

# Ethical Dilemmas of the War of 1812

by Marc Keirstead

**Suggested grade level:** Intermediate/Senior

**Suggested time:** 2 class periods

## Brief Description of the Task

Students will examine how to avoid using present values to evaluate the negative aspects of the War of 1812.

## Historical Thinking Concepts

- Ethical Dimension
- Use of Primary Source Evidence

## Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

1. Participate in an activity that allows them to understand the concept of **ethical dimension of historical thinking**.
2. Identify the rationale provided by both sides in the war for various brutal actions.
3. Examine written and visual sources to identify the brutal actions and motivations.

## Materials

Each student will need a copy of the Ethical Dimension Organizer, Appendix 1.

Copies of the Appendices should be copied for student groups.

## Prior Knowledge

It would be an asset for students to:

- be familiar with the military actions by both the sides in the war
- understand the negative relations that existed between Britain and the newly independent United States

## Assessment

## Detailed Lesson Plan

**Focus Question: Were the brutal acts committed in the War of 1812 justified?**

### Part 1

1. Students will be asked to identify local/national/international conflicts they feel are brutal. Students will explain their choices and also provide a rationale for why they consider the conflicts brutal. How have your values/beliefs influenced your answer? Why do these brutal acts take place? What information would you need to know in order to evaluate the actions? Can these actions be justified?
2. The concept of **ethical dimension** can be discussed with students, and criteria can be provided to assist in their analysis of current events (see [www.historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-significance](http://www.historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-significance)).
3. Teachers can wrap-up the activity by discussion the following with students:
  - What criteria can students use in evaluating past and current events?
  - Should our current values be applied to past events?

### Part 2

1. Students will be told that they will be examining primary sources and visuals of brutal acts that took place during the War of 1812. The focus of the activity is to determine if brutal acts conducted during the War of 1812 were justified.
2. Students will work in groups and examine the various sources posted in the room. They can use the ethical dimension template to guide their analysis.
3. Teachers can wrap-up the activity by discussing the following with students:
  - Were the actions described and illustrated justified?

- Can we and should we use our present values to evaluate the past?

Teachers can ask students to keep these ideas in mind as they examine some secondary sources on the War of 1812.

**Teaching Tip:** You may want to reinforce the concept that many of the acts of brutality were done to weaken the enemy by having the authorities take responsibility for displaced civilians. Also the destruction of property and supplies would negatively impact the enemy's ability to resist attacks.

## Appendix 1

“The few people that remained in it were filled with fear and consternation. Most of the inhabitants had fled, and carried with them as much property as they could. No females in the town and everything wore a gloomy aspect. Our men began to plunder all they could get; but I was determined to take nothing. Every eye was upon me, and I resolved that no plunder should be found with me, as so much depended upon our circumspection and watchful piety.” (Jon Latimer, 1812 War with America. (Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 175-176)

- a) How might plundering the town weaken the enemy?
- b) Why might this observer refuse to take any property?

## Appendix 2

“Strong is my dislike to what is perhaps a necessary part of our job, viz. plundering and ruining the peasantry. We drive all their cattle and of course ruin them; my hands are clean, but it is hateful to see the poor Yankees robbed, and to be the robber. If we should take fairly it would not be so bad, but the rich escape; for the loss of a few cows and oxen is nothing to the rich man, while you ruin a poor peasant if you take his only cow.” (J. Latimer, p. 160)

- a) How would taking livestock weaken the enemy?
- b) Does the writer’s remorse justify his actions?

## Appendix 3

“Mrs. Woodruff relates that a party of British Indians had a young girl whom they had taken captive. Our hearts pitied her, but we dared not interfere. Where she came from, or her name, we could not learn, but afterwards were told that she had been restored to her friends. Whether this was true or false we never knew, and could only hope it was so. To add to the miseries of that period a set of miscreants who

follow in the wake of armies, called 'Grey-coats,' who were white men disguised as Indians, plundered everything upon which they could lay their hands." Emma A. Currie. *The Story of Laura Secord and Canadian Reminiscences*. Toronto: William Briggs, 1900. P. 139)

a) Why would men disguise themselves as Indians and raid settlements?

#### Appendix 4

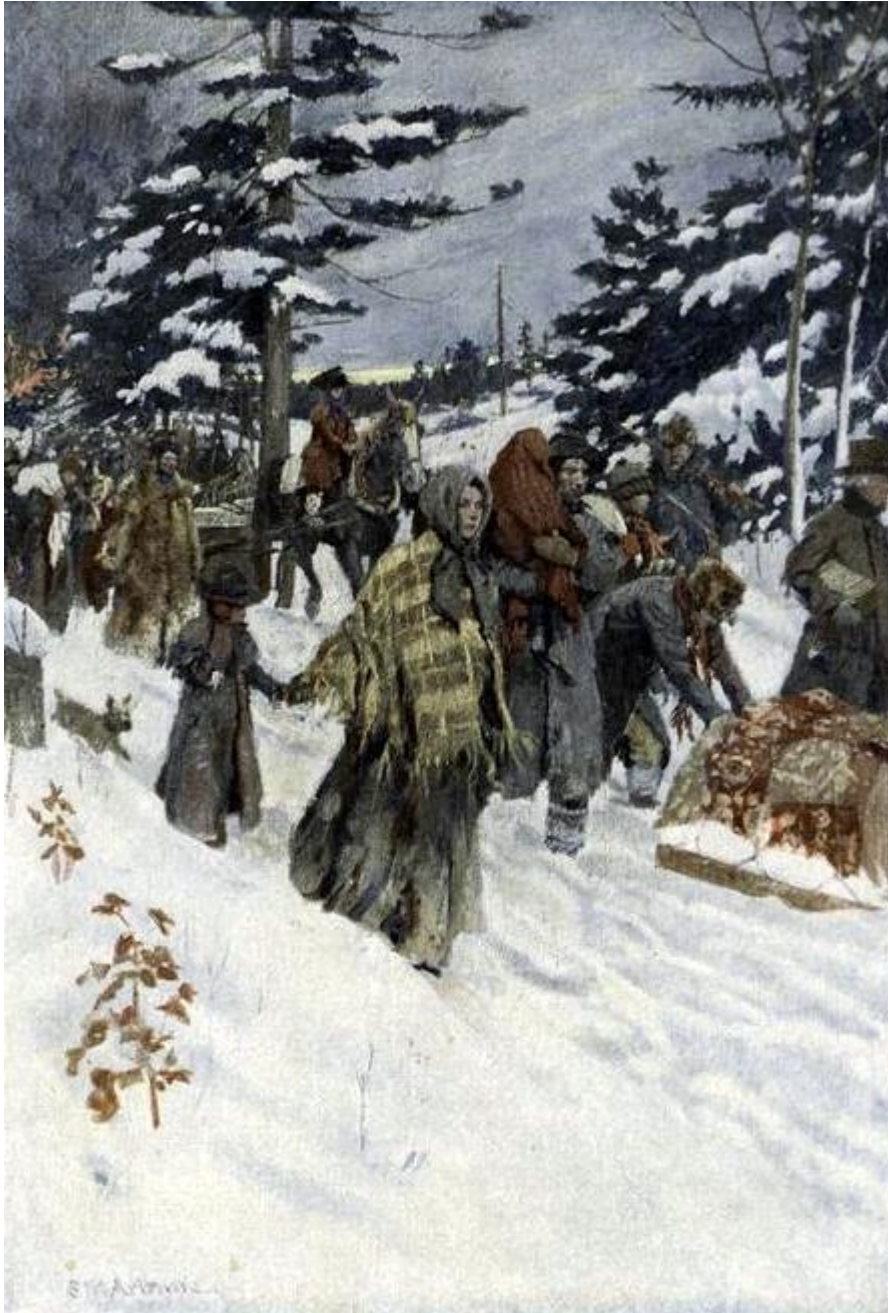


<http://www.opsail2012virginia.com/education/war-of-1812-in-virginia-timeline>

- a) What brutal acts can you identify in this picture?
- b) What justification could be proved for these acts?



Appendix 5



<http://americangallery.wordpress.com/category/arthurs-stanley-m/>

- a) What hardships would these refugees face?
- b) Why might the enemy create this situation?