

# When Detroit Raised The White Flag of Surrender

Tecumseh: Resistance to Empire

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Last October 3 marked twenty-five years since eighteen US soldiers died in Mogadishu, Somalia during a famous firefight that most Americans know as Black Hawk Down, for the crashed US helicopters. The loss is embedded in the American consciousness through a self-pitying book and film, and was widely commemorated on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Residents of the city where it happened refer to it as The Day of the Rangers, from an elite US Army outfit that provided the corpses.

Mogadishu's gunfire was amplified through American televisions in 1993, and that won the Somalis an asymmetric military victory, but at a very high cost. Thousands of Africans were chopped into body parts that afternoon by US helicopter miniguns, which are six-barreled rotating drums that fire 10,000 rounds a minute. In spite of this carnage, or because of it, Mogadishans celebrate every October 3 as a day when The People overcame The Man's technology.

The tactical payoff for Somalis was battlefield respect, and those enormous casualties they absorbed also provided them with a strategic win. News images of dead US soldiers getting dragged through African streets ended public support for the American expedition. The generals in Washington immediately stopped offensive operations, and the Secretary of Defense soon resigned in disgrace. This distant frontier ambush thus managed to reach beyond the battlefield and strike The Empire's war machine inside its headquarters.

The military results of Black Hawk Down were temporary, of course. Imperial armies quickly self-repair, and saboteurs who assail them place longshot bets. Their only gain is insurrectionist dignity, and that is what Mogadishans celebrate every October 3: their insurgent self-respect.

Such anti-imperial history lurks almost everywhere, if one cares to notice it. Two centuries ago, just a short drive from where this newspaper publishes, a Native American confederation fought a battle that foreshadowed Black Hawk Down. On August 5, 1812, twenty-five Indians led by the Shawnee warrior Tecumseh ambushed 200 US soldiers along Brownstown Creek, just outside of today's Gibraltar, Michigan, 30 miles south of Detroit.

This guerrilla attack left eighteen Americans dead, equal 1993 Mogadishu. Though separated by nine-score years, these two military defeats each resulted from arrogant US overreach into enemy terrain. On both occasions, the "hostiles" gained extra payback by mutilating dead Americans left on the field.

A historical recap of the War of 1812 is called for. In the first year of that conflict, the US invaded Canada via Detroit, turning Southeast Michigan into a combat zone. Native American, English, and Canadian military forces allied against the United States to defend the British colony and fight for an Indian homeland in the Great Lakes region.

US war objectives were total expropriation of natives and annexation of Canada.

Things went badly for the Americans at first. Incompetent planning ensured that their Northwest Army quickly was surrounded inside Detroit. Tecumseh's timely August 5 bushwhack stopped a US breakout attempt from that

besieged outpost, and the overmatched American garrison surrendered to the combined enemy forces on August 16, 1812.

Detroit's capitulation, along with another US base on Mackinac Island, ceded Michigan and Wisconsin to British control just six weeks after the war started. These territories formed the Old Northwest's geographic heart, and constituted the core of an imagined Indian homeland. (Northwest here refers to current US states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin, all located northwest of the Ohio River.)

If only this transfer of territory had been permanent! Additional British muscle might have made it so. Great Britain had authorized an Old Northwest native homeland in 1763 to quell Pontiac's rebellion, an anti-British regional uprising coordinated by multiple tribes, and the most successful anti-imperial Indian confederation ever.

Unsurprisingly, the 1783 Paris treaty that legitimized US independence thwarted this royal plan, as British negotiators sold out their Indian allies and blithely gave away the entire Old Northwest as though the Americans had actually conquered it.

Another historical opportunity to make things right arose during the War of 1812, and militant Great Lakes Indians took full advantage of it. However, Britain's immense Napoleonic war effort in Europe precluded sending an additional redcoat army across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, the officer in charge of Michigan's occupation, Colonel Henry Procter, tried his best to perpetuate Crown influence in the Great Lakes using available tools.

Since surrender had made Michigan British once more, Procter was determined not to return it. Appointed civil-governor of the conquered territory, the colonel immediately moved Western Canada's Indian office to Detroit, where his native allies were creating favorable facts on the ground.

British policy leveraged Indian tribesmen to complete Michigan's cessation, a military necessity for maintaining the alliance. For Native Americans, the War of 1812 was always a homeland war. In May 1813, Procter wrote to his superiors that the "Indian Department of Detroit," as he styled it, was busy "making the territory completely an Indian Country."

It didn't turn out that way. Insufficient British resources undid this objective. The US quickly raised another Northwest Army to win back the lost territory. American counterinsurgency in 1812–1813 consisted of unhinged frontiersmen rampaging down one Indian river valley after another, torching villages, destroying harvests, creating famine, killing natives.

Illinois or Vietnam, that is who Americans are, and always have been.

The genocidists ultimately won in Southeast Michigan, but not before the social pendulum briefly swung backward. After Detroit fell, Native Americans responded to 1812's shifting imperial fortunes with a revolution.

They started by ransacking homes in the surrendered town, a traditional Indian treatment of defeated enemies. They also took stored food and livestock held by local settlers unwilling to pledge British loyalty, and even from some that did. This impromptu wealth redistribution spread across the border into Canada.

Indiscriminate Indian plunder of whites was against official Crown policy, but it effectively forced out many remaining US loyalists, thus assisting Procter's "efforts to rid the country entrusted to my care of treacherous and dangerous characters." Friends of Britain who got looted in the process were simply collateral damage.

In another decisive move, Native Americans immediately started founding new villages directly inside Michigan's white settlement zone. Tecumseh's band went first, establishing a hamlet at the Huron River outlet to Lake Erie.

Miamis from Ohio followed, moving in with Wyandots north of the Huron. Arriving Odawas joined a Shawnee community. Potawatomis relocated to the mouth of the Rouge River, very close to Detroit. More Odawas linked up with them, and immediately started despoiling settler farms inside the Rouge watershed. In their favored metaphor, they now shared a spoon to eat from the same kettle.

This 1812 migratory push and pull in Southeast Michigan accelerated Indian re-nativization here, and the counter-historical implications are worth considering. Imagine an Old Northwest Indian protectorate defended long enough by British guns and native tenacity to consolidate and secure itself.

In a dream scenario, crushing the British forces would have been applied to make permanent their 1812 Old Northwest conquests, allowing a pan-tribal native homeland to coalesce in Michigan and Wisconsin. The Crown would then grant diplomatic recognition to this entity, and other nations follow their lead. In this same dream,

successful Indian organization would have served as a precedent for Western tribes, who would use it to head off Manifest Destiny.

Alas, these audacious Indian social-military actions that occurred were rooted out entirely. A signal US naval victory on Lake Erie in September 1813 cut the British supply line, forcing them to retreat eastward into Canada along Ontario's Thames River, accompanied by 1,500 Native American warriors and their families.

The US Army, now refitted and reinforced, chased after its battered enemy. British logistics failed and their morale bottomed out, ensuring that outnumbered redcoats could only manage a half-battle against American invaders in early October near Moraviantown. Most were killed or captured, but Procter and a few survivors escaped and continued their flight up the Thames.

Indians at Moraviantown were unwilling to run any further so they stood and fought, but unsuccessfully. There Tecumseh met his fate in close combat with the hated Americans. His 1813 death along the Thames ended Great Lakes native confederation dreams forever and fulfilled a primary US war goal. Predictably, radical Indian resettlement in Southeast Michigan was quickly suppressed by Americans upon their return to Detroit.

After forcing out the natives, rapacious US settlers then realized the rest of their plan. They divided the Michigan peninsula into ownership pieces, and its ancient forest was clearcut down to the last tree.

Ours is not the first human culture in this part of the world to face imminent extinction. Industrial civilization is rapidly slipping into its endgame, making it easy to identify with historical insurrectionists who, in spite of long odds, took a righteous shot at revolution in Michigan during their final years of existence.

Pan-tribal Native American confederation during that era remains a stirring example of solidarity, endurance and resistance among freedom-loving people.

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# fifth Estate

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