Conquest at the Battle of the Thames:
Explanations for the American Victory

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This paper was written for Dr. Tures’ International Conflict course. It was presented at the 2009 Regional Phi Alpha Theta Conference at St. Leo University.

October 5, 1813 was a victorious day for the American army led by Major General William Henry Harrison in the War of 1812. Called the Battle of the Thames, it is named for the river it was fought near in present day Ontario, Canada. The American troops defeated British forces lead by General Henry Proctor and an Indian confederation headed by the Shawnee leader Tecumseh. This particular battle is somewhat of an anomaly for American forces in the War of 1812. President James Madison had especially expected victory in Canada to be accomplished swiftly and resolutely, but there were many factors that prevented such success from being immediate. “American generals displayed incompetence, New England governors refused to release state militia for federal service, 12.7 percent of wartime recruits deserted ‘at least once,’ and the Canadians fought loyally under British command.” The Battle of the Thames however was a swift and decisive victory for America, destroying Tecumseh’s Indian confederacy and re-establishing the Old Northwest as an American dominated area. The victory aided General Harrison in becoming the ninth President of the United States as one broadside referred to October 5th as “the day on which peace and security were restored to our western frontier by the skill and valor of William Henry Harrison.” All of these factors made the Battle at the Thames an extremely influential victory for the United States.

What allowed the American troops to overwhelm the Indians and British so quickly and so easily? Often in battle and certainly in war, victory is a multi-causational outcome, which from the review of information and evidence obtained from historical accounts and analyses of battle strategies appears to be the case concerning the American victory at the Thames. Namely, victory in this instance seems to center on the American forces possessing greater manpower, higher morale, and greater unity.

Perhaps thought to be the most obvious and telling indicator of the victor in any battle is the number of combatants a particular force boasts. Common knowledge and reasoning would indicate that the side with the most combatants would have the greater advantage and would likely be the winner. When one side has a numerical advantage it is called asymmetric warfare, meaning there is a disparity between the two forces engaging each other. There are of course episodes in history that demonstrate smaller forces overcoming much larger ones, but generally it is expected that the larger force will emerge vic-
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torious.

Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian military writer of the nineteenth century, repeatedly championed the necessity of superior numbers in battle as a means to victory.\(^7\) In his work *On War*, he stated that the “. . . superiority of numbers is the most common element in victory.”\(^8\) A superior fighting force may in fact be the primary element in winning a battle, as Clausewitz certainly thought it was, saying that “superiority of numbers admittedly is the most important factor in the outcome of an engagement . . . It thus follows that as many troops as possible should be brought into the engagement at the decisive point. . .”\(^9\)

In the Battle of the Thames, “the exact strength of each side is difficult to determine, but the Americans were certainly more numerous.”\(^10\) The recorded numbers vary, but most sources put Harrison’s forces outnumbering Proctor’s by about 3 to 1,\(^11\) with Proctor commanding 800 regulars and 500 Indians and Harrison commanding 3,000 men.\(^12\) With 1,700 more men than Proctor, “the force under Harrison’s command was ample for the required purpose . . .”\(^13\) The British formed two lines of defense but due to their lack of troops the lines were sparse and there were wide spaces between men, taking Colonel Richard M. Johnson’s mounted Kentucky riflemen only minutes to ride through them.\(^14\) Greater numbers provide a strategic advantage as a superior force may be able to not only surround an inferior one but prevent itself from being surrounded. The Kentuckians encircled and flanked the remnant of the two lines of the British.\(^15\) The British soldiers were so overwhelmed and disoriented that they “. . . either ran for the woods or threw down their muskets, their arms raised in surrender.”\(^16\) “Proctor’s six pounder . . . was abandoned before it could even be fired.”\(^17\) The American troops surrounded the Indians positioned in the nearby swamp in much the same manner, and once their leader Tecumseh was slain, this force too retreated.\(^18\) The American troops suffered 30 wounded and only 15 dead, while 634 Englishmen were taken prisoner or killed and 33 Indians were killed.\(^19\) All of the superior English officers were either killed or taken prisoner, with the exception of General Proctor.\(^20\)

Harrison’s men made quick and easy business of their British and Indian opposition. The battle was so one sided that some sources indicate that it could have lasted less than half an hour.\(^21\) The easily attained victory seems to be due in large part to the greatest disparity between the two fighting forces. The British and Indians had not stood a great chance being as severely outnumbered as they were. Superior numbers can ensure victory even for a force that has weapons far inferior to its opposition. In December of 1866, just north of Ft. Phil Kearny, an Indian war party close to 2,000 warriors with bows and arrows overtook and massacred Captain William J. Fetterman’s force of seventy-seven soldiers.\(^22\) While the soldiers possessed firearms, which are certainly more sophisticated than bows and arrows, they were no match for
the overwhelming number of Indian warriors that besieged them. Despite their technological advantage, Fetterman’s contingent was annihilated in less than an hour.23

Troop numbers are important in the maneuvers that a force can employ against a foe as well. The Indian tribes and the America troops viewed war from two very different standpoints. While American forces were patterned for European style warfare, “Indian leaders taught their men to move in scattered order and take advantage of the ground, to surround the enemy or to avoid being surrounded.”24 These would be two difficult feats to accomplish on the battlefield if the Indian force did not have superior numbers to the American force they were opposing. It is difficult to avoid being surrounded by the opponent when they are greater in number and difficult to surround the opponent when there are fewer combatants than members of the enemy.

While having superior numbers in a fighting force may generally lead to a win, in order for that force to be effective, its individuals should be in good health, mentally and physically, to conduct and survive the hardships of battle. In order to have energy to fight, individuals must have adequate amounts of food, rest, and avoid illness. Illness could be detrimental to a fighting force, rendering members unable to fight at all. “Warfighters, as a result of deployments, may come into contact with pathogens with which they have no prior experience, and therefore, no immunity.”25 The need for a healthy fighting force is critical, especially when one considers that “until World War II, deaths due to infectious diseases outnumbered those due to direct combat injuries.”26 Illness could thus cripple a fighting force, even one of superior numbers and allow an inferior force to overwhelm it.

During the Battle of the Thames the American forces were in much better physical and mental condition than their British counterparts. In regards to the health of the soldiers, the American troops did not appear to suffer from any illnesses or malnutrition but were described as being “hardy and keen.”27 American soldiers pursuing the British came across their vacated camp at Sherman’s farm and “... helped themselves to the fresh bread found in the eight British ovens”28 that had been hurriedly left behind in the flight to Moraviantown. The American troops were then prepared to fight on a full stomach.

The health of the British troops was rather poor. Colic, smallpox, bilious (intermittent), fever, mumps, and whooping cough were common among the ranks ... and medical treatments were haphazard at best.29 On the journey to Moraviantown the troops were “... weakened by fever and exhausted by their slow march and heavy baggage,”30 which did not contain adequate provisions for the soldiers. The uniforms of the men “... were in “in rags,” and some of the soldiers went barefoot.”31 The British troops were also malnourished on the
eve of the battle. Soldiers were given nothing but bread the day before and whiskey the morning of the battle. Bread was about to be given to the men when they were ordered to take up their arms because the American troops were advancing on them. This resulted in the Right Division being “half-fed and exhausted” for the battle against American troops that were well fed and in good health. Sources speaking to the health of the 500 Indians accompanying the British are few, but the information available seems to suggest that the few Indians that fought with Proctor generally suffered from minor or no health problems.

An example of how illness can affect a fighting force can be seen in the smallpox outbreak during the Revolutionary War. “The prevalence of smallpox during the early years of the American War for Independence posed a very real danger to the success of the Revolution.” The disease thinned the colonial ranks and jeopardized success because it “. . . reduced the American ability to attract and hold recruits. . .” Many soldiers were dying from the disease and some potential soldiers were afraid to enlist for fear of contracting it. Luckily, the epidemic did not wipe out the colonial forces and America eventually gained its independence, but this incident is a clear example of just how important health is to a fighting force and its ability to be victorious.

The mental state and health of combatants is important in achieving success as well, and morale is important in motivating and mentally preparing combatants for battle. HERO, an examination of all major battles that took place between 1600 to 1982 with the purpose of developing a systematic theory of combat effectiveness, defines morale as “the prevailing mood and spirit conducive to willing and dependable performance, steadiness, self-control, and courageous, determined conduct despite danger and privations.” A fighter’s level of morale affects his or her behavior on the battlefield in their “. . . willingness . . . to lead others, execute their orders, put their lives in danger in combat, resist the temptation to flee under fire, and seize the initiative when opportunity presents itself.” Demoralized or disillusioned troops may fail in one or all of these critical areas. The theory that soldiers fight harder for democratic governments lends itself to the morale theory in that suggesting troops are more likely to risk their lives on the battlefield if they believe strongly in what they are fighting for and that they do so willingly.

The American contingent demonstrated greater morale and was in much better spirits than the British soldiers. “The Americans were . . . animated by a sense of mission.” The Americans were fighting on their home territory, unlike the British who were nearly a world away from home on a foreign continent and so perhaps lacked the same motivation to fight that the Americans felt. The British soldiers also felt cheated in that they had been recruited by the army “. . . with bounties and wonderful images of travel and romance with
lavish provisions of beer.”

They instead found themselves going six to nine months with no pay.

The morale of the Indians was very high in contrast to that of their allies. Despite their being only 500 in number, “... the Indians believed that man for man they were superior fighters to the Americans and they seemed satisfied by the prospect of battle.” The Indian confederation had much invested in meeting the Americans in battle because they believed they were fighting for their lands and their very way of life. This may have given them greater motivation for battle as they may have perceived that they had more to lose than their British ally. Their morale was somewhat dampened by the British retreat and seeming reluctance to fight, however their morale was still great in their cause for preserving their lands and existence.

The morale of the two fighting forces was greatly affected by their respective leaders. The American force, namely the Kentuckians, “... were in good spirits, led by such charismatic figures as the legendary frontiersman, Elisha Whittlesey, the popular Governor Shelby, and Harrison, ‘the victor of Tippecanoe.'” The Indians were confident under their charismatic leader and prophet Tecumseh, who had representatives from eleven different tribes with him in his confederation. The British soldiers, conversely, had very little faith in General Proctor. The hardships of the campaign had “... worn down their esprit de corps and their confidence” in their commander. Proctor does not appear to have been very concerned with inspiring confidence in his men. When the British force was making its way to Moraviantown to prepare for the battle, Proctor abandoned his men to ride ahead to be with his family which he had brought along on the campaign. One scholar even suggests that Proctor “... may have become interested only in the safety of his own family.” This poor leadership put “Procter. ... on bad terms with his regiment and its low morale may have been due to his management.” According to British army historian Sir John Fortescue, “... the men were thoroughly demoralized. During the retreat they had formed the conviction, which unhappily appears to have been justified, that their commander was more anxious for the safety of his family and his private property than of his troops.” Perhaps fittingly, all of Proctor’s “... baggage and military stores, together with his official papers, fell into Harrison’s hands” by the end of the battle.

Related to morale is the unification of a fighting force. It relates to morale in that it can be a thought process that binds the individual combatants together as a team with a strong, singular, motivated goal to passionately pursue. The unity of a fighting force is key to its capability to win battles. Human relations are important in unification, being “vital to efficiency” since cooperation between combatants is needed to conduct warfare. A fragmented force cannot conduct the necessary maneuvers if every combatant is pursuing their own
Unity in battle is also found when otherwise separate forces join together to create a larger and stronger fighting force. Many separate Indian tribes often came together to fight battles and even allied with European nations at times. Alliances strengthen a force in battle because they “... can save costs and multiply benefits through the division of responsibilities, the sharing of common assets, or simply the protection provided by having a stronger country as an ally.”

Alliances may increase the number of troops that fight in a battle, the amount and quality of weapons used to conduct the fighting, and increase supplies to ensure the health and morale of the combatants. By forming alliances, different forces can pool their resources. Such an action could prove extremely advantageous to the weaker force in an alliance that cannot adequately defend themselves; thus an alliance can serve as a “quick, inexpensive method of accumulating power and security” necessary for victory.

An alliance that involves a power disparity is related to another school of thought that emphasizes the importance of unification and alliances in battle: the battlefield decision theory. It concerns what it calls great-power involvement in an alliance with a much smaller force. As Avi Kober explains in his article “Great-Power Involvement and Israeli Battlefield Success in the Arab-Israeli Wars, 1948-1982,” “... great-power involvement [is] an external, systematic, condition for the achievement of battlefield successes and focusing on the material and political support provided by great powers to the local adversaries... such support... affects the adversaries' sustainability and the strategies they pursue on the battlefield...” Great-power involvement can be seen in many instances in Indian warfare with America, such as in the War of 1812 when Great Britain provided aid to and fought alongside the Indian tribes, as they did in the Battle of the Thames.

The American forces seem not only to have enjoyed superior health and morale over their British foes but were much more unified as well. The American soldiers were a single force representing a single country with a single objective. Their opposition, however, was composed of an alliance between British and Indian forces. According to political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, alliances can be very unstable entities. Bueno de Mesquita claims that “just because two states agree to ally does not mean that either or both are prepared to honor their commitment” and suggests in his writings that alliances are more often than not found to be unreliable. This was the case in the British-Indian alliance. The British had enlisted the help of the Indians by promising “... never to abandon them” and that they “would surely win their lands back” if they joined them to fight the Americans. When Proctor found himself alone in Canada after the British defeat at Lake Erie, he wanted only to retreat. This left Tecumseh and his followers considerably displeased.
Indian leader felt he was being betrayed and referred to Proctor’s actions as that of “...a fat animal, that carries its tail upon its back, but when affrighted, he drops it between his legs and runs.” He demanded that Proctor face the American forces that were trailing them. Tecumseh’s warriors backed up their leader with what was said to have been “a menacing demonstration” and persuaded Proctor to do battle with the Americans. Even so, Proctor distanced himself considerably from the actual fighting and fled when he saw defeat was imminent. “... Proctor and his personal staff, who were well to the rear when the action started, were out of sight when it was over.” In doing so he left his Indian allies “...disappointed and abandoned...” to fend for themselves and his own men to be killed or taken prisoner.

Despite their high spirits and willingness to fight, the Indian confederation suffered from disunity within itself as well. Some Indians, out of fear that they could not possibly win, deserted the confederation. Knowing that the Americans had a clear advantage and afraid that they would be victorious, a band of Shawnees, Ottawas, Chippewas, Miamis, and Delawares deserted the British and Indian forces and came to the aid of Harrison. Other Indians simply returned to their homes after they were “...faced with the loss of British supplies and bases...”

Tecumseh’s forces combined representatives from Shawnee, Ottawa, Ojibwa, Delaware, Wyandot, Sac, Fox, Kickapoo, Winnebago, Potawatomi, and the Creek tribes. These tribes stretched over a large geographic area in America, and were united only in that they desired to regain Indian lands that they felt the Americans had unjustly usurped. But there were many more differences between them than commonalities. The tribes differed in language, culture, and styles of warfare. Tecumseh was the only force that held the confederation together, and when he was slain in battle the confederation died with him.

From this analysis of the Battle of the Thames it appears that the odds were irrefutably stacked in the favor of the American forces during the battle. The Americans had an overwhelming superior force. They also enjoyed good health and high morale among their soldiers, while the British suffered badly in both respects. The American force was unified while the British and Indians experienced internal conflict. The British did not even want to fight, only doing so ultimately at the demand of their Indian allies. The Indian confederation itself suffered from deserters and members switching sides shortly before the battle, and the confederation was torn by the presence of so many diverse tribes.

A lesson that the Battle of the Thames illustrates and unsurprisingly so is that a superior force easily dominates an inferior one. Another lesson is that
high morale may not always win the day. While it is true that the Americans enjoyed high morale and were victorious, the Indians too had high morale and were confident that they were superior fighters than the Americans they faced. The Indians however were defeated swiftly. The lesson that soldiers need to be in good health in order to wage war effectively is paramount and generally an understood rule. Yet another lesson that the Battle of the Thames provides is the unreliability of military alliances. Thought by many scholars to be more often than not ineffective, countries the world over still pledge their support to one another in military alliances. At the very least the Indian conflicts of America’s past could undoubtedly provide some critical insight in how to wage effective warfare concerning their modern engagements.

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