

C. P. Stacey and Alternative History

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The May 2016 issue of *The War of 1812 Magazine* reprints a 1958 article by the eminent Canadian historian Charles P. Stacey.¹ That article examines the so-called “militia myth”: a belief that the successful defense of Upper Canada during the War of 1812 was mainly due to the efforts of Canadian militia and not British regular troops. Stacey successfully refutes this premise, concluding that while the militia played a valuable supporting role, it was British regulars who were the mainstay of the province’s defense. In a paragraph near the end of this article, however, Stacey diverges from his main thesis and unexpectedly ventures into the realm of alternative history.

Stacey believed that if the United States wanted to conquer Upper Canada they made a big mistake when they declared war against Great Britain. During the years before the war, “settlers from the States poured across the border” and Stacey believed Upper Canada was “getting more American every year.” Absent a war, the United States “would have an excellent chance of absorbing the country peacefully at an early date.” Although Stacey does not develop this thesis any further he was far from alone in his speculation. While Stacey did not propose how that war could have been avoided, other authors at the time were less circumspect.

In 1956, two years before Stacey’s work appeared, George Dangerfield’s article in *American Heritage Magazine*, “If only Mr. Madison had waited,” speculated that if the president delayed submitting his war resolution to Congress until August 1812 peace would have prevailed.² If news of the British repeal of the so-called Orders in Council caused just three senators to change their mind and vote against war, there would have been no War of 1812.³ Dangerfield, however, felt that Madison had no choice but to ask Congress to declare war when he did. Although he does not directly address the reasons, one strong motivation was probably politics. A presidential election was coming in November. Would a delay of two months give enough time for the “mere matter of marching” to conquer enough of Canada to ensure Madison’s re-election? I suspect the answer was no. Madison could not afford to wait.

¹ C. P. Stacey, “The War of 1812 in Canadian History,” *The War of 1812 Magazine*, no. 25 (May 2016). Reprinted with permission from *Ontario History*, vol. 50 no. 3 (1958) 153-159.

² George Dangerfield, “If only Mr. Madison had waited,” *American Heritage Magazine*, vol. 7 no. 3 (1956) 8-10, 92-94.

³ The vote in the Senate for war was 19 to 13 in favor. If three senators changed their vote it would have been a 16 to 16 tie and the resolution would have failed to pass. Madison’s vice president, George Clinton, died in April 1812 and, as president of the Senate, was therefore unavailable to resolve a tie vote in favor of war.

Since one “rule” of alternative history is to propose the minimum necessary change in what actually happened, there are a number of other possibilities. For instance, if John Bellingham assassinated Prime Minister Spencer Percival a mere three weeks earlier, word of that event would have reached Washington before the Senate voted for war. Testimony during Bellingham’s trial made it clear that he had more than a few screws loose topside and had been that way for some time. Would word of Percival’s demise and the resulting imminent change in the British government been enough to cause the Senate to adopt a “wait and see” attitude? I believe it would. A few more weeks would have seen the repeal of the Orders in Council and the war resolution would likely have died in the Senate.

However it happened, if war was averted in 1812 would Stacey’s scenario come to pass? Would it take 25 years from 1812 before dissatisfaction with the government of Upper Canada led to a demand for a change? Stacey expected that to happen “at an early date.” If it did, would that demand, now (in Stacey’s view) supported by thousands of additional American immigrants, be successful? Would the British government have simply abandoned the colony to the will of the republicans? There I must disagree with Stacey. I cannot believe that American annexation of Upper Canada would happen peacefully. I think a more likely scenario would have been a form of civil war, pitting the British colonial government against the forces of the republicans, but this time with more active support from the United States than occurred in 1837-38. Would such support have led to a war between the United States and Great Britain? The War of 1812 might have been averted but only at the cost of a much worse War of 1825. Perhaps, if Stacey was correct, it was a good thing that the War of 1812 happened when it did.

Alternative history, while anathema to most professional historians, is popular with the general public.⁴ Since you have to know something about the real history of an event before you can understand what might have been, that popularity does increase the public’s knowledge of, and interest in, “real” history. In that sense alternative history has considerable educational value provided it is not taken to extremes. Hence the “minimum necessary change” rule.

⁴For example, the volumes edited by Robert Cowley: *What If?*, *What If? 2*, and *What If’s? of American History* (Berkeley Books, 1999, 2001, 2003) which included essays from historians John Keegan, Stephen E. Ambrose and David McCullough, as well as David Downing’s *The Moscow Option: An Alternative Second World War* (London, 2001). These followed editor Gregory Benford’s four volume series *What Might Have Been* (Bantam Books, 1989-1992) and Peter Tsouras’ *Disaster at D-Day: The Germans Defeat the Allies, June 1944* (London, 1994).