

How Historically Significant was the 1812 Battle of Detroit?

By Allan Hux

Suggested grade level: intermediate / senior

Suggested time: up to 2 periods

Brief Description of the Task

Students consider the circumstances that led to the Battle of Detroit and its dramatic outcome using group role-playing strategies.

Historical Thinking Concepts

- Historical Perspective-Taking
- Historical Significance
- Use of Evidence (primary and secondary)

Learning Goals

Students will:

1. Explore the different perspectives of First Nations, Great Britain, the colonists in Upper Canada, and the U.S.A.
2. Recognize the importance of the First Nations alliance with the British.
3. Examine the historical significance of the Battle of Detroit in August, 1812.

Materials

Photocopies of handouts.

Masking tape, chalk, twine or string to create outline map of Upper Canada on the floor.

Prior Knowledge

It would be an asset for students to:

- recognize some of the major causes and events leading up to the outbreak of the War of 1812

Assessment

- Individual student contributions to group work and group performance and a group Tableau.
- Teacher feedback to groups.
- Individual reflections on learning.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Focus Question: How significant was the British and First Nations victory at Detroit in July-August 1812?

1. Display a map of Upper and Lower Canada and the Ohio Country prior to the War of 1812 and have the students identify the areas of Canadian, First Nations and American settlement. See **Appendix 1: Map of the Canadas and the Ohio Country.**)

2. Provide students with **Appendix 2: American, British and First Nations' Strategies** at the beginning of the war in June 1812. Divide the class into several groups of First Nations, British and Americans. There should be 3 to 4 students in each group and depending on the size of the class, there should be 1, 2 or 3 sets of 3 groups that would accommodate up to 12, 24, or 36 students in a class.

Set 1		Set 2		Set 3	
Group	No. of Students	Group	No. of Students	Group	No. of Students
First Nations	3 - 4	First Nations	3 - 4	First Nations	3 - 4
British	3 - 4	British	3 - 4	British	3 - 4
Americans	3 - 4	Americans	3 - 4	Americans	3 - 4
Total number of students	9-12		+ 9 -12 = 18 - 24		+ 9 -12 = 27 - 36

3. Have students in their groups read and discuss the war plans of their leaders in Appendix 2. Ask students:

- What is the difference between primary and secondary historical sources?

- Which of the sources in Appendix 2 are secondary sources?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each type of source?

4. Have students create a rough floor map of the waterway from the Detroit River to Montreal on the floor of the classroom using masking tape, twine, or chalk. Include: Detroit River, Lake Erie, Niagara River, Lake Ontario, St. Lawrence River to Island of Montreal. Also include a parallel line south of Lake Erie running westward that represents the Ohio River. Give students a copy of the map of the area, **Appendix 1: Map of the Canadas and the Ohio Country**.

5. Ask the groups of students in turn to role-play their ideal war strategy that would lead to a victory for their group. Have each group explain what would happen to the other 2 groups if their strategy was successful.

6. Review what historians mean by **historical significance**.

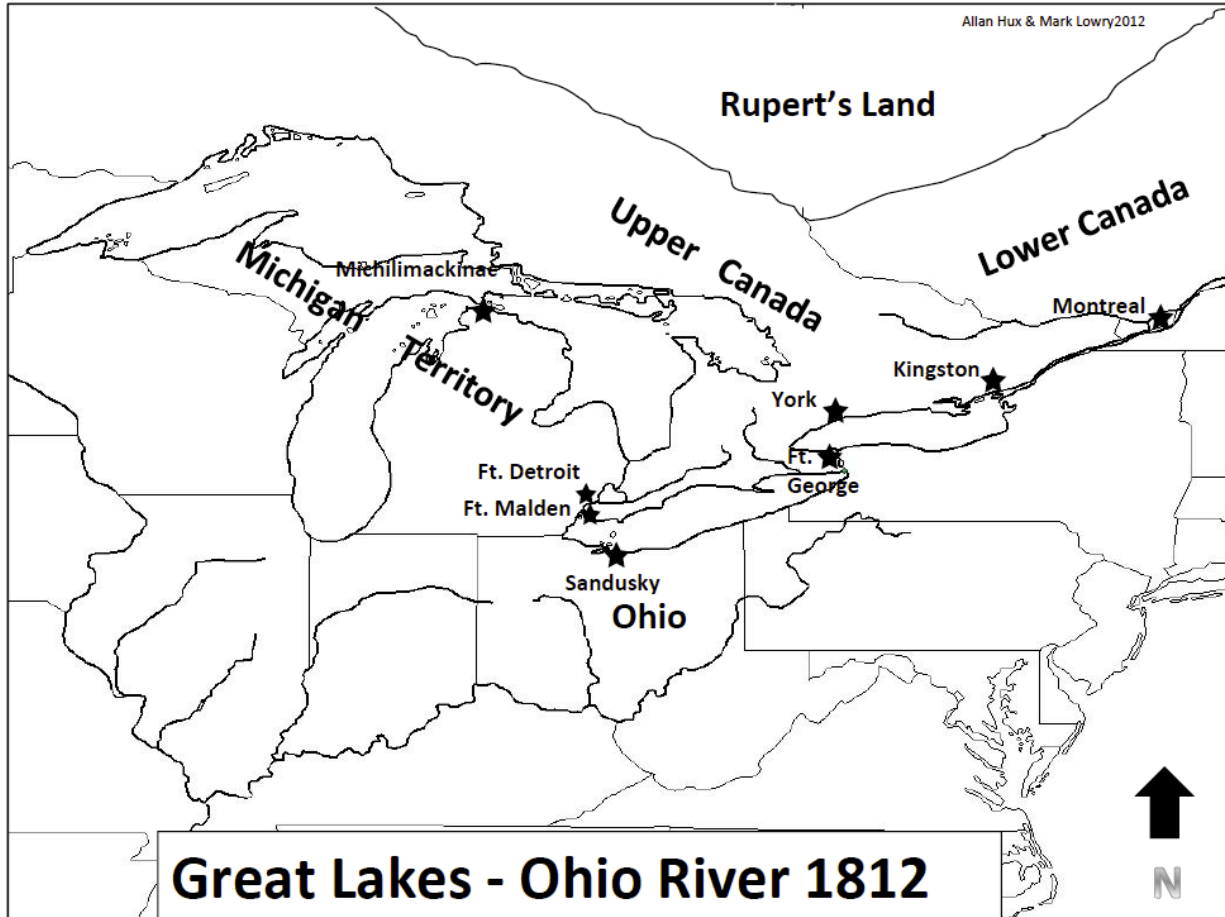
- Was an event or a person or a group significant?
- What was the turning point in the Battle of Detroit?
- Was the Battle of Detroit a significant turning point in the war?
- How did it change the strategy of each of the groups: First Nations, British and Americans?
- Why is the battle of Detroit remembered by the First Nations and the British, but often ignored by Americans when they look back on the War of 1812?

7. Looking specifically at the Battle of Detroit, have students read a brief account of what happened in July and August 1812 in **Appendix 3: Battle of Detroit**. Then ask each group to create a tableau to dramatically represent the key point for their group in the battle. Each group selects a speaker who steps out of their tableau to explain what each of the members of the group are doing and how this contributes to the power of their scene. Ask students to record their planning notes for their scene on **Appendix 4: Reflections on the Battle of Detroit**, and to take brief point-form notes on one of the scenes presented by each of the other 2 groups at the Battle of Detroit.

Extension:

You can differentiate the lesson by assigning some students to read **Appendix 5: The View of the Battle of Detroit at the Time** and add to their **Appendix 4: Reflection on the Battle of Detroit**. Appendix 5 explains how the Battle of Detroit changed the war strategy of the First Nations, British and Americans and how significant the Battle of Detroit was in the War of 1812.

Appendix 1 - Map of the Canadas and the Ohio Country



Appendix 2 – American, British and First Nations' Strategies

A) American

1. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Monticello, Aug. 20, '07

“An account, apparently worthy of credit, in the Albany paper, is, that the British authorities are withdrawing all their cannon & magazines from Upper Canada to Quebec, considering the former not tenable, & the latter their only fast-hold.”

The Thomas Jefferson Papers

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28tj100201%29%29>

2. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Monticello, June 29, 1812.

“Dear Sir,--I duly received your favor of the 22d covering the declaration of war. It is entirely popular here, the only opinion being that it should have been issued the moment the season admitted the militia to enter Canada. ... To continue the war popular, two things are necessary mainly, 1. To stop Indian barbarities. The conquest of Canada will do this.”

The Thomas Jefferson Papers

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28tj110108%29%29>

3. Brigadier-General William Hull to U.S. Secretary of War William Eustis, from Sandwich,, Upper Canada, 15 July 1812

“Dear Sir,

The Canadian militia are deserting from [Fort] Malden in large parties; about sixty [60] came in yesterday. I send them to their homes and give them protection. The probability is that the greatest part of them will desert in a few days.

The force under my command and the movement into this province [of U.C.] has had a great effect on the Indians. They are daily returning to their villages. ... The object is to induce all the nations to be neutral. I furnish them with provisions.... I have reason to believe the number of hostile Indians is decreasing. The inhabitants have received my proclamation with great satisfaction....

I will march the army to Malden as soon as the necessary preparations can be made for the siege.”

E.A.Cruikshank (ed.) *Documents on the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit 1812*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau 1912, p. 60.

**4. Thomas Jefferson to William Duane, August 4, 1812
Monticello, August 4, 1812.**

“The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching, and will give us experience for the attack of Halifax the next, and the final expulsion of England from the American continent.”

The Thomas Jefferson Papers

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B) British

1. Lieutenant-Governor Francis Gore to assembled First Nations 11 July 1808, Fort Malden, Upper Canada

(as summarized by an historian)

“Gore warned the Indians against those who would disturb the peace of the country or Britain’s historic friendship with the tribes ... [such as] American officials. The Indians should [follow] the “ancient customs and manners” ... and their association with the redcoats [British]... Lieutenant-Governor Gore ... hinted that Britain did not recognize any of the northwestern land purchases made by the United States. The King, said Gore, held the Ohio boundary of 1768 “sacred.””

As related by John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life*, Henry Holt & Co, New York 1997, p. 173

2. Major-General Isaac Brock to Governor-in-Chief of British North America Sir George Prevost, 6 and 25 February 1812

“Sir, ...

I am anxious to call attention ... [to] the inadequacy of the Military force to defen[d] the extended frontier... The more information I receive the stronger I am impressed with the [need] ... to act offensively [at Amherstburg.] ... [T]he greatest good would be Sure to result from it – The Indians in the vicinity would ... willingly co-operate with us; ... soon to be followed by the numerous tribes living on the Missouri who are ... very [angry] against the Americans.

...

The Americans are ... busily ... raising Six Companies of Rangers [to overawe] the Indians... Their [plots and] intrigues among the different tribes are carried on openly ... and no expense is spared ... Divisions are ... sowed among our Indian friends [E]ach day that the officers of the Indian department are restrained from interfering in the Concerns of the Indians – each time they advise peace, and withhold the [usual]

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supply of Ammunition, their influence will diminish, till at length they lose it altogether – It will then become a question whether that country [of western Upper Canada] can be maintained.”

E.A.Cruikshank (ed.) *Documents on the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit 1812*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau 1912, p. 16-17.

3. Governor-in-Chief of British North America Sir George Prevost to Major-General Isaac Brock, 31 July 1812

“... Your supposition of my slender means [of military support] is but too correct. ... You may rely upon [my] every exertion being made to preserve uninterrupted the communication between Kingston and Montreal, and that I will also give all possible support to your [efforts] to overcome every difficulty.”

E.A.Cruikshank (ed.) *Documents on the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit 1812*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau 1912, p. 114.

C) First Nations

1. Chief Tecumseh of the Shawnee Nation to Lieutenant-Governor Francis Gore of Upper Canada, Fort Malden, U.C., June 1808

(as summarized by an historian)

““Had Tecumseh intended fighting the Americans, he would have leaped upon the British [invitations], for the redcoats alone were capable of supplying the powder, lead, arms, and provisions the Indians needed to wage war. But although the Shawnee chief was courteous, he showed no desire to take the King [of Great Britain] by the hand. He admitted building a multiracial settlement on the Wabash to defend the land, and said that he would strike the Americans if necessary, but “at present” he wished to stay out of the quarrels [between] the whites.

His experience of the last war had left him deeply distrustful of the redcoats. At that time they had refused to field a respectable force to help the Indians, and when the tribes were defeated they had closed the gates of Fort Miamis to the flying warriors. It had not been forgotten, and Tecumseh believed that several chiefs had been killed because they were shut out of the British fort in 1794.”

John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life*, Henry Holt & Co, New York 1997, p. 172

2. Chief Tecumseh of the Shawnee Nation to British representatives and assembled First Nations', winter 1811-1812

“Father and Brothers Hurons, We are happy to see You and to hear Your and our Father's Speech. ...

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Father and Brothers! We will now in a few words declare to You our whole heart. If we hear of the Big Knives [Americans] coming towards our villages to speak peace, we will receive them: but if We hear of any of our people being hurt by them or if they unprovokedly advance against us in a hostile manner, be assured we will defend ourselves like men. And if we hear of any of our people having been killed, We will immediately send to all the Nations on or towards the Mississippi River and all this Island will rise like one man. Then Father and Brothers it will be impossible for You...to restore peace between us [and the Americans].”

E. A. Cruikshank E.A.Cruikshank (ed.) *Documents on the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit 1812*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau 1912, pp. 34-35

3. Report of Esidore Chaine, Huron Ambassador sent in the winter of 1811-1812 by Colonel William Claus to Chief Tecumseh of the Shawnee Nation. Report forwarded to General Isaac Brock, 16 June 1812

“Tecumseh ... advanced [to meet] Chaine with 12 different Nations ... [with] about 600 men, 2 leading Chiefs and 2 War Chiefs of each Nation ... Tecumseh left at his Village 300 men They have been constantly employed in making Bows and Arrows, not having any ammunition. Tecumseh was much dissatisfied with his Brother [the Prophet] for engaging Governor Harrison last fall as their plans were not sufficiently matured. He further states, that Governor Harrison held a General Council about the Full Moon in May, and called on the different Nations to deliver up their men who had committed murder on the Big-Knives (meaning the Americans). ... [I]f he did not hear from them ... , he would march against their nation and cut them off. Chaine mentioned to me that the Indians knew the Americans too well to believe that their intention was to attack only the one nation, and if they struck a blow, it would be against the whole, and that they would not be asleep. All the nations are aware of the desire they Americans have of destroying the Red people and taking their Country from them.

On examining the issues of Ammunition to Indians at Amherstburg for the last six months, I find that in Powder they have received only 1,211 pounds, making a difference of 1,921 pounds less than at former periods. Of Lead, not 1 ounce has been issued to them since last December, which will account for the increased consumption of provisions [we issued to them.] [Note: Having no lead the Indians cannot supply themselves with food by hunting.] “

E. A. Cruikshank, E.A.Cruikshank (ed.) *Documents on the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit 1812*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau 1912, pp.32-33

Appendix 3 - Battle of Detroit

American Brigadier-General William Hull was a veteran of the American Revolution and the Governor of the Michigan Territory prior to the War. He believed that a strong American force sent from Ohio and Kentucky could use Fort Detroit as a base to launch a successful invasion of the Canadas. Hull believed that a show of force would convince the First Nations such as the Wyandots and the Ottawas to remain neutral. He provided them with provisions to feed their families in the hopes of buying their neutrality. As well he believed that the settlers along the Detroit River who were mainly French Canadians would be willing to remain neutral or even support an American takeover of the entire area. As well, Hull was confident that once the American forces landed on Canadian soil that many Upper Canadian militiamen would desert the British and return to their farms. Some militiamen who were recent immigrants from the U.S.A. would actually welcome the creation of a republican form of government.

Hull slowly gathered a force of about 2500 at Detroit on July 5 1812. On July 12 Hull led his troops across the Detroit River and occupied the little town of Sandwich [now Windsor]. On July 13 he issued a Proclamation to the Inhabitants of Canada. The Proclamation promised to protect them, to free them from British tyranny, and to give them "Civil, Political and Religious Liberty". It also threatened "a war of extermination" against any militiamen who fought with the Indians. "No white man found fighting by the Side of an Indian will be taken prisoner." To feed his army Hull sent Colonel Duncan McArthur and his Rangers to collect supplies. Instead of buying provisions from the Canadian farmers and merchants, the American soldiers seized then and destroyed much of their property. These actions quickly alienated the Upper Canadian settlers.

General Brock soon answered Hull's Proclamation with one of his own on July 22. He reminded Upper Canadians that they had received land and enjoyed prosperity under the government and laws of Great Britain which guaranteed them "access to every market" in the world and protected them from re-conquest by France.

The town of Amherstburg and the British Fort Malden were 20 miles south of Sandwich. Instead of marching on the fort, Hull waited until his artillery guns could be put on carriages to be hauled to attack Fort Malden. General Hull was also worried about his supply lines and the need to feed his army. He sent troops back to meet the supply wagons being sent from Ohio to Detroit. Tecumseh and his warriors ambushed

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this American company at Brownstown and the Americans retreated to Detroit. On July 26 Hull learned that the British led by Captain Roberts and their Indian allies led by Robert Dickson with warriors from the Sioux, Chippewa, Winnebago, Menomenee and Ottawa Nations had successfully captured Fort Michilimackinac on July 17. Now General Hull began to worry that a large number of First Nations warriors were on their way to attack Fort Detroit. The British controlled Lakes Huron, St. Clair, Erie and the Detroit River and he feared that more British regulars, militia and Indian allies from the Grand River would soon arrive at Fort Malden. On August 7, General Hull decided to retreat back across the Detroit River to Fort Detroit.

General Isaac Brock arrived at Amherstburg on the evening of August 13 and met Chief Tecumseh in the home of the British Indian agent, Matthew Elliot. They discussed their strategy. Tecumseh recommended an immediate attack on Fort Detroit. Brock's officers advised against this move, but General Brock agreed.

Brock to Tecumseh

"I have fought against the enemies of our father, the king beyond the great lake, and they have never seen my back. ...I am come here to fight his enemies on this side of the great lake, and now desire with my soldiers to take lessons from you and your warriors, that I may learn how to make war in these great forests."

Tecumseh to Brock

"[T]heir father [the King] beyond the great salt lake had at last consented to let his warriors come to the assistance of his red children, who had never ceased to remain steadfast in their friendship and were now all ready to shed their last drop of blood in their great father's service."

(As quoted in James Laxer, *Tecumseh and Brock: The War of 1812*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2012, pp. 146 & 149)

Although the British and First Nations forces were outnumbered by the Americans, they had the element of surprise. And General Hull was very fearful of an Indian attack. His wife, daughter and grandchildren were with him and he was afraid of a massacre at the hands of First Nations' warriors.

On August 15, General Brock sent a message to General Hull demanding that he surrender.

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“The force at my disposal authorizes me to require of you the immediate surrender of Fort Detroit. It is far from my inclination to join in a war of extermination, but you must be aware, that the numerous body of Indians who have attached themselves to my troops will be beyond my control the moment the contest commences.”

General Hull took 3 hours to write his reply:

“I have no other reply to make, than to inform you that I am prepared to meet any force, which may be at your disposal, and any consequences which result from any exertion of it you may think proper to make.”

E. A. Cruikshank(ed.) *Documents on the Invasion of Canada and the Surrender of Detroit 1812*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau 1912, pp. 144-145.

But the seeds of doubt and despair had been planted in General Hull’s mind. General Brock ordered his artillery battery in Sandwich to shell Fort Detroit and the American cannons replied. During the night Tecumseh and his warriors slipped into their canoes and quietly crossed the Detroit River. At dawn Brock led his troops in many small boats across the Detroit River protected by British gunships and cannon. Brock dressed 300 militiamen in the uniforms of British regulars to make the Americans think that they were facing more soldiers. Tecumseh had his warriors march and dance across an open space in the woods that made Hull think that there were 1500 warriors with the British forces. Hull now believed that he was outnumbered and feared that the warriors would revenge the attacks on their villages and lands. He remembered that Brock had warned that he would not be able to control the Indians once the fighting started. Hull’s wife, daughter and granddaughter were in the fort along with many other women and children from the town of Detroit. Lieutenant Porter Hanks, the Commander from Fort Michilimackinac, had been released and had come to Fort Detroit. He was killed by the British cannon barrage inside the fort along with some other men.

General Hull decided to seek a cease-fire with General Brock under a white flag carried by his son, Abraham Hull. He asked for 3 days, but Brock gave him 3 hours. Hull then surrendered and the British and their First Nation allies captured 2500 muskets, 39 heavy guns, 40 barrels of gun powder, a large 16 gun ship, many small water craft, 100 pack animals, 300 cattle and many more provisions. Brock released the Michigan and Ohio militiamen on their promise not to fight again. General Hull and 582 American regular soldiers were taken by ship to Fort Erie and then to Kingston. Then they were marched to Montreal and paraded as prisoners of war. General Hull was released at Quebec City and sent home. He was tried and found guilty for cowardice and sentenced to the shot. President Madison pardoned him and spared his life.

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In the space of 1 month, the British and First Nation allies had scored 2 victories at Fort Michilimackinac and Fort Detroit. The British had suddenly changed the course of the war. They secured their western frontier, gained the confidence and support of many First Nations under the leadership of Tecumseh, and persuaded many of the recent late Loyalist immigrants from the U.S.A. that Britain would vigorously defend Upper Canada from American attacks.

Appendix 4 - Reflections on the Battle of Detroit

1. What was a key turning point in the Battle of Detroit for your group (Americans, British, or First Nations)?

How will your group demonstrate this scene in your Tableau? What should your speaker tell the class?

2. What was the key point in the Battle of Detroit for the other 2 groups? How was this different from your group's key point?

i)

ii)

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3. How did the Battle of Detroit change the war strategy for your group?

4. How did the Battle of Detroit change the war strategies of the other 2 groups?

i)

ii)

5. How significant was the Battle of Detroit in the War of 1812?

Appendix 5 – The View of the Battle of Detroit at the Time

1. Sir George Prevost, Governor-in-Chief and Commander of the Forces of British North America to the Earl of Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Montreal, 26 August 1812

“I feel the greatest Satisfaction in [telling] to Your Lordship a letter ... from Major General Brock, announcing to me the surrender of Fort Detroit on the 16th [August] by Brigadier General Hull with an Army under his command exceeding 2,500 Men, together with 25 pieces of Ordinance [cannons]. .. Which have led to the successful termination of the Campaign on the Western frontier of Upper Canada.

2. Thomas Jefferson to William Duane, Monticello, October 1, 1812

“The detestable treason of Hull has, indeed, excited a deep anxiety in all breasts. The depression was in the first moment gloomy and portentous. But it has been succeeded by a revived animation, and a determination to meet the occurrence with increased efforts; and I have so much confidence in the vigorous minds and bodies of our countrymen, as to be fearless as to the final issue. ... I fear that Hull's surrender has been more than the mere loss of a year to us. Besides bringing on us the whole mass of savage nations, whom fear and not affection has kept in quiet, there is danger that in giving time to an enemy who can send reinforcements of regulars faster than we can raise them, they may strengthen Canada and Halifax beyond the assailment of our lax and divided powers. Perhaps, however, the patriotic efforts from Kentucky and Ohio, by recalling the British force to its upper posts, may yet give time to [General] Dearborn to strike a blow ... [P]ossession of the river [to] Montreal ... which is practicable, would give us the upper country at our leisure, and close forever the scenes of the tomahawk and scalping knife.”

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28tj110110%29%29>

3. Representative Henry Clay to the U.S. Congress 9 January 1813

“The disasters of the war admonish us, we are told, of the necessity of terminating the contest. ...It is true, that the disgrace of Detroit remains to be wiped off. That is a subject on which I cannot trust my feelings, it is not fitting I should speak. But this much I will say, it was an event which no human foresight could have anticipated, and for which administration cannot be justly censured. It was the parent of all the misfortunes we have experienced on land. But for it the Indian war would have been in a great measure

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prevented or terminated; the ascendancy on Lake Erie acquired, and the war pushed perhaps to Montreal. With the exception of that event, the war, even upon the land, has been attended by a series of the most brilliant exploits, which, whatever interest they may inspire on this side of the [Appalachian] mountains, have given the greatest pleasure on the other... .”

http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=875&chapter=64054&layout=html&Itemid=27