Mr. Madison’s Secretary of War

In most accounts of the War of 1812 the War Department has been treated as if it were some distant administrative unit little involved in the actual conduct of the war. Nothing could be further removed from the truth. The War Department was in fact involved in the events on the battlefield perhaps more than it should have been. The Secretary of War not only devised the strategy of the campaigns, his department performed a multiplicity of functions touching directly upon the conduct of the war, including such matters as supervising the supply system, appointing officers, providing an adequate staff system, establishing priorities and allocating funds, recruiting, and many, many other things all vitally affecting the outcome of the conflict. For most of the War of 1812 the Secretary of War was John Armstrong, Jr., who is as little known today as the man he succeeded, William Eustis. Yet, as surely as he directed the War Department, Armstrong also directed the fortunes of the American Army. Since it is usually conceded by historians that the conduct of the War of 1812 was generally unsuccessful, it is pertinent to ask not only what were the reasons for the failures of the Army, but also to what extent was Armstrong responsible for these failures?

Armstrong was born at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on November 25, 1758, the son of the prominent Pennsylvanian who won fame as the “Hero of Kittanning.” Young Armstrong served for most of the Revolutionary War as the aide-de-camp of Major General Horatio Gates, eventually rising to the brevet rank of lieutenant colonel. He was thus a contemporary and an acquaintance of most of the older generals who served in the War of 1812. He was also the author of the Newburgh Addresses, written while the Revolutionary Army was in its last encampment. These Addresses, ostensibly an effort to threaten Congress to pay the Army its just claims, were viewed by Washington as a possible mutiny, which he moved swiftly to quash. Although the Addresses were written anonymously,
Armstrong's authorship became generally known, and thereafter he was viewed as a political intriguer. His subsequent career, which was marred by controversy, did little to dispel this image. After leaving the Army, Armstrong served successively as secretary of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, Adjutant General of Pennsylvania, and a member of Congress under the Articles of Confederation. Disappointed in not being appointed a Senator to the new Congress created by the Constitution, Armstrong gave up a promising career in Pennsylvania and removed to New York after marrying a sister of Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, head of the powerful political family of that state.

Following a brief spell as a gentleman farmer along the Hudson River, Armstrong re-entered politics in 1800 when he was chosen a Senator from his adopted state. The position did not suit him, but he impressed President Jefferson, who subsequently selected Armstrong to replace Chancellor Livingston as Minister to France. Armstrong served in that capacity from 1804 to 1810. It was a stormy tenure, with the Minister becoming involved in many controversies, particularly with the friends of James Monroe. Armstrong displayed not only a penchant but a considerable talent for polemical literature. He also attracted favorable public attention for his devastating but futile attacks upon French policies toward American commerce. His hawkish attitudes made him one of the earliest advocates of a war, preferably with both France and Great Britain. Despite his feuds with Jefferson and Madison, Armstrong supported Madison in the presidential election of 1812. When war was declared, Armstrong was appointed a brigadier general and placed in charge of the defense of New York City, where he exhibited considerable vigor and further enhanced his military reputation by publishing late in 1812 a military handbook entitled *Hints to Young Generals*, which he borrowed liberally from, and thereby helped to introduce to the American military, the concepts of the French military authority Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini.¹

When William Eustis resigned as Secretary of War on December

¹ There is no biography of John Armstrong, Jr., but his career is adequately surveyed by Julius Pratt in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. The author is currently at work on a biography of Armstrong. Armstrong's military tract is [Armstrong,] *Hints to Young Generals. By an Old Soldier* (Kingston, N. Y., [1812]).
3, 1812, Armstrong was mentioned prominently for the position. He was definitely not Madison's choice, but after several prominent men refused the post, Madison reluctantly turned to Armstrong, who, after all, did come from the crucial state of New York. There were several objections to the appointment, not the least of which was Armstrong's well-known ill-tempered disposition, aptly described by Martin Van Buren as "eminently pugnacious." Armstrong had numerous political enemies, and two of them, Albert Gallatin and James Monroe, were in Madison's cabinet. Although both agreed to work with Armstrong, the situation was not auspicious. Madison admitted in later years that he was aware of Armstrong's irascibility, but he had believed that Armstrong's known talents and military knowledge would be useful, and that "a proper mixture of conciliating confidence and interposing control would render objectionable peculiarities less in practice than in prospect." Madison appointed Armstrong on January 14, 1813, and it was only with difficulty that the nomination was confirmed in the Senate by a narrow margin of eighteen to fifteen. Armstrong was assailed not on the basis of incompetence but on old charges of favoritism in settling American claims while he was the Minister to France and for his authorship of the Newburgh Addresses. 2

Thus, he came into office realizing that he would be serving in a cabinet with men hostile to him personally. To his friend Ambrose Spencer he asserted, "I go to it reluctantly and with diffidence, and purely to exert whatever military knowledge and talent I possess, to rescue our arms from their present fallen condition." 3 Armstrong obviously viewed himself as an "outsider," and consequently he never sought and he never received the confidence of the President. Nor did he ever seek the advice of the cabinet, and they gave him none. Armstrong had few friends in Congress, and he made no effort to curry favor with them. By choice, he chose to stand on his own ground. Few cabinet officers in American history ever deliberately undertook to carry out so important a task with so little support.


When Armstrong assumed his office on February 5, 1813, the War Department was in a state of flux, despite the fact that the war was now in its eighth month. Much of the confusion and disorganization was due to the inadequate and tardy legislation of Congress. Many supply departments, for example, were created hastily on the eve of the war and did not begin functioning until the war had actually broken out. Even as Armstrong came into office, the War Department was still fumbling around trying to improve the supply system. Provisions for the army were supplied in three ways: food was provided by civilian contractors; the Purchasing Department in Philadelphia supplied arms, ammunition, clothing, and accouterments; and the Quartermaster Department was authorized to buy riding horses, pack horses, teams, wagons and forage. Any article, however, in case of emergency, could be purchased by the Quartermaster or deputies at the order of the commanding officer. Needless to say, this system led to abuses. Civilian contractors in particular were bitterly assailed by commanding officers. Failures by these contractors, chosen on the basis of the lowest bids were often attributed to their feeling that, due to scarcity or a rise in prices, they would lose money by fulfilling the terms of their contract. The redoubtable Andrew Jackson constantly complained of the failures of contractors to supply his troops. Only by his own perseverance and untiring efforts did he keep his men from starving. Jackson repeatedly asserted that the Creek War could have been terminated in a few weeks if the contractors had not failed to provide provisions.

Along the northern frontier, the British Army's Commissariat Department was often competing for the available food. Sir George Prevost, Governor General of Canada, informed his superiors in August, 1814, that "two thirds of the Army in Canada are, at this moment, eating Beef provided by American Contractors, drawn


5 See, for example, Gen. Edmund P. Gaines to Armstrong, June 21, 1814, National Archives, War Department, Secretary's Office, Letters Received (hereinafter cited WD/LR); Jackson to Armstrong, Nov. 20, Dec. 30, 1813, in John S. Bassett, ed., Correspondence of Andrew Jackson (Washington, D. C., 1926), I, 355-357, 423-428.
Contractors who failed to meet a requisition were theoretically responsible for failures to fulfill their contract, but in practice the War Department never held them to this clause. There was very little that Armstrong could do to alter the contract system, chiefly because Congress believed that it was the most economical. This was, however, a dubious proposition, for the commanding officer was authorized to utilize special commissaries when contractors failed to provide rations, and the prices paid by these commissaries were often exorbitant.

Contractors were civilians, and neither the War Department nor the officers of the Army had any special jurisdiction over them. The other supply branches, however, were under the War Department, and here Armstrong attempted to improve their efficiency and accountability. Congress authorized on March 3, 1813, an additional number of quartermasters, and deputy and assistant quartermasters. Thus Armstrong carried out a reorganization in the spring of 1813 by placing a quartermaster staff in each of the nine military districts, complete with deputies and assistants. Lacking, however, was any centralized coordination, except as the Secretary of War might occasionally direct. Armstrong also appointed six issuing commissaries in July, 1813, with instructions to receive goods from the Commissary General of Purchases or his deputies and distribute these items to the regimental quartermasters. It was hoped that this would reduce waste and bring some order out of the rather haphazard way troops were supplied. Nevertheless, accountability for supplies, due to the pressures of war, was only slightly improved. The want, the waste, and the inefficiency in supplying the armies was an important reason for many of their failures. Armstrong, shackled with an inefficient system, only tried to make it more efficient. His efforts did not get at the root of the problem of decentralization.

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8 Richard S. Peters, ed., Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America (Boston, 1848), Act of Mar. 3, 1813 (II Stat. 819); Armstrong to Callender Irvine (Commissary General of Purchases), July 25, Aug. 7, 1813, National Archives, War Department, Secretary's Office, Letters Sent, VII, 22, 33 (hereinafter cited WD/LS). The six Issuing Commissaries were located as follows: (1) with Gen. Harrison; (2) with Gen. Pinckney; (3) at Niagara; (4) at Sackett's Harbor; (5) at Lake Champlain; (6) at New Orleans.
The many failures of supply would not have been so glaring had there been sufficient funds available. On March 5, 1813, for example, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin wrote President Madison, "We have hardly money enough to last till the end of the month." Fortunately, Gallatin managed to arrange with three wealthy Americans, David Parish, Stephen Girard, and John Jacob Astor, to complete a $16,000,000 loan. The War Department was allocated $13,320,000, with expenditures not to exceed $1,480,000 per month. This limitation on expenditures acted as a brake upon military operations and seriously hampered the conduct of the 1813 campaign. In 1814, Congress authorized a $25,000,000 loan, but by September, when Armstrong left office, only $10,000,000 had been raised, and the country was verging on bankruptcy. Congress was chiefly responsible for this situation by failing to provide a solid foundation for revenue. It permitted the specie to escape from the country, it adopted a half-way system of taxation, it refused to establish a national bank, and yet it expected the war to be carried on with vigor.\(^9\)

Throughout his administration of the War Department, Armstrong gave the most careful attention to his financial limitations. In fact, it is conjectural whether he did not sometimes lose sight of the objects to be gained for concern over their cost. Faced with a critical shortage of funds, Armstrong arbitrarily cut almost all expenditures for coastal fortifications. As might be imagined, this was an unpopular decision. Just as unpopular was Armstrong's obstinacy in refusing to pay for unnecessary militia calls, even when state governors pleaded that emergency situations had not permitted regular procedures. Nor was Armstrong's decision to apply most of the War Department's funds to the northern army greeted with any enthusiasm in other sections of the country. Even then he thought the demands of the northern army commander, Major General Henry Dearborn, were excessive. Armstrong complained to the Quartermaster General in the spring of 1813 that Dearborn had

“altogether lost sight of the State & usages of the Treasury,” and he cautioned that “economy must be your alpha & omega as well as mine.” It is not difficult to see in this situation and in this mentality another reason for the failures of American arms.\(^{10}\)

Just as vexing as the problem of keeping an army in the field was the problem of getting one there in the first place. At the outset of the war, Congress authorized a force of 36,700, but in February, 1813, when Armstrong took office, the aggregate strength of the regular Army was only 18,945, scarcely half the authorized strength. On January 29, 1813, Congress permitted twenty additional regiments to be enlisted for one year instead of the usual five years, which raised the aggregate authorized to 57,351, but the force in service rose to only 27,609 in June and 34,325 in December. Even these figures are misleading, for Armstrong admitted to the Chairman of the House Military Committee on January 2, 1814, that the actual effective force for the entire northern frontier was only 8,012.\(^{11}\) Obviously, short-term enlistments hampered efforts to raise a regular force, one year’s service being preferable to a five-year enlistment, but public apathy and personal preferences for the easier service of the militia were also reasons for the failures to recruit an adequate army. Former President Thomas Jefferson believed that the cause “proceeded from the happiness of our people at home,” and he rejoiced that “we have so few of the desperate characters which compose modern regular armies.”\(^{12}\)

Doubtless, had Armstrong considered his problem in this light, he might have taken some satisfaction in reflecting that, after all, the failure to fill the ranks was not his fault. We have considerable evidence, however, that he was quite concerned about this problem, and even that he offered a plausible solution for it to Congress.


\(^{12}\) Jefferson to Monroe, June 19, 1813, Monroe Papers, L.C.
When the war began the recruiting system was streamlined. Previously, recruiting was the responsibility of the regimental commanders, but the service was revamped by establishing recruiting districts and by placing a field grade officer in charge of each reporting directly to the War Department. They received their instructions and bounty and premium money directly from the War Department. This centralization of the system did not notably increase the number of recruits, nor did Congress' timid increases in bounties alter the lack of zeal of Americans for military service. Armstrong was obstinately opposed to a reliance upon the militia to fight the war, and he made a strong effort, for example, to force Major General William Henry Harrison to rely upon a regular force. The effort was unavailing, however, for westerners showed a strong disinclination for the regular Army, and Armstrong reluctantly permitted Harrison to use militia for his campaign of 1813, which was, incidentally, very successful. Armstrong nevertheless considered the militia extremely wasteful, poorly trained, and unreliable, and, generally speaking, he was correct in his assessment of them. Still, as a measure of the failure of the recruiting system, 30,000 militia were called into service in 1813.

Following the failure of the campaign along the northern frontier, Armstrong returned to Washington in a black mood. He proposed to Madison that the country should resort to the extreme measure of conscription as the only means of raising an army competent to win the war. Secretary of the Navy William Jones and Secretary of State Monroe both opposed the plan as politically dangerous. Monroe, who personally distrusted Armstrong, asserted that it would "ruin the Administration," and he urged Madison to dismiss Armstrong. Nevertheless, Madison permitted Armstrong to submit his plan to Congress, which Armstrong justified as having "the sanction of revolutionary wisdom and energy—it produced that army which achieved our independence." Congress, however, no

13 Gen. Henry Dearborn to Armstrong, Feb. 14, 1814, WD/LR, comments on the relative merits of the new versus the old system.
doubt for political reasons, shied away from the revolutionary wisdom and merely raised the bounty for recruits. Armstrong was assaulted in Congress, particularly by Monroe’s friends, as well as by all right-thinking Republicans. Although authorized nearly 60,000 men, the regular Army averaged about half that number in 1814. Shortly before he left office, Armstrong was considering a proposal to raise a black regiment in Philadelphia. Needless to say, the lack of an adequate army was another cause of the failures of American arms.

Size is not always a criteria for the success of an army. Leadership, training, and discipline are also important factors. Organization is also vitally necessary. The former was chiefly the responsibility of the field commanders, but the latter was that of Congress and the Secretary of War. When the war was declared, the Secretary was faced with administering an increasingly complex task with the assistance of only a Chief Clerk and seven additional clerks. Several staff positions were hastily created, but the Quartermaster General and the Adjutant and Inspector Generals were assigned to the principal army. Only the Paymaster and Accountant Offices were located in Washington. Madison in his Fourth Annual Message on November 4, 1812, pleaded with Congress to improve the organization of the War Department. Earlier that spring Congress had refused a request to add two Assistant Secretaries of War on the implausible grounds that they were unnecessary, and it was hinted that Madison was merely seeking to create sinecures.

The failure of the first campaign no doubt persuaded Congress that some improvement was necessary. On March 3, 1813, Congress

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16 Nile’s Weekly Register, VI (Apr. 9, 1814), 94; American State Papers: Military Affairs (1832), I, 535 (hereinafter cited A.S.P.). The proposals to raise a black regiment were made by Philadelphians, Dr. James Mease and William Duane. Mease to Armstrong, Aug. 2, Aug. 8, 1814, WD/LR; Armstrong to Mease, Aug. 6, 1814, WD/LS, VII, 125; Duane to Armstrong, July 12, Aug. 25, 1814, WD/LR; Armstrong to Duane, July 15, 1814, Historical Magazine, IV (August, 1868), 63.
17 James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents (Washington, D. C., 1900), I, 499; Annals, 12th Cong., 1st Sess. (House), 1355-1374. See also, Daniel Parker to Armstrong, Jan. 17, 1813, Daniel Parker Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
passed a General Staff Act, which provided generally for the organiza-
tion of a staff structure for the Army. Armstrong was able to
divide the country into nine military districts, and place a regular
military officer in command of each, complete with its own staff.
In time Armstrong gathered about him in Washington an Inspector
General, an Assistant Adjutant General a Superintendent General
of Military Supplies, a Commissary General of Ordnance, and an
Assistant Topographical Engineer which, added to the Accountant
and Paymaster Departments, at least offered him a reasonably
adequate staff, although it fell short of being a general staff. As
constituted, it was essentially a housekeeping staff, and it was a
far cry from the sophisticated, massive staff structure of today's
modern military complex.\footnote{Peters, Act of Mar. 3, 1813, II Stat. 819. See Armstrong's report to the Senate, Dec. 27,
1813, A.S.P., I, 384-385; White, Jeffersonians, 233-241.}

On February 24, 1813, Congress authorized an increase in the
number of general officers to eight major generals and sixteen
brigadier generals. Except for William Henry Harrison, who was
forty, the major generals selected by Madison and Armstrong were
old Revolutionary veterans without much vigor. The brigadier
generals, however, represented a new generation.\footnote{Peters, Act of Feb. 24, 1813, II Stat. 801; Brant, Madison, VI, 167.}
Many of the failures of military leadership in the campaigns of 1812 and 1813 are attributable to the timidity and ineptness of the older group of
officers. By 1814 Armstrong had removed most of them from posi-
tions of command and had elevated younger officers to their places.
The average age of the nine general officers promoted in 1814 was
thirty-six. Among them were Major Generals Jacob Brown and
Andrew Jackson, and Brigadier Generals Alexander Macomb, Win-
field Scott, and Edmund P. Gaines. Many of the successes of
American arms in 1814 are attributable to them, for they infused
discipline and training into the troops and provided the leadership
sadly lacking before that time. This remarkable group of young
generals was destined to have a marked influence on the American
Army for the next generation. Armstrong deserves most of the
credit for these promotions, which were without regard to seniority.
Madison must also be given credit for recognizing the merit of these
men and for resisting the inevitable political pressures to alter the lists.

Congress failed to create the position of lieutenant general to command the armies. The ranking officer was Major General Henry Dearborn, who commanded the northern army, but he had no control over any other force. To remedy this defect, Armstrong gave every indication that he intended to fill this position _de facto_ even if it was not his _de jure_. He obviously took a very broad conception of his role, and his relations with his commanders were stormy. On many occasions, he communicated directly with subordinates without going through the normal channels, and he even set expeditions on foot within districts without official notice to the commanding general. These actions, as might be expected, met with loud protests. Armstrong justified his arbitrary actions by asserting that prior practice authorized his conduct and, further, that to follow the chain of command would have led to interminable delays. Virtually every commander at one time or another lodged a protest against Armstrong’s interference, and at least two, Thomas Flournoy and Harrison, resigned in protest.20

Armstrong not only assumed many of the prerogatives of a military commander, he also adopted the practice of dictating military instructions in detail and not in general terms. Invariably, however, he couched his instructions along hypothetical lines. Thus, he would dictate not only the specific objective but also the manner in which the attack should take place. Typically, he would then proceed to offer alternatives, that if such conditions assumed in his original proposal did not exist or had been altered, another strategy was called for, which the commander was free to adopt. Such pedantry was often maddening to commanders who were greatly offended by the lecturing tone of Armstrong’s directives. Major General James Wilkinson expressed his contempt for one such letter from Armstrong: “a pleasant work, to a minister in his closet, and quite easy

20 The examples of commanders complaining of breaches in military etiquette are overwhelming and included Gens. Dearborn, Wilkinson, Hampton, Brown, Pinckney and Jackson, as well as Harrison and Flournoy. The most notable case was Harrison’s. See, for example, Harrison to Armstrong, Feb. 13, 1813, quoted in Freeman Cleaves, _Old Tippecanoe_ (New York, 1939), 281; Armstrong to Harrison, Mar. 2, 1814, Esarey, _Harrison Letters_, II, 631. Harrison resigned on May 11, 1814.
of execution, on paper; where we find neither ditches, nor ramparts, nor parapets, nor artillery, nor small arms.” Major General George Izard similarly objected, writing bitterly in a private letter to James Monroe that Armstrong’s orders “need not assume the style of lectures from a pedagogue.” He added that “Although young as a General, I am too old to be schooled so repeatedly in anticipation of my not knowing what to do in contingencies to be easily forseen.”

In one of those comic-opera touches, so common in the War of 1812, General Jacob Brown in the spring of 1814 misconstrued one of Armstrong’s alternatives as the major objective and, accordingly, set his force on the march. Upon reflection, however, he decided that he was wrong, began the return march, and then changed his mind again. Governor Daniel D. Tompkins of New York, observing these movements, wrote Armstrong to ascertain Brown’s objective, noting that Brown had written him an “unintelligible letter about retrograding.” Implausibly, Armstrong reacted by informing Brown that he had mistaken the order, but, he added, “go on & prosper. Good consequences are sometimes the result of mistakes.”

Armstrong’s indecisiveness was obviously another reason for failure. Instead of establishing fixed goals and adhering to them, he offered not only a primary objective but secondary goals as well. Weak commanders and conservative commanders invariably turned to the lesser objective, leaving the primary goal ungained. The campaign of 1813 offers a prime example. It is generally conceded by military historians that Armstrong’s plan for that campaign had substantial merit. Essentially, he proposed an attack upon the British naval base at Kingston on Lake Ontario, near the head of the St. Lawrence, as the first objective; then the American force would move against York (present-day Toronto), and, finally, seize the British posts on the Niagara peninsula, Fort George and Fort Erie. The naval historian, A. T. Mahan, asserted that the capture

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of Kingston "would have settled the whole campaign and affected decisively the issue of the war." However, General Dearborn and the American naval commander, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, decided, after "mature deliberation," that the enemy was too strongly fortified at Kingston. They proposed to attack York first, reduce Fort George, and then mass their entire force for the assault upon Kingston. Armstrong accepted the alteration of his plan, stating that it "would appear to be necessary or at least proper." The spring and summer were wasted on these expeditions which, although successful, were neither creditable to American arms nor militarily decisive. Then General Dearborn fell dangerously ill before the assault could be made upon Kingston, and so did his second in command, another Revolutionary veteran, General Morgan Lewis.

The decision was made to call General Wilkinson to the northern front, which further delayed the beginning of the campaign against Kingston. Whether Armstrong or Madison was responsible for this decision is uncertain. What is clear is that Wilkinson had succeeded in alienating virtually every administration supporter in the South, and some place had to be found for this fractious general. Wilkinson's career in Louisiana hardly recommended him for the command of the northern front, but he enjoyed a military reputation higher than those of Dearborn or Lewis. In retrospect, a worse appointment could not have been made. The other major general assigned to the northern front was Wilkinson's bitter enemy, Wade Hampton. Armstrong apparently pledged to both men that he would act as an intermediary. Since both were assigned to different parts of the front, he undoubtedly did not anticipate the problems that eventually arose from this incredible arrangement. Worse, we now know what Armstrong did not, that his rival Monroe had approached

23 Armstrong, Memorandum to the Cabinet, Feb. 8, 1813, A.S.P., I, 439-440; Alfred T. Mahan, Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812 (Boston, 1905), II, 31, 33.
24 Dearborn to Armstrong, Mar. 16, 1813, WD/LR; Armstrong to Dearborn, Mar. 29, Apr. 8, 1813, WD/LS, VI, 338-339, 354-355.
these generals, insinuated his ideas to them, and was in their warm confidence.  

Monroe's intervention arose from his fears raised by Armstrong's intention to go to the northern front to supervise the operations. When Armstrong first proposed this idea in the spring of 1813, Monroe had expressed to Madison his alarm that this would combine the powers of the President, Secretary of War, and lieutenant general in one man, and, he added ominously, "in hands where it is most dangerous." Gallatin, however, thought that "the success of the campaign may be secured by General Armstrong's presence for a few days at the army." Madison apparently agreed with Gallatin, for he gave Armstrong permission to go to the front. Thus, the War of 1812 offers the unique example of the extension of the civilian authority directly over the front-line commander.

The campaign was a fiasco. Wilkinson resented Armstrong's presence and resisted his advice. At first Wilkinson expressed a decided preference to carry operations westward, as Dearborn had done, but Armstrong stubbornly insisted that Kingston was the main objective. Wilkinson then proposed to make a feint against Kingston and move down the St. Lawrence against Montreal. Armstrong finally relented and gave his approval of this further alteration of his original plan. Armstrong did not accompany Wilkinson's expedition, which did not begin until early November. When Hampton, pleading lack of supplies, declined to join Wilkinson's force for the attack upon Montreal, Wilkinson seized this opportunity and called off the campaign.

Except for the success of Harrison in the west and the destruction of Tecumseh's Confederation, the 1813 campaign was a failure, and it was particularly a blow to Armstrong's reputation. In truth, his


conduct contributed to the disappointment. His original plan had much to commend it, but it was flawed in its execution. Armstrong lacked the drive and the tenacity to adhere inflexibly to his strategy. By permitting weak generals to alter it, he sealed the fate of the campaign. In 1814, contrary to his sensible plan of 1813, Armstrong proposed operations along the Niagara peninsula. He cited this as necessary because of the probable lack of naval control over Lake Ontario. American arms gave a creditable account of themselves during this campaign, but militarily their efforts had little effect on the strategic objectives of the war.29

It became obvious in the spring of 1814 that Madison was losing confidence in his Secretary of War. By 1814 Armstrong had infused a great deal more vigor in the War Department, but he was coming under increasing attack for military failures. Madison had permitted him wide latitude in the conduct of the office, in fact, almost a completely free hand, but forbearance ended in the spring of 1814, and pre-emptory orders began to flow from the President’s office. In time it became obvious that Madison was conducting an official investigation of Armstrong’s conduct. The accumulation of a mass of derogatory data resulted in a letter of reprimand on August 13, 1814.30 Madison criticized Armstrong’s high-handed and independent actions and proceeded to lay down rules which would guide the Secretary’s conduct in the future. The reprimand was deserved, for Armstrong had indeed frequently failed in his responsibility to coordinate his actions with the President, or even, on some occasions, to inform the President of projects undertaken. The failure was not Armstrong’s alone, of course, for there is perhaps no better testimony than this letter of reprimand to reveal that Madison had been remiss in not exercising more control over the War Department.

It may be speculated that Madison’s changed stance toward Armstrong was attributable, at least in part, to Monroe, who had waged an almost unremitting campaign against Armstrong ever since he came into the War Department. Monroe’s suspicions of Armstrong were reciprocated. In their mutual distrust of each other

29 Armstrong to Madison, Apr. 30, 1814, National Archives, War Department, Secretary’s Office, Letters Sent to the President; Adams, History, VIII, 34–90 passim.
they were ever willing to attribute the worst of motives to the other's conduct. Both were ready to adopt less than honorable means to destroy the influence of the other. Their conflict was nearly constant and was creditable to neither. Monroe's hostility to Armstrong was reflected in his opposition in the cabinet to Armstrong's plans, which was at least overt, but there is evidence that the Virginian also sought to undermine Armstrong's position through his friends in Congress, and through a surreptitious effort to influence the officers in the army.31

Armstrong was by no means blameless not only in his conduct toward Monroe, but also in his treatment of the President. He apparently viewed Madison's conciliatory disposition toward him as weakness, and he grasped for powers considerably beyond those normally exercised by cabinet secretaries. He never felt his position was secure. During the winter of 1814 he carried out a brief, but futile, flirtation with the Federalists, seeking to counterbalance Monroe's friends in Congress.32 There were, invariably, charges that Armstrong was advancing his personal favorites and was intriguing to build a force which would be under his sway, but Madison, a jealous Secretary of State, and a watchful Senate would never have permitted this to happen. There were many who believed that Madison was intimidated by Armstrong. General Wilkinson later reflected, "I had long known that the poor President was a nose of wax in his fingers," and, he added, "I am indeed shocked when I take a retrospect of the evidence of the terror in which that minister kept more than one great man at Washington."33 Wilkinson, of course, frequently exaggerated, but the evidence is clear that Armstrong, in splendid isolation, attempted to run the War Department virtually free of oversight from the President, with Monroe sniping

33 Wilkinson, Memoirs, I, 741n, 762.
and attempting to undermine a man he thought dangerous. A less likely scenario for the successful conduct of the war cannot be imagined.

The dénouement came, of course, in the debacle that led to the burning of Washington. This affair presented in microcosm a replica of the failures of the war. Ironically, Armstrong was victimized by his own policies. His contentions that coastal fortifications were an unnecessary extravagance had left the entire coast exposed to the depredations of the enemy. Madison took charge of the defenseless situation of the capital in a cabinet meeting on July 1, 1814, when he created, without consulting Armstrong, the Tenth Military District, which included Washington.  

No doubt, Monroe figured in this development, for he had been urging more defenses for the capital for a long time. Armstrong was shunted aside, an affront which he resented in the greatest degree. He deliberately refused to cooperate with Brigadier General William Winder, who was chosen by Madison to command the district. Winder had very little military talent and needed all the help he could get, but Armstrong, who entertained no fears for the safety of the district, made no great effort to provide Winder with a staff or with the necessary supplies for his army. Affairs simply drifted while Winder traveled constantly around his district, studying the terrain when he should have been in Washington organizing his affairs. Unlike Armstrong, Monroe and Madison freely offered advice to Winder, and Madison even gave military orders to him regarding the movement of troops. When the British landed in mid-August, approximately forty miles below Washington, Monroe volunteered to scout the enemy, a suggestion which won Madison's approval. As the enemy approached, Winder, uncertain of the British objective, marched and countermarched his forces, exhausting them and himself but not in any way impeding the advance of the invaders. On the day of the battle of Bladensburg, August 24, Monroe was early on the field and assisted in arranging the hastily collected militia. He was thus not only the first cabinet officer to act as a scout, he was also the first to place troops in battle

34 See the Armstrong statement in the report of the House Committee on the "Capture of Washington," Annals, 13th Cong., 3rd Sess., appendix, 1565; Madison, memorandum of cabinet meeting, July 1, 1814, Madison Papers.
order. Madison also rode out to the battlefield with his cabinet, including Armstrong, but they withdrew when the battle began. The American militia, although greatly outnumbering the enemy, was poorly disciplined, incompetently led and managed, and it proved no match for the British regulars. Quickly thrown into disarray, the militia fled. The British proceeded to Washington and burned the public buildings. Armstrong’s conduct during this whole period had been strangely passive, considering his previous proclivity to interfere with his commanders. He maintained later that Madison’s letter of reprimand had been intended to gag him, which is not likely, but it did, nevertheless, moderate his actions. Ironically, the interference with the commander was on the part of Madison and Monroe. In this regard Armstrong’s conduct was the more correct, and the historian, Henry Adams, has asserted that “Armstrong was the only man connected with the defense of Washington whom no one charged with being ridiculous.” Nevertheless, he was charged with being responsible for—even wishing for—the destruction of the capital. Madison’s biographer has echoed these charges, asserting that Armstrong’s “neglect and resistance could hardly have been greater if the motive had been sabotage.”

The charge is unfair, but Armstrong was never popular with the citizens of Washington, and his failure to provide defenses, as well as his lassitude during the event, marked him as a convenient scapegoat. The Washington militia held a mutinous meeting, demanding Armstrong’s removal. Madison, rather than capitulate to such a demand, suggested to Armstrong that he should leave town for a few days. Accordingly, Armstrong went to Baltimore and from there on September 4 submitted his resignation. In a letter to the Baltimore Patriot, he attributed his removal to the “humors of a village mob, stimulated by faction and led by folly.” The burning

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35 William Winder statement, Annals, 13th Cong., 3rd Sess., appendix, 1602–1621; Monroe to Armstrong, Aug. 18, 1814, and Monroe to Madison, Aug. 20, 1814, WD/LR.
36 Adams, History, VIII, 155.
of Washington, therefore, led to his removal from the War Department, and, although he lived until 1843, he never again held another political office. If there had been more money available, there would no doubt have been more adequate fortifications. Had there been a competent regular force, the militia would not have been relied upon. Of incompetent commanders, there was a surfeit in the War of 1812, but, no doubt under better circumstances, with a competent staff, a regular army, well supplied, even Winder would have performed adequately. As it was, there was entirely too much interference in the General’s affairs by his superiors. Congress was not in session at that time; had it been it probably would have greatly added to the confusion and accomplished nothing.

There is much to condemn in the conduct of many individuals in the Washington affair, just as there is in many other events during this war, but it is difficult to conceive a more implausible event. However, the War of 1812 is replete with incredible events. One historian has even labeled it “The Incredible War.”39 Upon its termination, Americans preferred to dwell on its positive aspects, and there were indeed creditable moments for the Army, such as Chippewa, Lundy’s Lane, and New Orleans, but these were due largely to the efforts of outstanding individuals. Names such as William Henry Harrison, Jacob Brown, Winfield Scott, Alexander Macomb and Andrew Jackson attest to the valor of American arms. Nevertheless, the Army’s failures stand out as the general rule in contrast to the exceptions noted.

In retrospect, it would be unfair to blame Armstrong. Although he lacked to a degree the scope and drive of a good administrator, the War Department was made more efficient under his charge and the beginnings of a staff system first appeared. The supply system was improved and some accountability brought into its management, but the gains were minimal. Shackled by a miniscule budget, Armstrong’s priorities were, by and large, proper, if not popular. He was also shackled with a large number of old Revolutionary officers, imprudently appointed, often for political reasons. By the end of the war a new generation of professional, extremely competent, young officers had been elevated to command positions,

39 Hitsman, The Incredible War of 1812.
primarily due to Armstrong's initiative. On the minus side, Armstrong's grandiose concept of his role as Secretary of War led to excessive interference with his commanders, and even saw the notably unsuccessful experiment of the Secretary actually going to the front to supervise operations. His directives lacked clarity, thereby permitting weak commanders to direct their efforts at unimportant objectives. The two major strategic points in Canada, Kingston and Montreal, were never seriously threatened. Not only was there a notable lack of cooperation between the President and his Secretary, there was, in fact, a lack of communication. To this was added actual hostility, overt and covert, between Armstrong and a cabinet officer, complicated with strained relations between the Secretary and other cabinet officers.

The conditions of the War of 1812 were hardly ideal. However, the wretched condition of the American Army, ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-paid, lacking discipline, lacking leadership, was not unique. Other armies had faced similar problems, including the American Revolutionary Army, but the War of 1812 was marked by a stifling vacillation that was a manifestation of the lack of a sense of unity, a sense of purpose, a will to win. Enlistments were low, forcing a reliance upon raw, untrained militia. Congress performed sadly in its first declared war. It failed to provide the country with the legislation necessary to win. In short, there is much that can be learned by analyzing the conduct of this conflict from a broader perspective. Sadly, American arms fell short of success on many, many occasions, but the blame must be shared by the legislative and executive branches of the government, as well as by the apathetic public. Battles are often won or lost in due proportion to the conduct of those behind the lines, and the American Army was ill-served during the War of 1812.

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