A Note on the Sesquicentennial of the War of 1812
by Gene D. Lewis

For those who have been made groggy by the unrelenting barrage of Civil War centennial activities, “relief” is on the way in the form of another commemorative occasion — 1962 marks the sesquicentennial of the War of 1812! Plans have already been formulated to commemorate this event in Ohio. A governor’s committee has been appointed and a number of programs have been planned.

While Ohioans have taken part in Civil War commemorative activities, it would appear to this observer that they have not manifested any great enthusiasm for the event. Perhaps this lack of ardor may be related to the fact that Ohio was not particularly noteworthy for military engagements. In short, there are no Civil War battlefields to serve as foci of public attention.

The sesquicentennial of the War of 1812, on the other hand, affords Ohioans with a splendid opportunity to work martial spirits out of their systems, for this state was an important center of military action. A glance at a map of Ohio will suggest many pilgrimages which can be made to battle areas. Fort Meigs and Fort Stephenson, to name but two sites, may not rank with Gettysburg and Antietam in terms of carnage, but they were the scenes of two significant battles in American history. In fact, most of the important military engagements of the War of 1812 took place in Ohio and neighboring areas.

As for the war itself, some historians have regarded it as the “Second War for Independence.” Yet, to most Americans, it is in the realm of ancient history, despite the fact that it antedates the Civil War by less than fifty years. The general public has only a vague knowledge of the conflict, and tend to regard it as a “brush” war. Historians, however, have found the event to be more than a superficial episode, and in recent years they have placed considerable attention on it, especially on the causal factors. As yet, no work can claim the accolade as the “definitive” study of the causes of the war. A brief survey of the changing interpretations of the origins of the War of 1812 will not only remind Ohioans
that the sesquicentennial anniversary is fast approaching, but will reveal the wide difference of opinion that exists on this critical episode in American history.

The traditional American view of the war, first announced by President James Madison in his war message to Congress, holds that the United States sought redress against the maritime abuses of Great Britain. Henry Adams, in his brilliant analysis of the Madison administration in 1890, further developed the thesis that the United States had striven long and arduously to protect its rights as a neutral carrier, but finally reached the end of its patience and declared war on England.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, historians began to analyze the sectional character of the conflict, in the sense that southern and western Congressional representatives strongly favored war while many New England Congressmen were opposed. Was it not paradoxical that New England, which seemingly was most seriously affected by maritime abuses, did not favor war? The explanation offered for New England's lack of enthusiasm was a simple one: they were less patriotic than the westerners, who were more sensitive to insults upon national honor.

An alternate school of thought, to which many scholars now subscribe, affirms that the main causal factors are to be found in the American west. This is not to infer that there is unanimity of opinion among the scholars who adhere to this interpretation. Some have followed Louis Hacker's thesis, first enunciated in articles published in 1924, which emphasized that the westerners were animated by one desire in their insistence upon British expulsion from North America: the conquest of Canada. The great desideratum of the frontiersmen was cheap land, especially the heavily forested Canadian land which was "ripe for plucking" — so they thought.

A second group of western-oriented historians have found the source of the war primarily in the Indian menace. Julius Pratt developed this thesis in his significant study, *Expansionists of 1812* (1925), in which he asserted that the frontiersmen were convinced that the British were in league with hostile Indians. Extending his thesis, he posited that the "South was almost unanimous in its demand for the Floridas, for agrarian, commercial, and strategic reasons." On these grounds, the United States, led by the so-called "War Hawks," declared war for reasons peculiar
to the west. Pratt’s western formulations have come to occupy a leading position in American historiography — they are featured in many college texts in both general and diplomatic history.

The most damaging criticism of Pratt’s interpretation came in 1931 in two articles by George Rogers Taylor on agricultural conditions in the Mississippi Valley preceding the outbreak of hostilities. Heretofore it was assumed that westerners were not affected by events on the high seas. Taylor, however, showed that prices fluctuated in the west in the course of British seizures of American cargoes. There was, then, a direct economic relationship between maritime affairs and the west. Those following Taylor’s lead explain that the New England coastal regions voted against war because they were engaged in an extensive carrying trade and making considerable profit notwithstanding British restrictive actions. The New England shipping interests had much to lose with the war. The westerners and southerners were producers, not carriers, and they were therefore not concerned with the vast profits of the carrying trade but with selling their produce.

In 1941, with the publication of Warren Goodman’s article on the historiography of the origins of the war, something approaching a balance was reached. Goodman, in arguing for an eclectic interpretation, affirmed that the advocates of maritime abuses and western causal factors had become dogmatic. In his judgment, many factors need be considered, including Taylor’s theories.

A recent major contribution to this phase of historiography has been A. L. Burt’s studies on the relations of Great Britain and the United States before 1818. Burt rejected Pratt’s version and returned to the view that maritime abuses were paramount in precipitating war. In the late 1950’s, there appeared a number of articles which also disagreed with Pratt’s findings. It was asserted, for example, that the frontier areas of Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, which were exposed to Indian attacks, had no vote in Congress. Even Ohio split its vote on the issue of war — both senators opposed while the sole representative took the affirmative; yet, Ohioans were closer to hostile Indians and Canadian land than were the southerners and residents of the mid-Atlantic states who gave the major support for the war. Pratt had written that the acquisitive elements in north and south had agreed to support each other in realizing their objectives to secure the
Florida's and Canada. Critics have argued, however, that Pratt's conclusion of this North-South accord is based more on faith than on evidence. The theory that land hunger inspired the American declaration of war has attracted little attention in the past two decades. Critics of both western schools of thought insist that attacking Canada was a method of fighting war and was not in itself a cause of war.

Associated with all these causes but not mentioned until recently as a dominant motive for the war is the factor of nationalism. Americans, according to this view, were piqued by British actions and they were anxious to vindicate national honor. American patriotism was on the rise and the difficulties with Great Britain accentuated this feeling. Finally, a most recent theory holds that a breakdown in diplomacy was responsible for the conflict.

The foregoing brief survey hardly explains the genesis of the War of 1812. The fact is that the causes are still a topic for debate. Perhaps one beneficial effect of the sesquicentennial observance will be a concentrated effort to acquire new insights into, and a deeper understanding of, this event.