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Book review: Autumn Of The Black Snake: The Creation Of The U.S. Army And The Invasion That Opened Up The West, by William Hogeland

By Dennis Constant

Whenever you hear a man speak of his love for his country, it is a sign that he expects to be paid for it. – H. L. Mencken

My choice early in life was either to be a piano player in a whorehouse or a politician. And to tell the truth, there's hardly any difference. – Harry Truman

The westward expansion of the U.S. did not happen spontaneously. The “West,” actually the Ohio River Valley and the Midwest, was not open for the taking. In the lively and colorful book, *Autumn of the Black Snake*, author William Hogeland describes what led to the creation of the U.S. Army by President George Washington.

There was no significant threat from foreign armies, and the Revolutionary War had ended in 1783. Rather, the westward expansion was resisted by a coalition of Indian tribes that had wiped out federal troops in rather barbaric skirmishes. In November 1791, near the Wabash River, General Richard Butler lay dying, severely wounded. Indian leaders, Little Turtle and Blue Jacket, heading the Miami and Shawnee tribes, orchestrated a dramatic slaughter, leading to the “horrible defeat of troops led by General Arthur St. Clair in asserting legal claims of the United States in the region north and west of the Ohio River.”

St. Clair led 1,500 officers and men and dozens of wives, girlfriends and children to an unfortified bivouac, and the result was the death of 650 American troops, including nearly all of the officers. The total deaths may have been as much as 900, plus about 300 horribly wounded.

Informed of the news, Washington paced the floor in silence. “It’s all over,” he finally said. “St. Clair’s defeated, routed.”

“This must not go beyond this room,” he told Tobias Lear, his personal secretary.

Our founding fathers were bright, ambitious, ruthless and resourceful. They carried out what they saw as their mission to expand Westward, with the added benefit of sometimes becoming wealthy along the way.

Washington and his administration had been planning and managing the U.S. possession of the Northwest Territory. All land between the Ohio and the Mississippi had been ceded by Britain to the Congress. “In order to settle the Northwest Territory, the United States had to secure not just sovereignty but possession,” explained Hogeland.

Washington inherited the lack of a standing army, and Congress had refused to give it to him. At this time, security was in the hand of militias. Standing armies were seen as tools of tyrants.

Alexander Hamilton, an up-and-coming ambitious and brilliant New York lawyer, had for years lobbied for a strong central government and standing army, but it was years before this could be accomplished. Everything changed in 1787, according to Hogeland, when the nationalists won. “They gained not military and taxing power for the Confederation Congress but something far greater: the Confederation Congress’s total demise.”

Despite their personal differences, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson were nationalists. If they hadn’t been, Washington would not have included them in his cabinet.

Militias could not always be counted on to put down rebellions. In western Massachusetts, there occurred the famous populist “Shays’s Rebellion,” led by Daniel Shays, a War of Independence veteran. The group tried seizing federal materiel stored in armory at Springfield. The militia managed to put down the rebellion, but it was close. A real army was needed.

“Facing up to the horror of St. Clair’s defeat, Washington knew what had to be done. He’d always known. Without western investment: no nation. Without a standing army: no nation.”

In December 1791, Washington informed Congress of St. Clair’s defeat. His message was clear: the U.S. needed a standing army.

When Washington finally got his army, he placed in charge of it, “Mad Anthony” Wayne, who later would be dubbed “Black Snake” by the Indians.

Wayne initially was a dashing and admired officer, but in 1783, when he returned to civilian life, he had a string of personal, political and financial disasters that made him appear all washed up. In 1792, when Washington appointed him the first real general of the first real American army, he had his second chance.

The confederation of Indian tribes engaged in several battles with army units. In the meantime, relations between the British and the U.S. had deteriorated. The British had been interfering with U.S. trade, and were concerned with the threat they thought the U.S. posed to Canada. One tribe leader, Little Turtle of the Miami tribe, traveled to meet with the British commander of Fort Dearborn, and asked for help in the form of artillery and soldiers. Otherwise, he told the commander, Col. England, he would be unable to take on the U.S. and resist its expansion.

The commander promised Little Turtle continued support, whatever that meant, but turned down his request. The British position was to avoid a direct conflict with the U.S. unless war was officially declared.

Washington, displaying his patience and cunning, was determined to avoid another war with the British. He could tell that this was a good time to move against the tribes and expand into the Midwest – to achieve his dream of expansion, and with a standing army. “It was time to turn Anthony Wayne loose.”

Wayne’s March set out on July 28, 1794. The tribes described it as “the army that did not sleep.” It moved north and east, toward the west tip of Lake Erie.

Wayne sent the Indian confederation a last chance to surrender. He told them the British had neither the power nor the inclination to help them, and he didn’t stop advancing. Little Turtle tried to convince the other tribal leaders that victory was not possible, but was unsuccessful. He relinquished leadership.

Things came to a head at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. The U.S. Army was prepared for the Indians’ usually effective flanking maneuvers, and fought surprisingly well. The Indians retreated, and upon reaching Fort

Miamis, found that the commander, Major William Campbell, who did not want war with the U.S., had locked them out.

Ultimately, Wayne called off the pursuit, feeling that American possession of the Northwest Territory was a fact. “Eventually, the British evacuation of the contested lake forts on American soil led to the City of Detroit.”

“When he won the Battle of Fallen Timbers, fewer than 5,000 white people were living in what would become the State of Ohio. Less than fifteen years later, 230,000 Americans would live there; a decade later, more than twice that.”

POSTSCRIPT

The confederation’s victory over St. Clair’s troops, Hogeland points out, was the worst defeat the U.S. ever suffered at Indian Hands. It was the high-water mark in resistance to white expansion. No comparable Indian victory would follow. “The longest-lasting legacy of George Washington’s career . . . is the formation of a permanent military establishment, via the conquest of indigenous people, in pursuit of the industrial and imperial power that, with victory in its first war, The United States did go on to achieve.”

In 1792, a populist uprising erupted resulting from Alexander Hamilton’s revenue measures passed by the First Congress—the so-called Whiskey Rebellion. This was a substantial taxpayer-revolt, and the response of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton was equally massive and ruthless.

The tax-revolt was over the first federal tax ever on a domestic product, in this case, whiskey. Hamilton had designed the whiskey tax to favor big distilling, and to shut down small farming. There were armed battles between armed citizens and government agents, to the point that various “radical militias” announced that the “West” was independent of the United States.

In the eyes of the federal government, financial investment and U.S. sovereignty in the West again was threatened. Initially, Washington told Hamilton that military force against the citizenry must come only as a last resort. Now, Washington was ready to act. The Military Act of 1792 gave the president the power to call out and federalize state militias to put down insurrection. Federal forces, under Washington, were being enlarged and trained to do just that.

In 1794, Washington led the army to crush the tax-revolt, down to the mountains around Bedford, Pennsylvania, and then turned the forces over to Hamilton and Gov. Henry Lee of Virginia. Hamilton’s forces subjected the general public “to roundups, rough interrogation, and indefinite detention.” There were warrantless searches and mass arrests of hundreds of people. The point was to teach these populist protesters a lesson.

Washington had been speculating in the West since his teens. Now, with the area secure, his western land portfolio increased in value 50 percent.