WAR SENTIMENT IN
WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA: 1812

BY MARTIN KAUFMAN*

MUCH has been written on the War of 1812, and many historians have attempted to determine its causes. The traditional explanation is the one set forth by Julius W. Pratt.¹ By making a study of Congressional votes and sentiment Pratt found that the war was favored by the representatives of the Western and Southern states and opposed by those of the Northeastern states. He concluded that the Western states favored the war, believing that the Indian problem would be solved if the British were removed from Canada, while the Southern states favored war in the hope of annexing Florida.

Pratt did not look upon Pennsylvania as a frontier state, and he did not consider it in formulating his thesis.² Since Pennsylvania, however, provided more votes for war than any other state sixteen of her eighteen Representatives and both her Senators voted for war—the actions of her Congressmen must be explained in order to determine accurately the causes of war.

It is generally assumed by historians that President James Madison favored war in order to bring an end to impressment—and to terminate other violations of neutral rights, and that the Indian depredations of the previous few years played a minor role in the President's decision. For example, in the war message of June 1, 1812, Madison noted the Indian problem only in passing, making it clear that impressment and violations of neutral rights were the major reasons for sending the message to Congress.³

It is not easy to determine the precise motives which led Senators and Representatives to vote for or against the War of 1812, but in some cases the motives are quite clear. For example,

*An earlier version of this paper was an M.A. thesis presented by Mr. Kaufman at the University of Pittsburgh.


²Ibid., p. 130.

many Eastern Congressmen feared attack on the Atlantic ports and voted against war, certain that the United States Navy would be no match for the British fleet. The South Carolina Congressmen, on the other hand, favored war as a free-trade measure, a necessity for the prosperity of the single-crop economy of the state.

In the case of western Pennsylvania, four factors merit serious consideration: the Indian problem, imperialism, nationalism, and the economic conditions of the area.

In 1807 many Congressmen voiced their fears of Indian uprising, implying and often stating that the British were encouraging unrest on the frontier as part of a conspiracy to recapture the United States. Among those who expressed these ideas in Congress were Jacob Crowninshield and Joseph B. Varnum of Massachusetts, Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, Josiah Masters and James Emmot of New York, Henry Southard of New Jersey, Felix Grundy of Tennessee, and, of course, Henry Clay of Kentucky.

Rather significantly, neither of the Senators from Pennsylvania expressed any fear of Indian uprising, and of the Representatives, only William Findley noted this possibility, but in the sparsely settled northwestern corner of the state. The state legislature was likewise unperturbed by the Indian menace. The assembly showed fear only in 1808, when, in response to a petition from the Sixteenth Division of the Pennsylvania militia, a bill was passed providing for “the defense of the northern and western frontiers of this state.”

The newspapers of Pittsburgh, which certainly would have reflected any alarm present in western Pennsylvania, indicated little concern for the Indian menace until 1811, when the Indians of the Wabash led by Tecumseh and “The Prophet” began attacking frontier settlements. Earlier, in 1806 and 1807, the newspapers had printed only a few reports of Indian unrest, and many of these were later retracted as being “without foundation.”


Ibid., 10th Cong. 1st sess., II, 1521-22.

how little hostility existed is shown by the fact that the Pittsburgh newspapers reported the 1806 Fourth of July celebration at St. Louis, including the toast made to “our Indian Brethren.”

With the news of the Chesapeake-Leopard affair of 1807 came a host of rumors and reports of Indian murders and even of an alliance between the Indians and the British. One article, quoting the Aurora, even suggested the annexation of Canada in order to end the Indian warfare. Nevertheless, these reports indicate more hatred of England than fear of the Indians. This is made apparent in the almost complete disappearance of reports of Indian terrorism after the excitement of the Chesapeake-Leopard affair had abated. Only two reports of Indian unrest were published in the Pittsburgh newspapers from January 1808 to July 1811, while many articles stressing good will and friendship towards the Indians were printed.

With the rise of Tecumseh and the Indians of the Wabash, many accounts of Indian unrest and hostility appear. Almost every issue of the newspapers contained reports of Indian movements, of the troops led by William Henry Harrison, or of the coming battle at Vincennes. Rumors of British aid to the Indians were common, but these ceased with the victory at Vincennes and were replaced by reports of peace and friendship on the frontier.

Suddenly, in April 1812, the newspapers became filled with reports of a new Indian war, but this fighting was not related to British intrigue. The fact that only two reports even implied British aid indicates that the people of western Pennsylvania did not favor war with England in order to rid themselves of the Indian menace. If war with England had been favored for this

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8 Commonwealth (Pittsburgh), January 8, 15, July 9, August 6, 1806.
9 Pittsburgh Gazette, August 4, October 13, December 15, 1807; Commonwealth, September 9, 16, November 7, 1807.
10 Commonwealth, June 8, 1808, February 25, 1809. See also ibid, May 18, November 23, December 24, 1808, and Pittsburgh Gazette, January 26, 1808, May 10, 1809, and September 28, 1810.
11 Gazette, August 16, September 6, 13, 20, October 18, November 1, 8, 22, December 6, 13, 20, 1811.
12 Mercury (Pittsburgh), October 26, November 12, 20, December 28, 1811, January 11, 1812; Gazette, August 23, 1811, March 6, 13, 1812; Commonwealth, December 23, 1811, March 24, 1812; Gazette, February 7, 1812.
13 Commonwealth, April 28, May 19, June 9, 23, 1812; Gazette, March 20, April 17 to June 12, 1812. See Commonwealth, May 5, 25, 1812.
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purpose, the British certainly would have been blamed for the renewal of the Indian wars.

It is even doubtful whether western Pennsylvania had any reason to fear a direct Indian attack on any part of the state. Louis Hacker has estimated that there were only about 5,000 Indians in the entire Ohio Valley, while the population of western Pennsylvania in 1810 exceeded 140,000. This relatively small number of Indians would not have been cause for alarm unless they were hostile, and it is obvious that the Indians of western Pennsylvania were not unfriendly in 1812, as the last Indian murder in Beaver County was committed in March 1790 and the final Indian attack in the state was the Wyoming Massacre of 1778.

Rather than fearing or trying to destroy the Indians, many people were interested in converting them to Christianity. In 1808, for example, the Synod of Pittsburgh formed a society to spread the gospel to the various tribes, and the Quakers were trying to civilize the Wyandots.

With the fact that neither the newspapers, the state legislature, nor the Congressmen of western Pennsylvania showed any desire to end the Indian problem by annexing Canada, and as Pittsburgh was so far removed from the actual scene of Indian warfare and terrorism, it is obvious that the Indian menace could not have been a factor in the development of war sentiment in western Pennsylvania.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century many Americans developed an insatiable thirst for territory, and some even urged war as the means of expanding the nation's territory, prestige and revenue. Among those who expressed this idea on the floor of Congress were William Burwell of Virginia, Richard Stanford of South Carolina, Daniel Durell of New Hampshire,

14 Louis Morton Hacker, "Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812; a Conjecture," in Mississippi Valley Historical Review, X (1923-1924), 373-374.
Henry Clay of Kentucky, and Felix Grundy of Tennessee. Henry Clay even went so far as to boast, “I verily believe that the militia of Kentucky are alone competent to place Montreal and Upper Canada at your feet.”

Significantly, the representatives of western Pennsylvania were not at all affected by this expansionist sentiment, and even opposed the annexation of territory. An excellent example of western Pennsylvania’s opposition to the annexation of territory is found in the Congressional debates of March 7, 1810, when shortly after John Smilie of Fayette announced that “we should [only] be justified in carrying [the war] into the enemy’s territory” in order to bring it to a speedy conclusion, William Findley of Youngstown declared his opposition to taking any territory, “unless it became necessary in our own defense.”

The western Pennsylvania newspapers were also unaffected by the land hunger which seemed to pervade Congress. Only two articles in the Commonwealth favored the annexation of Canada, and these two proposals were made three years apart. In January 1809, quoting the Boston Chronicle, the Commonwealth advocated the annexation of Canada in order to “add to the power and revenue of the United States.” Three years later, the paper reported the toast made at a local Fourth of July celebration to “Canada—may it soon be counted as another star adorning our political hemisphere”; but this toast was made after the war message had been sent to Congress and when war with England was imminent.

As neither the local newspapers nor the Congressmen favored war in order to annex territory, imperialism can safely be ruled out as a cause of war sentiment in western Pennsylvania. Of course, once war was declared the only possible way of harming England was to invade Canada, so the first military endeavor was naturally in this direction. The fact that the citizens of western Pennsylvania were so enthusiastic about General William Hull’s attack on Canada does not imply that the people had favored the war for the purpose of annexing Canada, but simply that entering

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Ibid., 11th Cong. 2nd sess., I, 579-582.

Ibid., 11th Cong. 2nd sess., II, 1514, 1519.

Commonwealth, January 25, 1809, July 7, 1812."
war produces a passionate desire to win and that all methods of winning the war are ardently accepted by the citizens.

The United States was fast becoming an intensely nationalistic country. This new phenomenon was evident in the reaction to the so-called “British atrocities.” Even on the frontier, Americans responded angrily to the news of aggressions committed against their fellow countrymen on the coast. The people of western Pennsylvania reacted indignantly on hearing of the horrible “atrocities.” The journals constantly listed these aggressions for every citizen to read and remember, and even the Federalist paper, the Pittsburgh Gazette, published the list of atrocities “as a public service.”

The patriotic sentiment of western Pennsylvania was exhibited in the reaction to specific Anglo-American incidents. For example, when an American citizen, John Pierce, was killed in an encounter with the British ship Leander, the Gazette stated that he had been “feloniously killed and murdered,” demanding that Captain Whitby of the Leander be tried and punished for his crimes.

The Chesapeake-Leopard affair of 1807 provoked an even greater outburst of nationalism. The Gazette described it as a “violent and unjustifiable insult upon the dignity and honour of the country,” while the Commonwealth simply reported it as another British “outrage.” The anger of the citizens was revealed at the town meetings called to protest the British action. Townsmen assembled at Pittsburgh, Washington, Beaver, Erie, and Greensburgh (Greensburg?), and they pledged their “lives and fortunes” in support of any action taken against the British. This was not simply idle talk, as was proven when President Jefferson requested 480 men from the 22nd Regiment of the Pennsylvania militia and over 1,100 volunteered.

The state Senate and even the United States Congressmen from the area proved also to be highly nationalistic. John Smilie uttered what was perhaps the most nationalistic statement of the day, when he said, “Wherever our armed ships are, there is our juris-

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22 Ibid., February 25, March 29, 1809; Mercury, October 26, 1811; Gazette, March 27, 1812.
23 Gazette, June 9, 1807.
24 Ibid., July 7, 1807; Commonwealth, July 8, 1807.
25 Gazette, July 14, 1807; Commonwealth, July 29, August 5, 12, 1807.
26 Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Acheson, August 29, 1807, in Commonwealth, September 23, 1807.
The Pennsylvania Senate also reacted in the nationalistic pattern, having the Declaration of Independence read and following this patriotic and symbolic act with a resolution pledging the "support and cooperation [of Pennsylvania] in such measures as Congress may think expedient to adopt." 

After the declaration of war, many citizens volunteered their services, and "party distinctions were abandoned in love of country." As many as one-half of the able-bodied men of Beaver volunteered, among them "lawyers, Doctors, merchants, farmers and mechanics." Even those opposed to the principle of war were converted to its support, showing enthusiasm over victories and anger and sadness at the news of defeat.

This anti-British feeling is not at all surprising in light of Frederick Jackson Turner's view that on the frontier, far from British trade and influence, "immigrants were Americanized, liberalized and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics." It was particularly easy for the western Pennsylvania frontier to fuse immigrants into a race which was "English in neither nationality nor characteristics," since a large part of the population were either not British at all, or were completely opposed to the English by tradition. In the area were many Germans who had no cultural or social ties with England, and a greater number of Scotch-Irish who had been forced out of Ireland by British commercial and religious regulations. The Germans were soon as patriotically American as the original settlers, developing a love for their new country and a sense of pride and dignity that was missing in the small German states of Europe. The Scotch-Irish, on the other hand, hated the English for harsh regulations imposed upon them and their friends and relatives, which eventually forced them to leave Ireland for the United States.

Two of the western Pennsylvania Congressmen, William Findley and John Smilie, had been born in Ireland and arrived in America

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"Ibid., p. 15.
"Gazette, March 20, September 4, 1812, May 8, 1813.
with other oppressed Scotch-Irish. These two Congressmen favored all measures proposed to end British aggression at sea, voting for the imposition of the embargo, non-intercourse, and war, and these two Congressmen were possibly more anti-English than nationalistic, but this is very difficult to determine. At any rate, nationalism coupled with a hatred of England was definitely a major factor in the development of war sentiment in western Pennsylvania, and perhaps was the determining factor.

An economic depression devastated the Western states from 1808 to 1812, with the result that many farmers could not sell their produce, get a good price for it, and perhaps in some cases, could not even get it to market. With the Embargo of 1808, prices fell sharply, declining an average of twenty per cent in New Orleans. The impoverished farmers blamed the British commercial restrictions for the hard times, and, as a result, supported the embargo, non-intercourse, and war, in the hope of forcing the British to withdraw the Orders-in-Council.

Russell J. Ferguson, in his *Early Western Pennsylvania Politics*, maintained that prices declined in the area with a resulting depression, finding proof of this in the articles protesting the embargo printed in the Pittsburgh Gazette. An analysis of wholesale prices demonstrates that no such depression existed in western Pennsylvania. The prices of hemp, rye, shelled corn and wheat rose after the embargo began, and there was no price decline or depression in the area.

The wholesale price for hemp was six dollars per hundredweight in 1807, but after the beginning of the embargo the price rose to seven cents per pound, or seven dollars per hundredweight. This may have been caused by seasonal factors or brought about by a change in demand, but it certainly demonstrates that the cultivation of hemp was not hindered by the embargo.

The wholesale price for barley declined, but not enough to have

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24 George Rogers Taylor, “Prices in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812,” in *Journal of Economic and Business History*, III (1931), 149, 154.
26 *Gazette*, April 14 to 28, 1807. Compare with December 7, 1808, to April 12, 1809.
damaged the economy of the area. The price remained at a steady 53 cents per bushel throughout 1806, 1807, and most of 1808, then falling to 47 cents per bushel until at least February 1809.\textsuperscript{37} Although no prices are available from 1809 to the start of the war, advertisements show that barley was still a marketable crop, always needed at the Pittsburgh Point Brewery.\textsuperscript{38} The decline of ten per cent in the price of barley corresponded with the beginning of the embargo, but the drop was slight as compared with the depressed prices of the Mississippi Valley,\textsuperscript{39} and may have had no relation to the embargo.

The price of rye was quoted at three shillings (about 45 cents) per bushel from January to June 1812, rising to 50 cents per bushel and remaining at that price from June to November 1812.\textsuperscript{40} This price rise corresponds with the start of the ninety-day embargo of April 4, 1812, and demonstrates that there was no depression in rye culture in western Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, the newspapers did not contain advertisements for rye before 1812, so generalizations cannot be made as to the long term price change.

The price of shelled corn also increased in 1812, corresponding to the embargo. The price rose from two shillings nine pence (about 42 cents) to three shillings (45 cents) and finally to 50 cents.\textsuperscript{41} This may have been a seasonal change, but it likewise shows that prices rose rather than declined in western Pennsylvania in the years preceding the War of 1812. The wheat price shows a similar tendency, declining ten per cent in May 1811, but rising to seventy-five cents and finally to one dollar in October and November 1812.\textsuperscript{42}

Although the Pittsburgh \textit{Gazette} painted a sad picture of desolation and ruin, there is no reason to believe that the embargo had...
destroyed the economy of western Pennsylvania. Wholesale prices generally rose in 1812 rather than declined, and this was apparently the case elsewhere in the West. It is true that the prices of Southern crops had declined tremendously during the period from 1808 to 1812, and that the embargo seriously damaged the single-crop economy of the Southern states, with rice and cotton prices declining more than fifty per cent in some places, and with tobacco being abandoned in favor of corn, a crop which could be utilized if not sold.

It is doubtful, however, whether any measure affecting commerce would have seriously affected western Pennsylvania. As long as the people could consume all that they harvested, price changes in New Orleans would not have affected a western Pennsylvania farmer. The farms of western Pennsylvania were small and self-sufficient, quite different from the great farms of “230 acres which produced 11,000 bushels of wheat,” a sight which shocked a Pittsburgh native traveling in Ohio and Indiana. The survey taken in 1806 of Warren County indicates that the average farm contained between 150 and 200 acres, but a great many farms were less than 100 acres. Warren County was sparsely settled, and the farms in the more densely populated areas were probably much smaller and more self-sufficient.

The small farmer could not afford to ship his goods to Philadelphia. It was simply too expensive. In 1808 it cost over two hundred dollars to bring two wagon loads of goods from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, and very few farmers could afford such high transportation charges. Neither could the farmer ship his goods to New Orleans, as the trip was slow, costly and unsafe, plus the fact that the New Orleans’ merchant was too good at his business, often placing the farmer at a great disadvantage.

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44 Ibid., May 24, 1808, May 1, 1812.
47 Cramer’s Pittsburgh Almanack, 1811, pp. 51-52.
It was not really necessary for the farmer of western Pennsylvania to ship his goods south or east, as Pittsburgh furnished a market for his goods and a source of supply for the necessities of farm life—bacon, pork, and other foods, tobacco, iron goods, clothes, and above all, plenty of whiskey for the cold winter months. In fact, by 1815 the breweries of Pittsburgh needed from twenty to thirty thousand bushels of grain annually, this in itself providing a market for many farmers of western Pennsylvania.50

Pittsburgh in 1810 was the manufacturing center of the West. Glass and cotton mills, a button factory, an iron grinding mill, and forty-four weaving looms were located in the town. Flour and whiskey were produced in great quantities, and even such luxuries as snuff and "segars" were manufactured in the city.51 Some of these goods were shipped to the west to furnish the settlers of Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee with nails and other iron goods, glassware, "segars," clothes, and whiskey.52

Besides being a manufacturing and marketing area, Pittsburgh was also a transportation center. It has been estimated that in 1810 the passing trade annually amounted to one million dollars and the sale of the city's manufactures to another million.53 As transportation and storage charges are somewhat dependent on the price of goods, the commercial interests in Pittsburgh might have lost all their profits if it had not been for the great increase of volume due to the British and Spanish confiscations at sea. This additional trade allowed the commercial classes in the city to continue making high profits, even though their charges declined.

The great majority of citizens of western Pennsylvania were not affected at all by the change in conditions brought about by the British commercial restrictions and by the American countermeasures. Western Pennsylvania was a self-sufficient area, with the farmers having a market for their goods and a source of supply for items that could not be produced on the farm. The embargo naturally encouraged the manufacture of some goods, and had little effect on agriculture.

As western Pennsylvania had little contact with foreign trade,  

51 Cramer's Pittsburgh Almanack, 1810, pp. 52-58.  
53 Ibid., p. 152.
and as the policies of embargo and non-intercourse benefited many citizens, the people naturally favored these measures. As early as February 1806 Senator Andrew Gregg of Pennsylvania called for a non-importation of British goods in response to impressment of American seamen. Two years later, William Findley argued for the constitutionality of the embargo on the floor of the House of Representatives, and in November 1808 John Smilie boasted that "there had been no petition or remonstrance from the State of Pennsylvania respecting the Embargo." In February 1809, Smilie advocated the passage of the non-intercourse bill, since "it was determined to repeal the Embargo and not go to war," and all the Representatives of western Pennsylvania voted for the passage of the bill.

In his annual message to the legislature, Governor Thomas McKean stated in 1808 that "Pennsylvania . . . has borne the Suspension of her Commerce and without murmur or complaint." This is definitely true, as the embargo did not adversely affect western Pennsylvania and the citizens had no reason to petition for the repeal of the embargo.

Economics played little or no role in the development of war-like sentiment in western Pennsylvania. While the settlers in the Western states were blaming the British for the depression, the citizens of western Pennsylvania had no economic grievance for which to blame the British. The prosperity of the area allowed the people to search for effective methods of ending the British aggressions at sea, and it was truly a happy coincidence that all the measures proposed to end the violations of American neutral rights tended to favor the commerce and industry of western Pennsylvania.

Evidence from western Pennsylvania indicates that nationalism and hatred of England were the causes of war sentiment which led to support for the War of 1812. Julius W. Pratt's thesis is partially correct as applied to this area, in that nationalism was the cause of the war; but in the case of western Pennsylvania,

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51 Commonwealth, February 26, April 19, 1806.
52 Annals of Congress, 10th Cong. 1st sess., II, 2224-2232; 10th Cong. 2nd sess., pp. 574-575.
53 Ibid., p. 1501.
54 Ibid., 11th Cong. 1st sess., I, 457.
this nationalism was not directed towards the acquisition of territory or towards the removal of the Indian menace. There was no fear of the Indians and little interest in the removal of a menace which probably did not exist. The nationalism of western Pennsylvania was directed towards the actual aggressions of the British, the practices of confiscation of ships and impressment of men.