War of 1812

The War of 1812 broke out to settle many issues left unresolved since the American Revolution.

Key Issues Leading to the War of 1812

1. **Neutral Rights** – the United States as an independent nation often faced challenges to its sovereignty. Remember the French seizure of American vessels at the end of the 18th century during the Adams Administration (part of the Quasi-War with France)? After 1803, war consumed Europe as Britain and its allies struggled to rein in Napoleon’s ambition to control Europe. As part of its war effort Britain stopped American ships from trading with the French, seized sailors (impressments), and ignored American protests.

2. **American Westward Expansion** – Euro-Americans continued to move west into the lands of American Indians. You read earlier about 1790s conflicts between whites and Indians in the Ohio Valley that resulted in the 1795 ceding by 12 tribes of their lands in what is now Ohio and Indiana and parts of the Old Northwest (under the Treaty of Greenville). Relentlessly Americans pushed beyond those lands. Congressmen from new western states such as Kentucky trumpeted expansionist sentiments to drive the British out of North America.

3. **American Indian/First Nations Resistance to Westward Expansion** – after the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution, peace negotiators ignored American Indians. By the early 1810s, Indians west of the Appalachians sought to unite and oppose American expansion. [Note: Canadians refer to indigenous peoples as First Nations.]

Impressment

British sailors deserted at a high rate and many then signed up with American ships where they received better pay. As many as one-quarter of the 100,000 seamen on U.S. ships were British. The British could ill afford to lose sailors while engaged in a global war with France; thus the British stopped American vessels and removed any man they believed to be British, even if the man had papers indicating he was an American. At least 6000 American citizens were impressed into the British navy from 1803 to 1812.
American Response

Lacking military power to force the British to honor its neutral rights, the United States turned to the tactic that the colonists had used to protest British taxes – boycotts. The British lost American markets, but the boycotts (cutting off imports) and then embargoes on export of American goods were disastrous for American commerce and plunged the nation into a deep depression in 1808. That depression revived the Federalist Party in the elections of 1808, although not enough to stop the election of Jeffersonian Republican James Madison to the presidency. Madison ended embargoes and began others without forcing the British to honor American neutrality.

Continued Indian Resistance

Tecumseh was a Shawnee military leader and his brother Tenskwatawa a religious one who advocated that Indians return to traditional ways and resist white incursions. They moved west after the 1795 treaty (Treaty of Greenville) and hoped to continue their traditional nomadic lifestyle. But whites continued to press westward and Tecumseh concluded that like King Philip (Metacomet) in 1675 in New England he must unite Indian tribes against the Euro-Americans. British food and guns from Canada strengthened Tecumseh in his cause. In 1811 Tecumseh traveled into the southeast to recruit tribes to join him and while he was away Indiana Territory's governor William Henry Harrison marched a force of 1,000 soldiers to Tippecanoe in northern Indiana. A battle between Tecumseh's men and Harrison's force resulted in losses on both sides and although not a victory for Harrison secured a reputation that would carry him into the presidency in 1840. Tecumseh returned and retaliated by attacking white settlements in Indiana and Michigan and formally allying with the British.

Here's a simple map showing the location of Tippecanoe in what is now Indiana. Note the other locations of conflicts between Euro-American and Indian peoples before the War of 1812.

WAR!

In 1812 when President Madison asked Congress for a declaration of war, he cited neutral shipping rights and control over western Indians as the causes. The more general cause, however, was American resentment toward British domination.
The war was largely a military disaster for the United States as Americans invaded Canada and were repulsed, inspiring anti-American sentiment and nationalism among Canadians, and watched as the British burned their national capital Washington, D.C.

British preoccupation with the war in Europe probably preserved American independence. Americans won the war by not losing it. Britain, victorious but weary from the long Napoleonic Wars, sought peace. In the peace treaty neither impressments nor neutral rights were settled, although the British agreed again to evacuate western posts. Once again the British abandoned their Indian allies who were the clear losers in the war.

Below is another simple map showing the location of the Battle of the Thames in what is now the Province of Ontario in Canada. Tecumseh was killed here.
War Opposition

The War of 1812 divided the United States and aroused more intense opposition than any other American conflict, including the Vietnam War. The New England states opposed the war and so refused to provide militia units or supplies because of their close trade ties with Great Britain. At the end of 1814, the New England Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut, and insisted on their states' rights to protect citizens from unconstitutional federal laws and some delegates even threatened secession.

Nullification: Thomas Jefferson and James Madison introduced this nullification doctrine in 1798 in response to the Alien and Sedition Acts and now you see it reappear here. The Alien and Sedition Acts were supported by the Federalists in the Adams Administration and were designed to suppress public criticism. Look back at the Adams Administration readings and the lecture this week to review these acts. The Jeffersonian Republicans opposed them and in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolves asserted that the U.S. Constitution was simply a compact among sovereign states who retained the power not only to "nullify" any unconstitutional laws but also, if threatened by a despotic federal government, to secede.

This idea of the states' rights to refuse to enforce federal legislation and secede if necessary is used later to justify the actions of the southern states in withdrawing from the Union at the start of the Civil War. Can you think of how the idea of nullification comes up today? With regard to health care reform or national education programs?

Because the Hartford Convention took place just as the war ended, its resolutions were ignored but its restatement of nullification is significant. You will read about nullification again during the Jackson presidency.

Different Perspectives on the War of 1812

Visit this Canadian site prepared in conjunction with a film about the War of 1812. http://www.galafilm.com/1812/e/intro/index.html

This link takes you to the introduction to the site. A navigation menu is at the bottom of the page. Don't worry if you don't have the plug-ins for Shockwave or Quicktime that the site tells you to download. You do not need to download them in order to use the site.

From the navigation menu, you can choose the symbols across the top to get to the "Introduction," "People & Stories," or "Background & Ideas" or choose the numbers below to access "Help," "Chronology," or "Links."
Explore the site above to learn about British, Canadian, First Nations/American Indian, and American perspectives on the war.

Here is another Canadian site that focuses on military history: http://www.warof1812.ca/1812events.htm

This link takes you to a chronology that juxtaposes political events, military events, and military events in Europe. Note that when you look at the third column "Military Events in Europe," you gain an understanding of how Britain was engaged in stopping Napoleon's attempt to control Europe.