



Andrew Jackson's Courageous Decision at New Orleans

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

The United States won its independence in 1783, but challenges for the young republic were only beginning. The major powers of Europe, primarily England and France, were constantly challenging the sovereignty of the United States. By 1812, these challenges had become so outrageous that the United States felt it had to do something. The British had waged a nearly continuous war with the French since 1792. Their strategy was to isolate France by blockading her ports from the North Atlantic and English Channel, all the way to the Mediterranean. This meant trade restrictions on the United States. It also led to the seizure of American ships and the impressment of American sailors in the British navy.

Additionally, the British failed to evacuate several forts it had pledged it would in the treaty signed after the Revolutionary War. Finally, many Americans believed that the British were inciting Native American tribes to violence in order to limit American westward expansion. The United States declared war in June of 1812, and what followed was several years of sporadic conflict.

NARRATIVE

Andrew Jackson was born on the American frontier in 1767 to Scots-Irish immigrants. Life on the frontier was harsh. The families who called this region home worked for everything they had. Combatting weather, disease, tense relations with native tribes, and the danger of everyday chores, accidents and tragedy were common. Andrew Jackson lost his father to one such accident three weeks before he was born, leaving him to be raised by his mother alone.

Jackson's education was sporadic, but his natural talents thrived on the frontier. He was ambitious, determined, tough, and relentless in pursuit of his goals. When the Revolutionary War began, Jackson, still only a child, did all he could to help the cause of independence. Jackson lost his two brothers and his mother in the conflict and nearly died himself while in British captivity. This instilled a hatred for the British in him that would carry throughout most of his life.

However, despite the tragic loss of his family, Jackson knew he had to continue on and make something of the opportunities that the United States offered. He began to practice law and was involved in the drafting of the Constitution for the State of Tennessee, eventually being elected to the United States House of Representatives and then to the Senate.

Simultaneous to his political career, Jackson also continued his martial one. In 1801, he was appointed a colonel in the Tennessee militia, and by 1802 he was elected a major general. It was in this role that Jackson would once again come into conflict with the British during the War of 1812.

NARRATIVE

The war that finally broke out in 1812 was the result of nearly 15 years of tension between the young United States and various powers in Europe. Those in the United States who wanted to fight, known as “Hawks,” believed it was imperative that the young nation prove it was serious about its sovereignty. War was officially declared on Great Britain in June of 1812.

Although the war was directed at Great Britain, there were other conflicts with Native Americans occurring at the same time. It was in these actions that Jackson spent the majority of his service and proved himself to be an able military commander. Jackson’s greatest victory came in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814 against the Red Stick Indians during the Creek campaign.

By late 1814, the war with Great Britain had reached a stalemate. Both sides had gained victories with neither making any major gains. The American capital had been burned, British warships had been sunk, a U.S. expedition into Canada had failed, and the redcoats had been halted on the Great Lakes. This brought both nations to the negotiating table, and peace talks were opened.

The British, however, were planning a major offensive to take the lucrative port of New Orleans. Hearing of the move, the United States dispatched General Jackson to defeat the British forces and defend the city. The British troops sent to New Orleans were hardened veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. They had fought in some of the fiercest conflicts the world had ever seen over the past 12 years. They were well trained, professional, and deadly. The force Jackson led to oppose them was the complete opposite. Made up mostly of militia with some Choctaw Indian allies and a few professional soldiers, they resembled an armed war band more than an army. Though they did have combat experience, it had not been against well-trained European armies like their counterparts.

The British arrived off the coast of Louisiana in mid-December and began landing soldiers on December 23. Although the British had only landed a fraction of their forces, Jackson knew he would soon be greatly outnumbered. He gathered around half of his army and set out into the darkness to surprise the British.

In an age before electronics and easy communication, nighttime engagements were extremely dangerous. Jackson planned to break his forces into three and simultaneously assault the British in their camp. Timing and discipline would be critical. The attack launched on time, and the engagement was fierce and bloody. By the end, Jackson and his men were forced to pull back nearly four miles across a canal outside of the city. Though a tactical defeat, it was a strategic victory for Jackson. It forced the British forces to remain in place and shattered their illusions of a quick and easy conquest. It also granted Jackson the time he needed to build earthworks and other defenses he desperately needed to hold off the much larger enemy force. The gamble had paid off.

In the following weeks, the British landed the remainder of their men. On January 8, they launched their main assault. This attack was ruthlessly turned back. The American earthworks created a bloody field of fire in which the British lost nearly one-third of their forces in under thirty minutes. A few days later, news reached the armies that a peace treaty had been signed

NARRATIVE

in December and that the nations were at peace. The British forces withdrew from the country, never to return.

The world will never know what might have happened had the British succeeded in taking New Orleans. Though peace had technically been signed, it is very possible that they would have held onto the port, thus putting a stranglehold on the Mississippi river trade that was critical to the westward expansion of the United States. Jackson's courage to bring out his motley army in a daring night raid saved the city and possibly the future of the young nation.