D.C.’s darkest day, a war that no one remembers

By Joel Achenbach · washingtonpost.com · 13 min

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A blanket of clouds forms around the United States Capitol. On Aug. 24, 1814, the British burned the U.S. Capitol and the White House among other buildings.

7 a.m., Aug. 24, 1814

The day began like so many days in Washington, with a painfully long meeting marked by confusion, misinformation and indecision.

The British were coming. They were on the march in the general direction of Washington. The precise target of the invaders remained unclear, but their intentions were surely malign.

James Madison, the fourth president of these young United States, had raced to a private home near the Navy Yard for an emergency war council with top generals and members of his Cabinet. The secretary of war, John Armstrong — conspicuously late for the meeting — had argued in recent days that the British would not possibly attack Washington, because it was too unimportant, with just 8,000 inhabitants and a few grandiose government buildings scattered at a great distance from one another.

“They certainly will not come here. What the devil will they do here? No! No! Baltimore is the place, sir. That is of so much more consequence,” Armstrong had declared.

The British had landed five days earlier near the head of navigable waters on the Patuxent River, southeast of Washington. There were about 4,500 of them — hardened fighters fresh from the

Napoleonic wars.

James Madison used this table during his presidency. The table is now at the Octagon Museum in the District.

The American forces called out to meet the invaders and defend the capital numbered about 5,500, but most were local militia — farmers and tradesmen with minimal training.

The war council proceeded in a desultory fashion until finally a bulletin arrived reporting that the Enemy was most definitely headed straight for Bladensburg, a town just six miles northeast of the Capitol. This provoked a convulsion of activity. Generals prepared to dash to the field of battle. Madison decided he should go, too. Someone handed him two pistols that he strapped around his waist.

The gunslinging 5-foot-4-inch president galloped on the pike toward Bladensburg.

It had been a brutally hot, dry August, and the sun was beating down again. This day was shaping up as a real scorcher.

The war no one remembers

In recounting this inauspicious chapter in our history it might behoove us to acknowledge that few Americans care about this strange little war. It was fought beyond the tall ridgeline in American memory of the Civil War. In the far distance we see the misty peak that is the Revolution. But the War of 1812? We don't know why it happened, or where the battles were fought. We are a little vague on the question of who won.

(We have a decent idea of when it happened, because of the name, but given the critical events of August 1814, the conflict possibly should be called "the War of Approximately 1812.")

Still, the bicentennial has incited some local celebrations (including a major event Saturday in Bladensburg), and it has given rise in recent years to new historical accounts, including "

Through the Perilous Fight ," a book by Steve Vogel, a former Washington Post military affairs reporter who agreed to be conscripted as a guide for this retelling of the momentous events.

With Vogel, we ventured to the Navy Yard, the Marine Barracks, the Sewall-Belmont House (burned after snipers fired on the British), the Octagon House — which sheltered the Madisons for many months after the great debacle — and the battlefield at Bladensburg. A trained eye sees only the faint palimpsest of the war beneath layers of urbanization, expansion, suburbanization and all the lacquer that an affluent and busy society slathers on the past.

The Sewall-Belmont House and Museum was burned by the British as they invaded Washington.

At the White House, curator William Allman can point a visitor to fire-blackened stones atop an old entrance to the mansion beneath the North Portico. You might walk through that doorway for years and never notice the scorch marks unless someone pointed them out.

A brief history lesson: The United States had declared war on Britain in June 1812. One of the central incitements had been the practice in the Royal Navy of "impressing" American sailors, many of them wrongly accused of being wayward British subjects, into service on British warships. The British interfered with American trade with the French, aligning themselves with Native American tribes on the frontier.

Critics called the conflict "Mr. Madison's War." Later historians would sometimes call it the Second War of American Independence. In Canada, the war looms larger in memory, as part of the founding mythology of the nation ("Canada" being a plausible answer to the who-won question).

What everyone seems to agree on is that the United States chose to wage a war for which it was spectacularly unprepared. The young republic had a vast territory and a miniature army and navy. Madison was a Republican (sometimes called a Democratic-

Republican), like his predecessor, Thomas Jefferson, who came to power by promising tax cuts and a small federal government. This proved problematic when the United States declared war on the mighty British Empire.

The sun sets on the Capitol in Washington.

Most of the action was initially in Canada and the Great Lakes, but then in 1813 the British launched the Chesapeake campaign, raiding towns and bringing on board African Americans who had been in bondage and who viewed them not as invaders but as liberators.

Charged with the defense of Washington was Brig. Gen. William Winder, a lawyer with an undistinguished military background but good political connections. On the 24th of August he clearly didn’t know what to do, or how to do it, or even where he ought to be. The best that can be said of him is that when he finally rode to Bladensburg, he had a keen perception that events would go badly.

Noon, Bladensburg

Madison arrived at Bladensburg and went a little too far, nearly riding into the British lines before reversing course and finding a spot to watch the suddenly erupting battle.

Busybody Secretary of State James Monroe, hardly in the chain of command, took it upon himself to rearrange the second line of the American defense, moving the soldiers too far back to be of much help.

Leading the British invasion were Gen. Robert Ross and Adm. George Cockburn. The British officers detected the cockeyed American defensive positioning and decided to press ahead with light infantry even before their stragglers, who had been marching for seven hours in brutal heat, had caught up.

A pedestrian walks over the bridge spanning the Anacostia River in Bladensburg, Md. The British crossed the river, then known as the Eastern Branch of the Potomac River, during the Battle of Bladensburg. The British defeated the American force and then marched to Washington.

The Americans had mysteriously failed to destroy the bridge at Bladensburg that spanned the Eastern Branch of the Potomac — the Anacostia River. The silted-up river was shallow enough to cross on foot, anyway, but the intact bridge hastened the British assault.

Some of the Americans on hand had dressed inappropriately for the occasion.

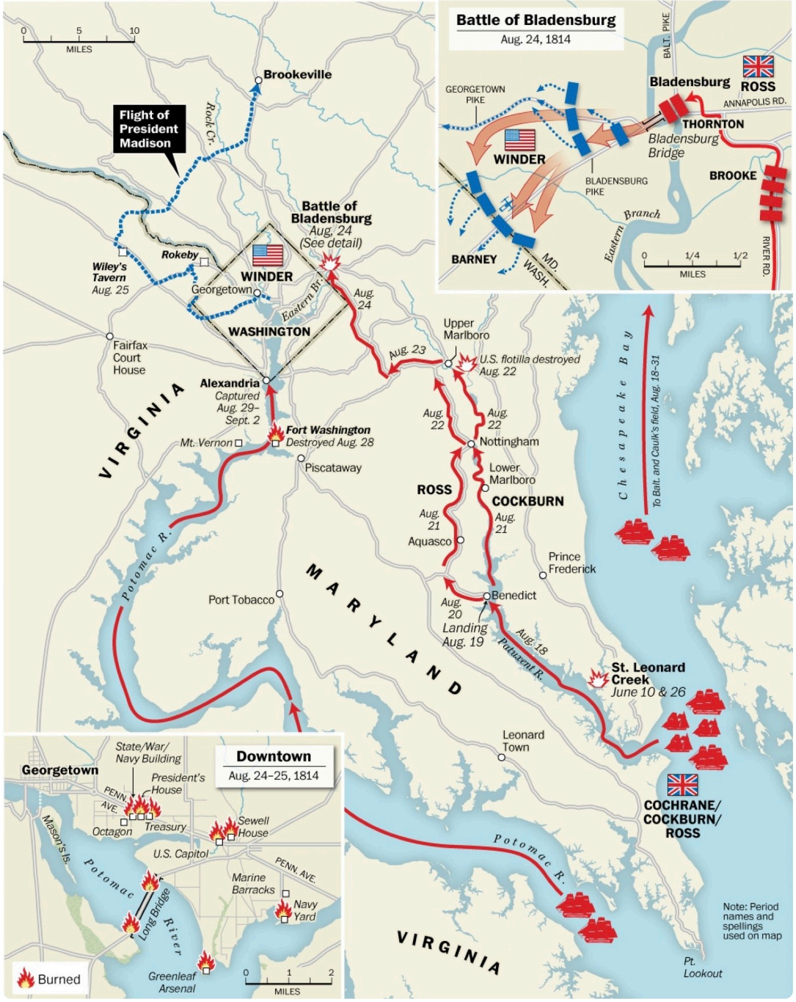
"People arrived on the field of the battle of Bladensburg in winter wear, many of them. They had no boots, they had no flints for their muskets. They were totally unprepared," says historian Anthony Pitch, author of "The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814."

"They have one training day a year, which is mostly spent drinking rather than drilling," University of Virginia historian Alan Taylor, author of two books that deal with the War of 1812, says of the militiamen. "Whoever was elected captain would take them down to the local tavern and they'd get blasted."

The British fired newly developed rockets that could not be aimed accurately, which added to their terrifying effect. Several screamed over the head of Madison — the first time a sitting U.S. president had been under fire.

The man known as the Father of the Constitution turned to Cabinet secretaries Monroe and Armstrong and observed that it "would be proper to withdraw to a position in the rear."

Many of the militia men broke ranks and fled, some never slowing down until they reached home.



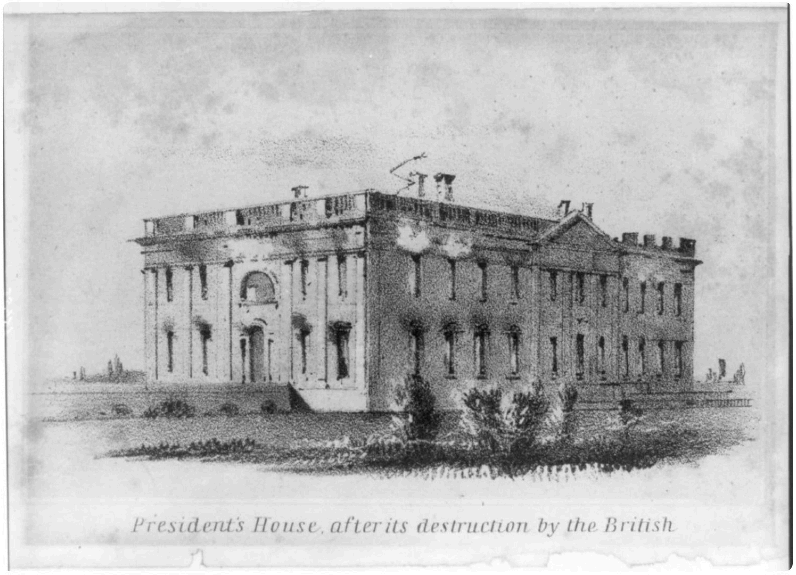
Two hundred years ago this week, British forces stormed Washington and burned it.

There would be significant American heroism on this day — particularly on the part of the men under the command of Commodore Joshua Barney, who was himself wounded and captured and then immediately paroled by Ross and Cockburn as a gesture of respect for his gallantry. But Winder's forces retreated in disarray and failed to concentrate into another defensive line. The pell-mell retreat of the Americans led to gibes later about the so-called "Bladensburg Races."

Winder pulled back in a series of retreats all the way to Tenleytown, leaving the city exposed and his men so disheartened that they began to desert in droves.

The British advanced into the defenseless capital.

"Ross couldn't believe that they'd actually be able to pull this off," Vogel says.


President's House, after its destruction by the British

A lithograph print showing fire damage to the White House.

3 p.m., the White House

Now comes the most famous part of the story: Dolley Madison and the painting.

The popular first lady had set a table for 40 people in the White House, expecting the president and his top officials for dinner at the customary hour of 3 p.m. She instructed 15-year-old family slave Paul Jennings to get cider and ale from the cellar, Jennings recalled in a memoir published decades later.

But then a free black man named James Smith came riding up to the White House, shouting, “Clear out! Clear out! General Armstrong has ordered a retreat!”

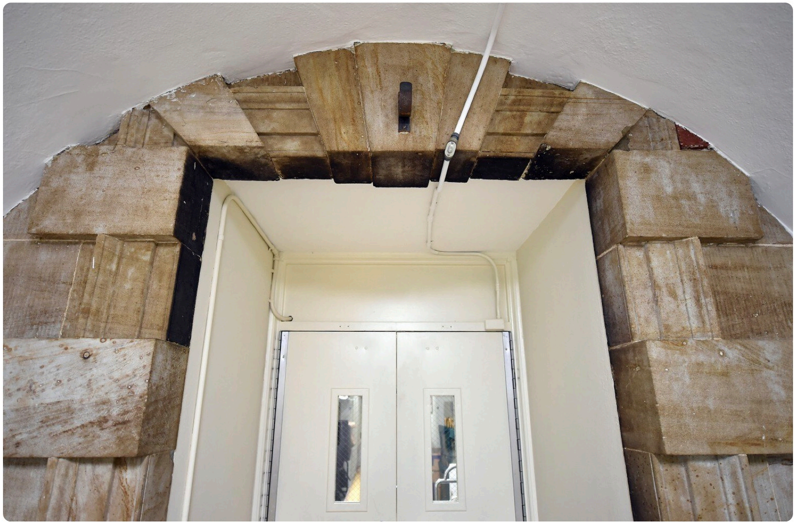
The first lady finished a letter to her sister, and then, before fleeing in a carriage, ordered workers to break the frame of Gilbert Stuart’s painting of George Washington and save the canvas.

“Save that picture if possible!” she said. “If not possible, destroy it. Under no circumstances allow it to fall into the hands of the British!”

Thus the famous painting wound up at a farm in Montgomery County that night, preserved for White House tourists to see for centuries to come.

Less well known is that local vagrants ran amok in the White House.

“A rabble, taking advantage of the confusion, ran all over the White House, and stole lots of silver and whatever they could lay their hands on,” Jennings reported.



Scorch marks from the Aug. 24, 1814, burning by the British are still visible on stones at the White House.

8 p.m., Capitol Hill

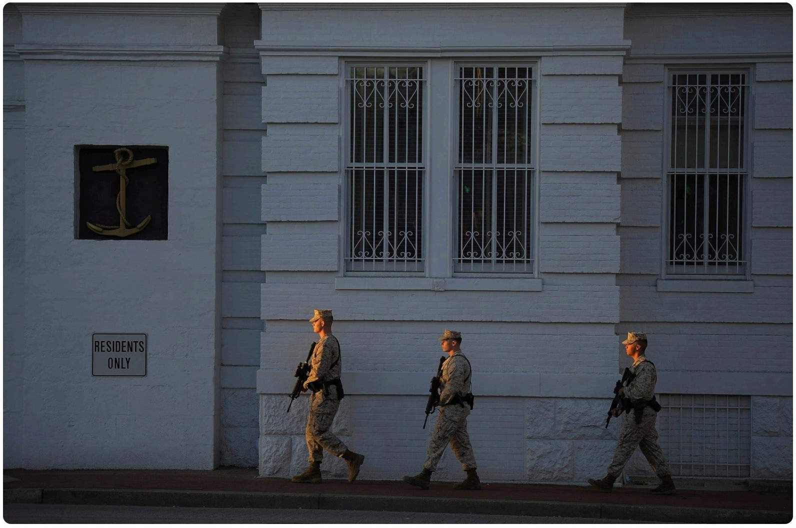
The British knew how to build a bonfire. You just stacked the furniture, sprinkled it with gunpowder and put a torch to it.

They built multiple fires inside the Capitol, immolating the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress and the splendid chambers of the House and Senate.

Later in the evening, Ross and Cockburn made their way to the White House and helped themselves, amid hearty toasts, to the fabulous meal and adult beverages left by Mrs. Madison and her staff. They took a few souvenirs, and one filthy lieutenant ventured into the president's dressing room and put on one of the president's clean linen shirts.

Then they set the fires. Up in flames went some of the most beautiful furniture in the country, including pieces obtained by Jefferson in Paris and the private possessions of the Madisons. The fires left the mansion a gutted, smoldering shell.

The British also burned the Treasury building, and the building housing the War and State departments. They ransacked the National Intelligencer newspaper office, with Cockburn ordering the seizure of all the letter C's from the presses so that the editor could no longer write nasty things about him. The Americans themselves burned the Navy Yard to keep the ships and stores out of British hands.



Military personnel walk by the Latrobe Gate at the Washington Navy Yard. Much of the Washington Navy Yard was burned by the Americans just prior to the British invading Washington.

The invaders spared private dwellings. This was to be a civilized sacking; no rapes, no murders, minimal plundering. They even spared the Patent Office after being persuaded that patents were private property.

From Tenleytown, and the heights in Virginia, and from all points of the compass, the fleeing leaders of the U.S. government and its ineffectual military could look back toward the federal town and see fires everywhere. The glow of the fires could be seen 50 miles away. Vogel's book recounts a letter from Mary Hunter, a resident on Capitol Hill:

“You never saw a drawing room so brilliantly lighted as the whole city was that night. Few thought of going to bed — they spent the night in gazing on the fires, and lamenting the disgrace of the city.”

The flight of the Madisons

Madison, with no guards and only a small entourage, fled into Virginia. He wandered the dark roads. Refugees from Washington clogged the taverns and many of the private homes.

The president apparently stayed at an estate called Salona, in McLean, and failed to reunite with Mrs. Madison, who had crossed the bridge at Little Falls and wound up not far away at a farmhouse called Rokeby.

The citizenry by now had turned against the Madisons. The president and his wife were targets of insults as they roamed the Virginia byways.

Storms blew in. The fiercest, on the afternoon of the 25th, has been described as a tornado or hurricane, and it might have been a derecho, for it ripped off the roofs of houses and helped squelch the fires in the city.

Madison went to a tavern the night of the 25th, but there were rumors that the British were coming to capture him, and he was evacuated to what has been called a "hovel in the woods," possibly a shack belonging to a ferryman just above Great Falls.

Sandy Heiler stands outside her home in Brookeville, Md. President James Madison stayed at the residence on Aug. 26, 1814, after fleeing from the British.

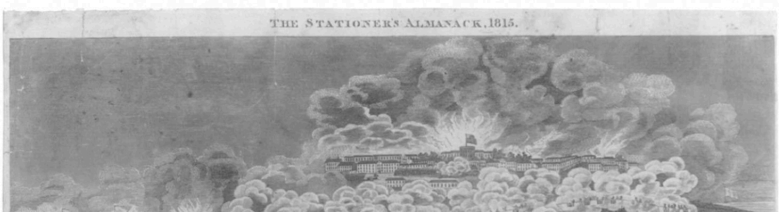
One might pause here to flag this as a remarkably low point in the history of the American presidency.

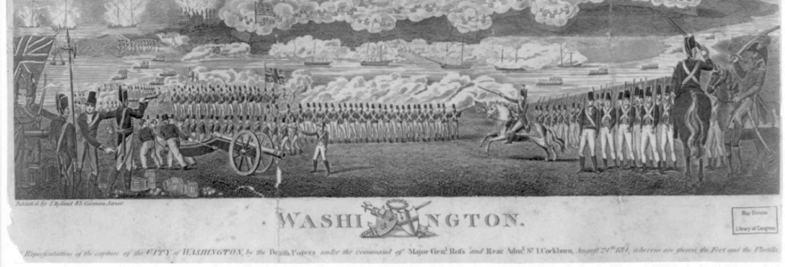
The next afternoon, Madison managed to cross the swollen Potomac and, still searching for his army, he arrived exhausted and hungry in Brookeville, Md., a Quaker settlement of just 14 homes.

A member of his party knocked on the door of the biggest house in town and, without mentioning the president, asked for refuge, but the owners said they had no more space. The second house took them in. Then came the surprise announcement: Here's President Madison!

Sandy Heiler, who owns that house today, and keeps it exquisitely preserved in period style, said Madison showed his resilience that night. He didn't despair.

Still, she said, "Every now and then he would become very quiet and ask questions. At one point he said, 'Do you think they burned my library?' Someone in the group said, 'Your Excellency, they burned your whole palace.'"


THE STATIONER'S ALMANACK, 1815.



A representation of the capture of the city of Washington, by the British forces under the command of Major General Ross and Rear Admiral Sir I. Cockburn, Aug. 24th 1814. The print shows British soldiers in the foreground and British ships on the Potomac River bombarding Washington, which appears atop a hill with several buildings burning.

The spin

Word came that the British had left the city and returned to their ships. Madison decided on Saturday, Aug. 27, to ride back to Washington, despite a new threat from British warships heading up the Potomac to Alexandria.

Madison and Monroe ordered cannons to the banks of the river to prepare to repel the next wave of invaders. The British, however, settled for the capitulation of Alexandria, and made off with a trove of ships and other plunder as they sailed back down the Potomac.

On Sunday the 28th, Richard Rush, the attorney general, having contemplated the enormousness of the disaster of recent days, argued that there was only one sensible move left: Spin the results.

He wrote a long memo to Monroe describing the need to put out a government statement quickly, thus seizing the narrative and putting the most positive light on the debacle rather than letting the British control the story.

“Such a proclamation should reach Europe contemporaneously with the account of the entry of the capital, thereby at once repelling the idea, so prevalent there, that it carries with it the reduction of the country,” Rush wrote. He suggested a statement with “a high and manly tone,” one that “might serve to inform, to balm, and to rouse.”

The Burning of Washington was not permitted to live in infamy. Instead, the Americans turned their humiliation into a mere act of vandalism, and in the nation’s memory it would become little more than a quirky prelude to the uplifting story of the victory at Baltimore three weeks later, when the light of glaring rockets and bursting bombs gave proof that our flag was still there.

“The losers are writing the history as if they were victors,” the historian Taylor says. “It’s the essence of American politics. You’ve got to be able to control the narrative and persuade the public that you have led the nation on to great and glorious things.”

Traffic streaks in front of the White House in Washington.

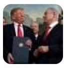
The war, in fact, soon petered out. The British were exhausted by years of fighting in Europe and had tired of the American sideshow. By December, negotiators had finished crafting the Treaty of Ghent, in which the two sides (spoiler alert!) agreed to a draw, keeping everything the way it had been before the war started. In January 1815, as yet unaware of the peace treaty, Gen. Andrew Jackson led the Americans to one last, morale-boosting victory in the Battle of New Orleans. Madison soon signed the treaty at the Octagon House and the country erupted in celebration.

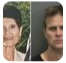
The Burning of Washington created an existential crisis for a city that had been through a number of them already. Every few years, certain lawmakers demanded that the seat of government move somewhere more congenial. Now, with most of the government buildings destroyed, Congress again debated a relocation.

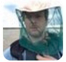
But something had changed. The U.S. experienced a surge of nationalism, and became something more than a loose collection of states. The capital took on new significance in the national psyche.

“Because the buildings were burned and it was such a national insult, Americans rose to the defense of Washington, D.C., as a seat of government,” says historian Kenneth Bowling. “There was never another bill introduced in Congress to remove the seat of government until 1869.”

So perhaps Washington’s worst day was one of the best things that ever happened to the city. It was the stake that pinned the capital forever to this patch of land on the Potomac.







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