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## **New Orleans**

The American victory at New Orleans in 1815 reflected many of the qualities that are considered intrinsic to the American national character. Social equality, personal resiliency and an emphasis on the common good were all in evidence during the defense of the city at the mouth of the strategically critical Mississippi River. The American force that defeated the British was a multi-ethnic and populist patchwork, a collection of rugged individualists from throughout a nation that was still coalescing as a viable geo-political unit. It was led by a man who embodied the very notion that common people can possess extraordinary qualities, itself a refutation of the British class system against which Andrew Jackson and his soldiers fought. As such, the Battle of New Orleans was more than a battle – it was a certification of the American ethos itself.

There is a decided element of irony to this closing act in the War of 1812. The Treaty of Ghent had been signed between America and Great Britain almost two months earlier, officially ending hostilities. It was almost as if the war needed some signature event, an exclamation point on the events of the past half-century and America's emergence on the world stage as the first full-fledged Democracy. The culmination of a series of military actions, the final battle for the city was fought between British regular troops and an ad hoc American army, “probably the most disparate and slapdash army ever assembled on earth,” comprised of backwoodsmen, Pirates, prosperous New Orleans lawyers, Catholic nuns, merchants and regular U. S. troops. 1 The famous alliance between Jackson and the buccaneer Jean Lafitte has been the subject of many books, even a movie, but only represents a small portion

of the astounding cultural diversity to be found among the approximately 4,000 men (and women) who trounced the British in February 1815. What took place confounded the British, who had burned Washington to the ground, as well as many Americans who expected to be defeated and “to return hat in hand to the iron fists of His Royal Britannic Majesty and life under the British lion.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the war itself was technically at an end, the Americans’ victory restored an enormous amount of prestige to the country’s military forces, which had suffered a number of setbacks. More importantly, the Battle of New Orleans secured for the United States firm control of the vital Mississippi River waterway, and forced the British to recognize American claims to Louisiana and parts of Florida. The outcome of the battle was no chance happening; it was a victory produced by a dedicated, native force that truly belonged to the country for which it fought, diverse as it was. It is to be remembered that the Redcoats who assaulted Jackson’s breastworks on the Chalmette Plantation were not inexperienced recruits but soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars, and of the brutal campaign against armies of the French empire on the Iberian Peninsula. The ill-advised tactics of British commander Sir Edward Pakenham, whose men marched in crisp order directly at the entrenched American positions, should not marginalize the effectiveness of Jackson’s tactical approach and the inspiration of his personal leadership against a seasoned and war-hardened foe.

Given the lot of blacks in the American South, it is remarkable that so many of those who fought at New Orleans were men of color. Nevertheless, Jackson’s entreaty played on their American identities and the desperate

need to protect those freedoms that set them apart from the tyranny of the invaders. “ As sons of Freedom you are called upon to defend our most inestimable blessing. As Americans, your Country looks with confidence to her adopted

Children for a Valorous support” 3 Blacks had been called on to display their personal valor in Louisiana on behalf of the French in 1727 and the Spanish in 1779, and on other fields of battle after the Americans took control of the territory. Their social status was virtually unique in the South, a remnant of Spanish and French society, which allowed persons of multiple races greater freedom than was the case in American plantation society. 4 Free blacks, the gens de couleur libre, had even helped put down slave rebellions after the Americans acquired Louisiana. 5 By the time Jackson put out the call for volunteers, this segment of Louisiana society had been fighting defensive battles for generations.

The exigencies of global politics worked in Jackson’s favor in other ways. The French Creoles who fought with the Americans were vehement Bonapartists and, as such, hated the British and the imperialist expansion they represented. Bernard de Marigny de Mandeville, a prominent Louisiana Creole noted that “ One cannot be French, or of French origin, without detesting the English dominationOur state was free, independent, and was a part of the Union and should we sacrifice such noble privileges in order to become an English Colony?” 6 Initially, the aristocratic Creoles of New Orleans disliked associating with the rough Kentuckians and Tennesseans, who seemed little more than savages. Yet when it came time to working

together as a fighting force against the British, the social differences between these two widely disparate

peoples were forgotten. In the crucible of war, a truly American society was born, the survival of which depended on close and mutual cooperation.

Jean Lafitte's buccaneers were at the extreme end of the social spectrum to be found in Jackson's army, part of the general's "marriage of expediency" with people who existed on the fringes of society. The New Orleans

Committee of Defense was opposed to the idea of arming criminals and lodged a firm protest with Jackson for having accepted the aid of Lafitte and his "hellish Banditti." 7 But the Americans, who were heavily outnumbered

by the British, simply couldn't afford to be selective about who fought on their behalf. In fact, the people of New Orleans had adopted a remarkably

laissez faire approach to the pirates, who were seen by many as simply pursuing their own agendas. 8 It was the contribution of these outlaws, many

of whom were being prosecuted by the government that has come to symbolize the "classlessness," the spirit of selflessness and sacrifice that

animated the city's defenders and for which the American victory is still celebrated. The victories of the Revolution were glorious examples of the

virtues of the American soldier; New Orleans was a microcosm of the American social experiment in general.

It is as such that the Battle of New Orleans is remembered – as much a cultural victory as a military triumph. The victory helped burnish America's image among the world's great powers, and placed the new nation in control of territories once owned by the imperial powers of Spain and France. It also

gave the Americans a commercial and military “superhighway” in the Mississippi River. But the battle’s great significance lies in the way the victorious defenders of New Orleans came together, despite differences that would have made such an event unimaginable in other cultures. This is what gives the events of 1815 such resonance.

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