Hull had sent his heavy baggage, medical supplies, and official papers to Detroit on the unarmed schooner *Cuyahoga*. The British, having learned of the declaration of war earlier, snapped up the *Cuyahoga* as it sailed past Fort Malden. It was the first in a series of blows that, several weeks later, would persuade Hull to surrender; but it was not an unusual occurrence in this frontier war.<sup>10</sup>

The delays incurred in communicating orders, intelligence, and supply requests across long distances was a circumstance that enveloped Americans in what Karl von Clausewitz called the "fog of war"—that twilight of uncertainty and ignorance about the data of war which "gives to things exaggerated dimension and unnatural appearance."<sup>11</sup> Usually applied to uncertainty about enemy strength and intentions in operational situations, the "fog of war" concept is also useful for interpreting the uncertainty and ignorance of Americans toward their own activities in command and administrative situations. The Secretary of War was often in the dark about the movements and intentions of his own commanders as well as those of the British. On the other hand, commanders who required the cooperation of the secretary and of other frontier commanders, or who needed the swift clarification of orders, were often in a fog about what assistance they could expect and about what to do in a particular situation. One of the most ludicrous examples of this form of the fog of war occurred in February and March of 1814 on the New York frontier. Major-General Jacob Brown, misinterpreting Secretary of War John Armstrong's confusingly written orders—which in turn had been based on faulty information—marched his Left Division 250 miles from Sackets Harbor to Buffalo. It was definitely not what Armstrong had wanted him to do. Ultimately, though, Brown's mistaken but irrevocable march resulted in a Cabinet decision to direct the major American offensive for that year toward the Niagara peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

The military district system of command—a system in which major generals responsible only to the Secretary of War commanded the nine military districts of the country—further complicated the problem of the fog of war.<sup>13</sup> Offensives on the northern frontier usually required the cooperation of commanders in District No. 8 (Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri) and District No. 9 (northern New York and Vermont). But cooperation depended on the ability of the secretary to coordinate their efforts—to see to the timely launching of attacks or the shifting of troops, supplies, and means of transportation from one district to another. Given the state of communications, it was a system that frequently broke down. It discouraged field commanders, retarded expeditious action, prevented appropriate responses to the ebb and

flow of events, and precluded cooperation between districts. In 1812, British Major General Isaac Brock found the task of defeating Hull's offensive eased when Americans were unable to coordinate their attack in the Northwest with their attacks in New York. James Wilkinson and Wade Hampton's abortive combined offensive from northern New York against Montreal in 1813 was a notorious case of command confusion, lack of cooperation between commanders and the secretary, and resulting logistical breakdown.<sup>14</sup> Problems could originate at the district commander's end of the chain of command, too, because he might feel that circumstances warranted a change in plans, a privilege he could claim on the basis of immediate knowledge of the situation. However necessary or significant a change was, the decision, because of communications lag, was irreversible and could result in altering previously determined strategy. One of the more momentous of such changes in strategy was Dearborn's decision in April 1813 to attack York, a secondary objective, instead of Kingston, a primary objective. But in this case all was not lost, because the Americans succeeded in destroying the ammunition, guns, and naval stores destined for Robert H. Barclay's British fleet on Lake Erie. The British shortage of heavy guns in the battle of Lake Erie later in the year was one of the major causes of Barclay's defeat, finally making possible the American reconquest of Detroit and capture of Fort Malden.<sup>15</sup>

The absence of army-navy unity of command also contributed to the fog of war. Cooperation between military and naval commanders on the northern frontier and Great Lakes depended upon a complicated four-way correspondence between themselves and the Secretaries of War and Navy.<sup>16</sup> While it was often cordial, it also proved unsatisfactory and sometimes disastrous. General Brown, who planned to invade the Niagara peninsula in 1814 and link up with forces stationed in Detroit, required the logistical assistance of the Lake Erie fleet. But to his dismay he learned at the last moment that the navy had decided to withdraw from the operation in order to attack a small British naval post in Lake Huron, whose size and importance had been exaggerated by espionage reports. For Brown it was the first of a series of naval disappointments.<sup>17</sup>

The fog of war was only one of the afflictions of the command and administrative system. Another was the "friction of war." "All appears so simple . . . in War," Clausewitz explained, "but the simplest thing is difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction. . . . Through the influence of an infinity of petty circumstances, which cannot properly be described on paper, things disappoint us, and we fall short of the mark."<sup>18</sup> The friction of war made its effect felt most keenly in the area of supply. In theory, once the government decided upon a particular plan of campaign, the Secretary of War could issue orders to the Commissary General in Philadelphia to prepare sufficient amounts of clothing, hospital stores, camp equipage, guns, powder, and ammunition. He could instruct the contractor to make deposits of food at convenient depots in the district. Orders could be sent to the assistant quartermasters to transport the materiel to the appropriate points on the frontier, to construct barracks for the troops, and to prepare means of transportation for the offensive. But the system never worked in reality as it was supposed to in theory. Clothing might not be ready on schedule; supplies could be lost along the way through theft, damage, or careless bookkeeping; wagons could break down without the necessary tools on hand to repair them; materials for constructing barracks might not be immediately available. The contractor or an assistant quartermaster might require additional funds, because the cost of supplies and food had been underestimated or prices had risen. Moreover, they might require scarce specie because some banks would not accept Treasury notes or drafts on the Secretary of War. Until the funds were provided, delay in supplying the army could force a change in plans, and a change in plans could cause further delay. Only the general could know how many wagons or boats would be required for the campaign, but they might not be obtainable because the secretary had not authorized their purchase. On the other hand the general might not know how many wagons or boats were required because he did not know how many troops he would receive.

Friction—or things going wrong—occurs in all wars. For the Americans in the War of 1812, however, administrative malfunctioning, complicated by the fog of war, made it all the more difficult to cope with. One of the results was supply

shortage. Only a modicum of supplies and shelter may have been necessary to initiate preparations for a campaign; but serious shortages retarded recruiting, delayed mobilization, adversely affected the health and morale of troops, and ruined offensives.<sup>19</sup> During the winter of 1812-1813, four hundred men died of pneumonia at Greenbush, New York, because of inadequate shelter, fuel, clothing, and medical care. In November 1814 General Brown complained that "five men have perished by disease to one who has fallen by the sword," mainly because of the "infamous" quality of clothing and shoes and because winter clothing always arrived on the frontier in the dead of winter rather than in the fall. In northwestern Ohio in November 1812 General William Henry Harrison postponed his anticipated advance upon Detroit until he could accumulate more rations and supplies. But during the ensuing winter his troops continued to be ill-housed, poorly clothed, inadequately fed, and generally short of all supplies—despite vast expenditures of money and laborious effort. Under the circumstances Secretary of War Armstrong had little choice in the spring but to order Harrison to halt his attempts to retake Detroit by land and to wait for Commander Oliver Perry to gain control of Lake Erie.<sup>20</sup>

Human error, incompetence, administrative dysfunction, the lag in communications, the fog of war—all these things helped create logistical friction. But probably the most important cause, as Erna Risch insists, was simply the supreme difficulty of transporting supplies. "The great defect," lamented General Harrison, "is in the means of transportation." Most manufactured military goods had to be procured from the older cities and towns near the Atlantic coast. When practicable, these were transported by river; but most of the materiel was carried overland from the littoral to and through the trans-Appalachian frontier on roads and traces that left much to be desired, those nearest the frontier being the worst of all.<sup>21</sup> Traveling long distances, supply trains encountered the inevitable friction of war; and progress by heavily loaded wagons and packhorses was extremely slow.<sup>22</sup> Among the transportation sources of friction were terrible road conditions, bad weather, accidents and injuries, shortages of medical supplies and repair parts, and scarcity of local sources of food and forage.

The experience of Assistant Quartermaster Captain Joseph Wheaton illustrated the problems encountered by other quartermasters. Wheaton's supply train of 37 wagons, 8 gun carriages, 2 "travelling Forges," and 304 horses left Pittsburgh on 22 November 1812, bound for Harrison's headquarters and forward supply base at Upper Sandusky, Ohio, over 250 miles away. Rain, hail, snow, "extreme deep roads, bad bridges, and worse crossings, with the addition of frozen ground" slowed his pace to six miles per day and forced the caravan to stop frequently for reshoeing of horses and repairing of wheels, axles, and axletrees. On 8 December Wheaton halted the march at Canton, Ohio; for the train had used up its supply of food, forage, horseshoes, nails, axles, axletrees, and chains. Bureaucratic red tape and stock shortages at Pittsburgh had prevented Wheaton from taking all of the repair parts he needed. Eight blacksmiths and four wagonmasters worked around the clock to make the necessary parts and repairs, but some of the parts and all of the food and forage had to be purchased in the neighborhood. "With the road swept of provisions of every kind by those who have gone before me and by some whose wanton conduct has set an example," he wrote the Secretary of War, the price of every item had risen enormously.

One week later the train finally left Canton. Fourteen miles down the road one of the teamsters caught his leg between a wagon wheel and a tree, stripping skin and flesh from his thigh. Leaving the train, Wheaton brought the injured man back to Canton for treatment; and he and a physician worked through the night to mend the wound as best they could. In the meantime, "pioneers" from the Pennsylvania militia detachment accompanying the train had to cut a new road for twelve miles, part of the state road having been found impassable. On 19 December, thirty miles through "mud and mire" from Canton, Wheaton's train stopped for a full day at Wooster to make the usual repairs.

On 27 December Wheaton reached Mansfield, fifty miles from his ultimate destination. He spent three days making more repairs and procuring corn from the Mohican River settlement, eighteen miles off the main road. En route from Canton, Wheaton had bought and hired additional teams of horses and oxen in order to collect the public stores that the

Quartermaster's Department had previously deposited in depots scattered along the route. The animals, who now numbered 690 horses and 15 oxen, were consuming huge amounts of hay and corn; and nearly one-third of the horses were needed to carry forage alone. Wheaton expected to arrive at Upper Sandusky in another week or less, and despite tribulations and delays—or perhaps because of them—he was pleased with his progress. He had made the journey from Pittsburgh to Mansfield in only thirty-six days, while other quartermasters had averaged sixty-two.<sup>21</sup>

Transportation problems not only restricted the speed and volume of supply but raised the cost of supply to enormous sums. According to one oft-quoted source, Balthasar H. Meyer, the government paid from \$1,100 to \$1,600 to transport each cannon sent from the Atlantic coast to Lake Erie in 1813. The \$400 cost of transporting one cannon to the Niagara front in 1814 was less, but it nevertheless matched the original cost of the piece and was a sum greater than the cost of transporting one cannon across the Atlantic from Liverpool, England. Transportation expenses also helped raise the price of food and forage. On the Detroit frontier in 1813, pork was \$127 per barrel, flour was \$100 per barrel, and oats were \$60 per bushel.<sup>24</sup> The specie shortage caused a costly form of inflation as some merchants accepted Treasury notes, drafts on the Secretary of War, and bank notes only at discount. However, had more specie been available to the government and its agents, the cost of supply would still have been great, because of the cost of feeding transport animals, the increased demand for scarce frontier agricultural products, the loss of supplies and animals en route to their destination, the practice of hiring civilian teamsters, wagons, horses, and oxen, and the one-way traffic exchange.<sup>26</sup> Given inherently great transportation costs, the tenuous financial condition of the government simply caused additional costs and delays in delivering supplies.

It was, nevertheless, still possible to transport supplies over the long land routes from the littoral to the frontier, as from Philadelphia via Pittsburgh to Upper Sandusky, because supply trains could resort to local, albeit scarce, sources of forage until they reached the forward supply bases near the northern frontier.<sup>27</sup> But the resort to reliable, adequate local sources of

forage was not possible on the frontier itself. Literally the advanced region of settlement and civilization facing a hostile power, the "northern frontier" was an apt contemporary title for the theater of operations. With only six persons on the average per square mile in a fifty to one-hundred mile band of territory along the border, it was impossible for an army to live off the countryside in the Napoleonic manner.<sup>28</sup> Armies deployed on the Canadian border had to be supplied from the forward bases, which were at least fifty to one-hundred miles away in southern Ohio, western Pennsylvania, central New York, and Vermont. Much of this region itself contained only two to six persons per square mile, but there were several sections with as many as eighteen and more: northern Vermont and the Connecticut River valley; wedges of settlement from Albany to the Genesee country in western New York and north along Lake Champlain; southwestern Pennsylvania at the Forks of the Ohio; and a wide strip of territory in southern Ohio along the Ohio River. Although these were still pioneer areas, much of the army's food could be procured from them.<sup>29</sup>

On the frontier, however, the inherent disadvantages of a subsistence system of supply trains and depots employing animal drawn vehicles were magnified. Transportation costs were greater, even over short distances; and they rose geometrically as the distance from the base increased, since each vehicle had to return to base after delivering a cargo of supplies, and extra food and forage had to be carried for the logistics personnel and animals. Horses fed only on grain and hay; and even though oxen could forage in fields and woods, they could not rely on a wild food supply. Ox-drivers, moreover, were scarce and expensive. From its base of supply, an army could be effectively provisioned at a maximum distance of about ninety miles, or six to seven days by wagon at an optimistically average pace of fifteen miles per day. If packhorses had to be resorted to because of poor road conditions or a shortage of wagons and teamsters, then the effective operational distance might be reduced by as much as two-thirds, to thirty miles. If the army advanced and the distance and the time required to supply it increased, then so did the need for more wagons, horses, and teamsters. Eventually, however, the wagons or the packhorses would have to carry more forage for the teams than flour and other supplies for the troops. This

point would be reached at a distance of about 135 miles from base using wagons and 45 miles using packhorses, whereupon the possibility of supplying the army would be practically eliminated. Even at shorter distances, the hundreds of wagons, horses, and oxen required to maintain an army for any length of time were often unobtainable on the frontier, either because of unavailability or excessive cost.<sup>30</sup> The establishment of food storage depots along the supply route in advance of forward bases was an expensive, difficult, and only partially effective expedient. In northern Ohio by as early as the end of 1812, for example, grain was so scarce that quartermasters had to make purchases south of Chillicothe in order to place deposits 120 miles away at the forward base of Upper Sandusky, which was another 120 miles or so from Detroit. On the northern New York front the northernmost depot was Plattsburgh, about twenty miles south of the Canadian border and almost eighty miles north of the forward supply base of Whitehall. As General Hampton discovered in November 1813, forage was non-existent between Plattsburgh and the border, and roads could not support wheeled traffic during wet seasons. Supplies could only be moved on soldiers' backs.<sup>31</sup> Despite forage scarcity on the Niagara front, relatively better road conditions and relatively high agricultural productivity in central and western New York in 1814 made it possible to store food and forage in depots between the Genesee River forward bases and the Niagara River frontier and, therefore, to support the army at Buffalo. But forage scarcity and other overland transportation difficulties delayed or prevented the transport of clothing and cannon from eastern New York.<sup>32</sup>

All of this meant that the limit of advance for an American army relying on overland supply was roughly the Canadian border or a short distance beyond it. Even had more specie and more recruits been available, overland transportation alone would have caused serious problems and certainly limited the size of armies and their mobility on the frontier.

To attempt to conduct an offensive under these conditions, moreover, created tremendous planning problems. As one contractor explained to Secretary of War Armstrong, depots or magazines had to be established and stocked well in advance along the route of march "in places best calculated for

the accumulation of the surrounding country, whilst at the same time they should possess the advantages of water communication to such points as the army may concentrate" from time to time. Planners had to take into consideration the contemplated size of the army, the duration of the campaign, the amount of local food supplies that might be available in friendly or enemy territory, and the time of the year when roads would be impassable and water routes blocked by ice. With this information the general and the contractor could decide where to purchase flour and meat and where to establish depots, and determine whether it would be possible to supply the army. Too often, however, such careful planning was not done. In fact, the government usually decided upon plans of campaign so late in the year that contractors had to buy victuals when they were in great demand and prices had already risen.<sup>33</sup> And besides subsistence the army had to transport its ordnance, ammunition, medicine, extra muskets, and the rest of the impedimenta.

The army's inability to forage on the march and its dependence on supply from bases and depots in the rear limited its size, reduced its speed and mobility, confined it to specific and vulnerable lines of operation, forced it to advance on a narrow front, and eliminated the possibility of substantial penetration. This was why Henri Jomini pointed out that "from a military point of view the offensive has its . . . bad sides."<sup>34</sup> Unless the invader could reduce his supply train by using water transportation, invasion might be out of the question, or if attempted, doomed to failure. Only naval superiority on the Great Lakes held out the chance of turning the tables. With it one could concentrate troops and supplies faster at critical points in all seasons except midwinter, communicate with distant posts more speedily, threaten the enemy's land line of communications and supply depots near the shore, and, perhaps more important, force the enemy to move by land. Without naval superiority on the lakes, the Duke of Wellington observed, "it is impossible . . . to maintain an army in such a situation as to keep the enemy out of the whole frontier, much less to make conquest."<sup>35</sup> In 1812 the Americans' lack of foresight gave the British temporary and tenuous superiority on the lakes, which Brock used to great advantage in defeating the Americans at Detroit and Niagara. The Americans finally

gained control of Lake Erie in late 1813, making possible Harrison's reconquest of Detroit; but on the other lakes the balance of power alternated indecisively.

Both belligerents in the struggle learned, however, that the supplies required for naval construction created their own logistic problems, which might detract from the army's effort.<sup>36</sup> In addition, naval superiority was not in itself a complete solution to the problem of supplying an offensive against a determined defender. The navy must not only maintain supremacy on its particular lake, but also supply the army. The army would still depend on overland supply from the hinterland to the port of embarkation and from the port of disembarkation into enemy territory. Continued American control of Lake Erie after Harrison's victory on the Thames River did not in itself permit them to extend their conquests through the Upper Canadian peninsula. By the spring of 1814 the Americans could only manage to support about 1,600 men at and around Detroit. Because of sickness, the effective force was about 800; and because of provisions shortages, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Butler occasionally had to send foraging expeditions deep into Upper Canada to supplement the ration.<sup>37</sup>

It is from the perspective of logistical fog and friction that American leadership and troop performance must be judged. "In all military operations, we must, as you know," Secretary Armstrong wrote, "begin with the belly."<sup>38</sup> Granted, there were defeats attributable mainly to the mistakes or incompetence of leaders, or to ill-trained, unwilling militia, volunteers, and even regulars. When it came to offensive warfare at least, no one, from the President to the common soldier, seemed to possess a sufficient quantity of that quality White described as "a reasoned conception of function and duty" and Clausewitz called "character"—the mental strength, moral power, and force of will needed at decisive moments to dominate intelligently whatever event or crisis emerged.<sup>39</sup> But perhaps there are times when the obstacles people encounter cannot be overcome by any amount of character, especially in the face of determined enemy resistance. It is worth noting that the British, who are generally credited with having better leaders and troops, also failed to achieve offensive victory when, having accumulated numerical and qualitative troop preponderance in some areas, they moved to the attack in



1814. Each campaign must be analyzed on its own specific merits. But in the view of the war as a whole perhaps the best overall explanation for American offensive defeat is that they had, from the start, ambitiously reached for all of Canada without the wherewithal to take and permanently hold any part of it.<sup>40</sup> Fighting a war that had resulted from the complex conflicts of the Age of Democratic Revolution, they nevertheless lacked the revolutionary striking and staying power of mass armies and steam propulsion. All they—or the British—could do was manage to fight an ineffectual border, frontier war with a few thousand militia and regular soldiers and sailors supplied by beasts of burden. "Nature, not yet subdued by man, interposed stupendous obstacles."<sup>41</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Despite historiographic disagreement about whether the conquest of Canada was a cause or a political goal of the war, there is virtual unanimous agreement that conquest of Canada was the main strategic objective. Americans used the word "Canada" to refer at different times to Upper and Lower Canada as well as to all of British North America. Although the words "strategy" and "logistics" were not part of the era's vocabulary, military leaders of necessity observed the concepts.

<sup>2</sup>This list, which for practical purposes includes only the direct military related causes, not the "underlying" social, economic, political, or ideological causes, is based on a reading of many or most of the major and minor histories of the War of 1812. For good published bibliographies, see: Harry L. Coles, *The War of 1812* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972); and Morris Zaslowsky, ed., *The Defended Border: Upper Canada and the War of 1812* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1964).

<sup>3</sup>J. F. C. Fuller, *The Decisive Battles of the United States* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1942), p. 81; Coles, *War of 1812*, p. 43, and see pp. 107, 111, 136, 143-144, 163, 241, 258-262. Similar criticism of American strategy may be found in these representative works: Henry Adams, *History of the United States during the Administrations of James Madison* (1889-91; rpt. Bks. V-IX in 2 vols. New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1930), Bk. VI, pp. 317, 338, Bk. VII, pp. 144-147, Bk. VIII, pp. 91, 93, 99-102; Irving Brant, *James Madison: Commander in Chief, VI* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1961), 46; J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 240-241; Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (1905; rpt. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1919), I, 304-313, II, 29; C. P. Stacey, "An American Plan for a Canadian Campaign," *American Historical Review*, 46 (1941), 348-358.

<sup>4</sup>Madison to Jefferson, 17 August 1812, Madison to Dearborn, 9 August 1812. *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), VIII, 211, 206. Other contributors to the plan were Albert Gallatin, John Armstrong, William Hull, Henry Dearborn, and William Eustis.

Henry Adams, ed., *The Writings of Albert Gallatin* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1879), I, 340-353; John Armstrong, *Notices of the War of 1812* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1840), I, 236-237; *Report of the Trial of Brig. General William Hull*, taken by Lt. Col. Forbes (New York: Eastburn, Kirk, 1814), pp. 27-36; H. A. S. Dearborn, *Defence of Gen. Henry Dearborn* (Boston: E. W. Davies, 1824), p. 3; Eustis to Hull, 24 June 1812, Eustis to Dearborn, 9 April, 26 June 1812, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Letters Sent (Military Books), Record Group 107, National Archives.

<sup>5</sup>It is highly speculative whether Montreal was indeed the best target. To seize it Americans would have needed to: (1) control Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River; (2) overcome many natural and military obstacles south of Montreal in a wilderness area; (3) besiege Montreal; (4) out-concentrate the British at the very heart of their defensive system; (5) defend Montreal against counterattack. New England's lukewarm support for the war only added to these inherent difficulties. For a British view, see Frederick DeGaulle, "Memoir on the Places Which Ought to be Fortified for the Defence of Lower Canada, June 1, 1815," (F) Military and Naval Figures, Nineteenth Century Pre-Confederation Papers, MS. Group 24, Public Archives of Canada. For a description of British strategy, which stressed the defense of Montreal at the expense of everything else to the west, see: A. M. J. Hyatt, "The Defence of Upper Canada in 1812," Thesis Queen's University 1961, pp. 24-29; Hitsman, *Incredible War of 1812*, pp. 243-249; Hitsman, "Sir George Prevost's Conduct of the Canadian War of 1812," *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1962), pp. 34-43; John K. Mahon, "British Command Decisions in the Northern Campaigns of the War of 1812," *Canadian Historical Review*, 56 (1965), 219-237. Perhaps it would have been best for the Americans to have concentrated on taking Kingston and territory to the west, for they could transport men and supplies easier to the west. Much depends on whether it was American policy to take all or part of British North America. When Gallatin suggested a limited western offensive in 1812, the idea was rejected. Gallatin, "Agenda," n.d. [ca. 12 July 1812], Madison Papers, Ser. 2.

<sup>6</sup>The narrative tradition continues in recent works. See, e.g., Reginald Horsman, *The War of 1812* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969) and Mahon, *War of 1812*, especially p. vii. For a critique of the narrative tradition in military history, see John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).

<sup>7</sup>Breton Greenhous, "A Note on Western Logistics in the War of 1812," *Military Affairs*, 34 (1970), 41-44; Mahan, *Sea Power*, passim; for a good discussion of the meaning of logistics, see Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1940-1943, Ser. 1, Vol. IV of The United States Army in World War II*, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1955), 3-17.

<sup>8</sup>Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951), pp. 215, 216, 222-223.

<sup>9</sup>White, *The Jeffersonians*, Chs. xv, xvii. See also Erna Risch, *Quarter-master Support of the Army: A History of the Corps, 1775-1939* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), pp. 141-142.

<sup>10</sup>Alec R. Gilpin, *The War of 1812 in the Old Northwest* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 52-54; Milo Quaife, "General Hull and His Critics," *Ohio State Archeological and Historical Quarterly*, 47 (1938), 168-182; Mahon, *War of 1812*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham (1873; rpt. London: Lowe & Brydone, 1966), I, 106, 48-49, 75-76. Michael Howard and Peter Paret translated this passage somewhat differently. (*On War*, ed. and trans. Howard and Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 140.

<sup>11</sup>Jeffrey P. Kimball, "The Battle of Chippawa: Infantry Tactics in the War of 1812," *Military Affairs*, 31 (1967-68), 169-186.

<sup>12</sup>Some contemporaries and some historians suggested that the problems resulting from geographical distribution of command might have been alleviated through the creation of the post of general-in-chief. But anti-military suspicions and personal rivalry between Armstrong and James Monroe prevented the creation of such a post. Brant, *Madison*, VI, 166, 226; Harry Ammon, James Monroe: *The Quest for National Identity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 313-327. Even with this office, the problems of communicating between district commanders and the general-in-chief, on the one hand, and between the general-in-chief and Washington and other coastal cities, on the other, would have been as great as the problems of the existing system.

<sup>13</sup>Madison to Armstrong, 3 August 1814, Letters and Other Writings of James Madison (New York: R. Worthington, 1884), III, 417-419; Mahon, *War of 1812*, pp. 202-215.

<sup>14</sup>C. P. Stacey, "Another Look at the Battle of Lake Erie," *Canadian Historical Review*, 39 (1958), 41-51.

<sup>15</sup>See White, *The Jeffersonians*, Chap. xix, for naval administration.

<sup>16</sup>John Sinclair to William Jones, 19, 27 May 1814, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy (Captains' Letters), RG 45, National Archives; Armstrong to Brown, 10 June 1814, Military Books, RG 107.

<sup>17</sup>Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Graham I, 77-78. Cf. *On War*, trans. Howard and Paret, p. 119.

<sup>18</sup>Marguerite M. McKee concluded that there was never a time when the defeat or failure of a campaign could be entirely blamed on supply shortages. Following the lead of Emory Upton, she blamed failure on incompetent generalship and overreliance on militia. But this was an unwarranted conclusion and reflected an overly narrow conception of logistics. "Service of Supply in the War of 1812" (4th Paper), *Quartermaster Review*, 7 (1927), 32.

<sup>19</sup>Dearborn to Morgan Lewis, December [?] 1812 (ltr. 180). Dearborn to Lewis, 3 September 1812 (ltr. 65); Dearborn to Eustis, 24 November 1812 (ltr. 107). Letters and Orders of General Dearborn, Letterbook No. 2, New York Historical Society. See also, James Mann, *Medical Sketches of the Campaigns of 1812*, 13, 14 (Dedham, Massachusetts: H. Mann & Co., 1816); Brown to Secretary of War (SW), 29 November 1814, Registered Letters Received, RG 107, National Archives; Harrison to SW, 15 November 1812, in *Governors Messages and Letters: Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, ed. Logan Esarey, II (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 213; Risch, *Quartermaster Support*, pp. 171-172. Cf. Mahon, *War of 1812*, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup>Risch, *Quartermaster Support*, p. 162; Harrison to SW, 15 November 1812, *Messages and Letters of Harrison*, ed. Esarey, II, 212; Curtis P. Nettels, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775-1815* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), pp. 270-283; Trench Cox, "Digest of Manufactures," *American State Papers: Finance* (Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1832), II, 666-612. In a very few of these cases transportation was by steamboat.

<sup>21</sup>For overland transportation, the following published sources were especially useful: *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, I; *American State Papers: Miscellaneous*, I; C. P. T. Glazebrook, *A History of Transportation in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938); Oliver W. Holmes, *Conquering the Wilderness*, Vol. V of *History of the State of New York*, ed. Alexander C. Flick (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1934); John Melish, *Military and Topographical Atlas of the United States* (Philadelphia: J. Melish, 1815); Balthezar

H. Meyer, Caroline E. MacGill, et al., *History of Transportation in the United States before 1860* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1917); Nettels, *National Economy*; Charles O. Paullin, ed., *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Washington and New York: Carnegie Institution and American Geographical Society, 1932).

<sup>22</sup>Wheaton to SW, 14, 22, 31 December 1812, Registered Letters Received, RG 107; Wheaton to SW, 1, 8 December 1812, Letters to the Secretary of War, 1812, Relating to the War of 1812 in the Northwest, Vol. VI of *Document Transcriptions of the War of 1812 in the Northwest*, ed. Richard C. Knopf (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1959), 575, 580; William Platt to Wheaton, 27, 28 November 1812, Letters to the Secretary of War, pp. 570, 571. Wheaton apparently paid as much as \$0.625 a bushel for corn, \$2.50 for oats, and \$20.00 a ton for hay. In 1818 the price of these items at Zanesville was \$0.335 to \$0.50 a bushel for corn, \$0.25 to \$0.335 for oats, and \$9.00 to \$10.00 for hay delivered. Percy W. Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1925), p. 176.

<sup>23</sup>Transportation in the U.S., pp. 91-92; McKee, "Service of Supply" (4th Paper), p. 31; Meyer, *Transportation in the U.S.*, pp. 91-92. In 1818 pork sold at Zanesville for \$4.50 to \$5.00 cwt. and flour, \$5.00 to \$5.75 a barrel (196 lbs.). At Bidwell and Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern U.S.*, p. 176. At Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, flour sold at \$6.50 a barrel in 1815. Thomas S. Berry, *Western Prices Before 1861* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1943), p. 160.

<sup>24</sup>Greenhaus, "A Note on Western Logistics," pp. 41-44, argued that Meyer's figures were exaggerated and exceptional and that the real logistical problem was not poor transportation but scarcity of specie. He gave the figure of \$15.00 per barrel for the price of flour at Fort Meigs. But this lonely outpost was over 60 miles south of Detroit through the terrible "black swamp." According to McKee, "Service of Supply" (3rd Paper), n. 130, p. 38, flour at Fort Meigs in January 1814 was \$19.61 per 96-lb. barrel. At Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, flour sold at \$9.00 a barrel in late 1814, when prices peaked. Prices at Detroit would have been considerably higher because of added transportation costs. Moreover, while the government was short of specie, specie itself was not scarce on the frontier. Berry, *Western Prices*, pp. 159-160, 366-367. Nevertheless, agricultural prices were still high during the war. See Risch, *Quartermaster Support*, pp. 135-180, for some of the interrelated causes of high prices, including transportation as the most important. Transportation, moreover, did more than raise the costs of supply; it caused frictions and weakened offensives.

<sup>25</sup>Many wagons returned to the east empty. Berry, *Western Prices*, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup>By forward bases I mean those bases which were on the northern and western limits of local sources of forage (though forage was sometimes scarce south and east of forward bases). The major forward bases of subsistence were: Piqua, Sandusky, and Upper Sandusky on the northwest frontier; the Genesee River on the Niagara frontier; Oswego on the eastern Lake Ontario frontier; and Whitehall on the Lake Champlain frontier. Such places farther north and west as Fort Defiance, Fort Meigs, Buffalo, Sackets Harbor, and Plattsburgh were depots and bases of operations.

<sup>27</sup>Assuming that for a brief period of time a given region could support one soldier for each inhabitant, then the foraging area required to feed an army near the border would be roughly 40 times larger than in France, whose population density was 250 per square mile. A force as small as 5,000 men would have the impossible task of foraging in an area of over 850 square miles, which