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Spring 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Cline, Wesley C., "The National Intelligencer Validating Cowardice: How a Washington D.C. Newspaper Redefined Defeat into Republican Victory" (2020). *Student Publications*. 800.  
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# The National Intelligencer Validating Cowardice: How a Washington D.C. Newspaper Redefined Defeat into Republican Victory

## Abstract

The fall and burning of Washington D.C. without substantial resistance by the American army and militia was initially an obvious disgrace, however the widely read Washington based newspaper, The National Intelligencer, sought to rewrite this story of defeat into a narrative highlighting republican virtue. Utilizing preexisting stereotypes perpetuated in their paper of British soldiers acting immoral, the staff of The National Intelligencer articulated that the men defending Washington had to return to their individual homes on account of the impending barbarism and savagery of the British invaders, therefore vindicating the militiamen of their lack of resistance and praising their virtuous paternalism.

## Keywords

War of 1812, Washington D.C., History, Politics, Military

## Disciplines

History | Journalism Studies | United States History

## Comments

Written for HIST 343: The Early Republic.

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*The National Intelligencer Validating Cowardice*

*How a Washington D.C. Newspaper Redefined Defeat into Republican Victory*

Wesley Cline

On the morning of August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1814, it became brutally apparent that the British forces under Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane and Rear Admiral George Cockburn intended to seize Washington D.C. through a pincer movement which would envelop the Capital and Baltimore in a single action. Determined to hold off the onslaught, the United States Army prepared to intercept the column of British General Robert Ross before he could reach the city. Utilizing the population of Washington and the surrounding communities as militia, the American ranks swelled from 350 regulars to 5,000 total troops. British forces were estimated at 4,500, with only 1,200 meeting the Americans who now outnumbered them more than 4 to 1.<sup>1</sup>

The two armies collided at the town of Bladensburg, Maryland around 10am. While numerically inferior, the British troops were trained to a level far superior to even the most veteran American units. A segment of British forces initially charged the American line, weathering substantial fire from artillery. Suddenly the sky was alive with a barrage of rockets screaming through the air towards the bewildered Americans. While almost always inaccurate, rockets were a new innovation brought to the American battlefield by the British, terrifying because of their sound and explosive capabilities. Unlike traditional artillery, rockets could be seen soaring through the sky and down upon their target, creating a spectacle of beauty and terror that transfixed the gaze of many an American. Most soldiers in the U.S. Army had heard of this new technology when it was implemented against Napoleon, but now witnessed the horrifying invention firsthand. Taking advantage of the terror-stricken American force, the remaining British infantry steadily advanced on the American line, despite coming under increasingly intense artillery and small arms fire. The outnumbered British forces closing in on the American

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony S. Pitch, The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 71-72.

infantry, coupled with the rockets shrieking overhead, led to a portion of the militia retreating in disorder. Once some of the soldiers began to flee it had a domino effect on the other militiamen, shortly all the U.S. forces were retreating in absolute chaos. A greater disgrace was yet to come, the road to Washington was open.

British troops began their advance on Washington having lost over 240 men at Bladensburg, although now, there would be no more resistance. The depleted American forces slowly crawling back into the Capital were met by 700 militiamen from Virginia. Even with these reinforcements, it was clear to the U.S. command staff that there would be no holding the city. Too many militiamen had returned to their homes and there were too few regular troops to combat the British. The United States Army Senior Officers agreed that it was best to abandon the city to preserve what men they had. Washington was defenseless.<sup>2</sup>

In the late afternoon two senior British officers entered the Capital with their entourage, finding a lone defender who promptly fired at them and ran. His house was the first to be burned.<sup>3</sup> The regular army soon marched on the city, combing through all major government buildings before setting them aflame. Private property was generally spared, and civilians unharmed. President James Madison and others who had fled the city were said to have been unable to tell if it was a single building or the whole city burning from their location across the Potomac, so intense were the fires against the night sky.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Anthony S. Pitch, The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 85-89.

<sup>3</sup>Anthony S. Pitch, The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 99-100.

<sup>4</sup>Anthony S. Pitch, The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 125-126.

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, the rising sun illuminated the destruction of Washington DC, and with it fear the same fate would soon befall the country. The sacking of the nation's Capital, although quite limited in scale, forced Americans to justify not only their inability to defend this most symbolically important city, but also their reasons to continue fighting. In the days which followed the chaos of Bladensburg and the abandonment of Washington, American newspapers such as the *Daily National Intelligencer* would portray the British as the antithesis of republican values. They were attempting to salvage a moral victory despite the clear physical defeat.

Republican newspapers such as the *Daily National Intelligencer* were known for their pronounced nationalistic sentiment and unwavering support of the war. While it was not a new tactic to construct a narrative of barbaric British soldiers terrorizing moral Americans, the destruction of Washington legitimized many of these claims, giving republicans what they viewed was the moral high ground and a rallying cry for the nation. Dominating these arguments were messages of the sacrosanct home, women as beacons of virtue, and the civilized male soldier, all being violated by the “barbarism” of British warfare, culminating in the flames of Washington.

The home took on new importance in early nineteenth century America, now serving increasingly as a retreat from the hustle and chaos of everyday life. The ideal republican man had a home in which his wife and family resided where he could retire at the end of a long day, a sanctuary from the issues raging outside. Throughout the war, *The National Intelligencer* printed and reprinted reports highlighting the lack of respect British soldiers had for the American household, commonly referring to the actions of British troops as those more fitting for

“Hessians” or “Spaniards.”<sup>5</sup> This xenophobic characterization further emphasizes the appalling and egregious nature of property desecration to Americans of this period. Surely a refined Englishmen couldn’t stoop to those levels of warfare.

If the family home was sacred, the White House was sacrosanct. Therefore, when the British burned the national home in 1814, they simultaneously violated the chastity of domestic United States and made the war personal for even the most apolitical of Americans. This was no longer a report of homes being burned on the periphery of America through guerilla raids, this signaled that now even the most substantial domestic property was liable to be targeted by the “barbaric” Englishmen. President Madison immediately rebuked the British Army’s burning of his residence as a “disregard of the principles of humanity.”<sup>6</sup> This invasion of the household particularly infuriated Americans because it also marked a transgression against women, understood to be the managers of the domestic sphere as well as holders of virtue.<sup>7</sup> British forces were commonly accused of instigating and perpetrating lootings, home destruction of all kinds, and sexual assault.<sup>8</sup> Reports of these crimes outraged the American public, particularly in the towns of Hampton and Havre de Grace, where reports of “every detestable violation of humanity” appears to have occurred with officers equally complicit.<sup>9</sup>

A subliminal message pervasive in many articles is that of the British being widow makers, killing noble American men who would never be able to return to care and provide for

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<sup>5</sup> "Depredations of the Enemy." Daily National Intelligencer (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), June 17, 1813: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>6</sup> The National Intelligencer (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), September 3rd, 1814.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Welter. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." American Quarterly 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74.

<sup>8</sup> "Depredations of the Enemy." Daily National Intelligencer (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), June 17, 1813: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>9</sup> "British Influence. from the Aurora." Daily National Intelligencer (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), August 13, 1814: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

their families. A reoccurring trope was that of the defenseless wounded soldier killed after or in place of surrendering. By emphasizing the American men as incapacitated, newspapers such as *The National Intelligencer* emphasized the barbarism of the killing. Soldiers are expected to die on battlefields, but only when they are combatants. Killing soldiers while wounded or surrendering was equated to the murder of civilians.<sup>10</sup>

If these barbaric actions had a personification, it was Admiral George Cockburn. *The National Intelligencer* effectively lumped every accusation possible onto the man who gained a reputation for the “depredations (he committed) on the works of genius and taste.”<sup>11</sup> The primary villain for Washingtonians due to his burning of the city, Cockburn was portrayed in the newspaper as a heinous villain, one who was claimed to have been “despised as much by his officers as he is our citizens.”<sup>12</sup> He had led a substantial number of raids along the American coast, targeting many a trading vessel bound to or from Washington. George Cockburn was a household name with a grisly reputation. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1813, a group of Washington locals made a toast to the Admiral, “the faithful harbinger of the tender mercies of Britain (sarcasm)- May the Virginians remunerate him for his worse than savage conduct.”<sup>13</sup> Among his raids were the ravaging of Hampton and Havre de Grace, events which burned him into the American psyche as a heinous war criminal. One aspect of this English Admiral was exceptionally unsettling to Washingtonians, he advocated for and practiced the enlistment of black slaves and freedmen. It had become common knowledge that the Admiral had raised a regiment of black marines just

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<sup>10</sup> "Washington City. Thursday, February 25." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), February 25, 1813: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>11</sup> "The United States & England." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia) III, no. 634, January 17, 1815: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>12</sup> "Depredations of the Enemy." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), June 17, 1813: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>13</sup> "[Monday; Spring; Navy Yard; American; Independence; Capt. Joseph Cassin; Mr. John Davis]." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), July 8, 1813: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.



south of D.C. with the intent to deploy them for the attack upon Washington.<sup>14</sup> This tapped into one of the deepest fears of Americans in the early nineteenth century, slave revolt.

Slave revolts were synonymous with chaos and debauchery, particularly against women. This not only challenged the ability of men to protect their household, but also their wives and daughters, two of the central tenets of sentimentalized republican manliness in this period. The San Domingo massacre, just ten years before, burned a lasting scar in the psyche of American men. Armed slaves were expected to pillage, rape, and kill indiscriminately. In the eyes of Washingtonians, Admiral Cockburn was not only instigating this, but actively promoting it. When faced with invasion of their city, citizens of the Capital had “the fearful apprehension, that the horrid scenes exhibited by the enemy in Hampton and Havre de Grace were about to be acted in Washington.”<sup>15</sup> Contemporary culture suggested that a republican male’s primary obligation would be to defend his physical household and family should some form of slave uprising occur.

Warfare in this age was considered by Europeans and Americans to have two primary characterizations, civilized and uncivilized. Civilized warfare was marked by armies engaging one another in open combat, led by commissioned officers. These engagements followed the unofficial rules of war, namely, that civilians and their property were not to be targeted, surrendering soldiers would be given protection, and the damage would be contained to military targets. Uncivilized warfare was marked by civilian casualties, ambushes, looting, and violations of prisoners’ or surrendering soldiers’ rights. Native Americans were considered to engage in uncivilized warfare, primarily due to their militarily stylistic differences, which prioritized small

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<sup>14</sup> Nicole Eustace, 1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 181.

<sup>15</sup> Nicole Eustace, 1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 208.

units of similar rank, raiding, and occasionally vicious treatment of prisoners. Americans had a tremendous inability to understand how the "uncivilized" tactics of the indigenous tribes were not an intentional slight or offense to American or European sensibilities, it was simply a continuation of the way indigenous peoples had conducted warfare since before Europeans arrived.<sup>16</sup>

British soldiers were equated to Native warriors by most major American newspapers, particularly *The National Intelligencer*, who utilized terms such as "savages," "barbaric behavior," and "massacre" to typify and equate the actions of British troops with common Native American tropes.<sup>17</sup> This had the effect of dehumanizing the British, as the Americans had already done to the native tribes. Through their consistently racist narrative, Americans emphasized that the indigenous peoples were being manipulated by the English, simultaneously ignoring any reasons they may want to fight Americans (e.g. past injustices), and further vilifying the British armed forces.<sup>18</sup>

When the U.S. Army regulars and militia prepared to defend Washington, the narratives of their local paper undoubtedly influenced perceptions of the approaching enemy. Those who had been at Bladensburg were demoralized, tired, and dramatically reduced in number. Those joining the ranks were likely concerned at the impending enemy's effects on their veteran comrades. Quickly the American defenders had dispersed from Bladensburg, with some

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<sup>16</sup> James D. Rice, "War and Politics: Powhatan Expansionism and the Problem of Native American Warfare." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>17</sup> "Washington. City. Monday, June 20." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), June 20, 1814: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>18</sup> "British Influence. from the Aurora." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), August 13, 1814: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

retreating from the city, others returning to their homes.<sup>19</sup> Those troops garrisoned in D.C. retreated shortly thereafter. British forces, led by Admiral Cockburn, would soon march on the American Capital without resistance, a severe blot of shame on the young nation.

Following the quick burning of many national buildings, the British retired from the city. This left the American soldiers, particularly those that lived in Washington, to explain how they permitted a British army to march on the Capital without providing resistance. In a concerted effort to minimize propaganda and psychological damage, James Madison and his cabinet argued that the United States did not need cities to win the war, but armies. As long as American troops were able to fight, the war was far from over.<sup>20</sup> This narrative did not hold for long, as the Madison administration and those in Washington opted for a new message, led by their primary newspaper, *The National Intelligencer*.

Utilizing the commonly known portrayals of British soldiers and officers as savage brutes who were the opposite of republican America, the Madison administration and U.S. Army changed the narrative from one of full-fledged abandonment of the capital to one in which noble republican men retired to their homes out of necessity to protect their families. It was no longer a retreat; it was now a noble and expected gesture. The concepts of republican virtue had already been juxtaposed by *The National Intelligencer* and other newspapers with the immorality of the British. While this was a convenient excuse as to why American soldiers dispersed initially, it would have to be backed by legitimate evidence that individual homes needed to be protected during the British occupation. This was represented in the testimony of United States officers in

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 91.

<sup>20</sup> Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 171.

a federal investigation immediately after the Capital fell, an event so noteworthy its dialogue and coverage spanned almost an entire page of the newspaper.<sup>21</sup>

In order to emphasize the dastardliness of Admiral Cockburn and the tangible danger he posed to individual American households, *The National Intelligencer* published articles extrapolating on his actions against slavery, implicitly arguing he was attempting to facilitate a change in the American racial hierarchy, undoubtedly involving a slave rebellion. An article from March 28, 1815, repeatedly states the number of slaves taken from various Americans by the Admiral during his raids.<sup>22</sup> The newspaper also reminded readers of the horrors inflicted upon seaside communities, usually giving a list of damages to private property or an excerpt describing indiscriminate slaughter. In the case of American victories against Cockburn's raiding parties, slaughter and pillaging were always mentioned as the outcome had the heroic American men not stood their ground.<sup>23</sup>

Validation for the Washingtonian men was paramount, particularly for the notion of the romanticized male soldier to hold up against the present situation. *The National Intelligencer* continued to publish articles emphasizing the barbarism of the British, leading residents of the district to ponder what may have happened had the militia not dispersed in the face of the coming army. Would women and children have been subjected to assault and wholesale slaughter had their husbands not returned home? This question was never far from the average Washingtonians mind. While internal reforms were made by the American military to prevent a

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<sup>21</sup> "For the National Intelligencer." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), November 26, 1814: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>22</sup> "Sketch of Plunder." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia) III, no. 694, March 28, 1815: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>23</sup> "A British 74 Ashore, New-York, Feb. 2." *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington (DC), District of Columbia), February 5, 1814: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

repeat of such a disaster, these were not anywhere near as publicized as the defense of those who went home on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 1814.

*The National Intelligencer* aimed to emphasize to the people of Washington D.C. that these combined factors indicated that the war was not merely being fought on American soil, but against American society and the people themselves, civilian and soldier alike. Republican values themselves were under attack. Neither the homes nor the virtuous women of America were safe from men like Admiral Cockburn and his barbaric fighters. Nor were they safe from blacks and Indians incited by British warmongers. It appears *The National Intelligencer* was not alone in this characterization, with many articles of this sort being reprints from other newspapers across the Northeast. Characterizing the British in this way allowed a Washington based newspaper to simultaneously vindicate local men of their inadequate defense of the Capital while justifying the English as the appropriate antithesis of republican America.

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