

# A Bloodless Victory: The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory

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## Review

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**Stoltz III, Joseph F.** *A Bloodless Victory: The Battle of New Orleans in History and Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$29.00 ISBN 9781421423029

*A Bloodless Victory* explains how the memory of Andrew Jackson's 8 January 1815 victory at Chalmette became more useful to Americans in the following centuries than the battle itself (p. 113). Pliable and adaptable, the memory evolved to meet the needs of varied groups; its cultural worth fluctuating. From Stoltz's analysis, it seems that the one consistency in America's memory of the battle is its detachment from historic accuracy. His work successfully shows the political, diplomatic, and social utility of military memory in U.S. culture from the very early days of the republic. Military historians, cultural historians, and practitioners of public history seeking examples of how contested sights of memory have been interpreted will appreciate this work.

Stoltz looks at the evolving collective memory of the Battle of New Orleans chronologically. His opening chapter provides an historic overview of the battle and is the only one that does not deal specifically with its memory. This chapter provides essential context for the remainder of the work. He identifies the significant elements of the battle that found no place in how Americans came to understand it: the battle was not a single day event, but part of a prolonged campaign; southern and western militia made up a large portion of Jackson's force and many of these were free people of color; complex fortifications constructed over days by skilled engineers (not anachronistic cotton bales) and well placed heavy artillery manned by experienced Army and Navy artillerists, not the gumption of frontier marksman with long rifles, carried the day.

The remaining seven chapters of the book can be divided into roughly two sections—19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century memories of the battle. Chapters 2 and 3 show how political parties used Jackson's victory to gain political power. Republicans framed Jackson's victorious force as an extension of the agrarian and decentralized vision of America they espoused, one that stood in stark contrast to the Federalists, orchestrators of the Hartford Convention. The Republicans ability to coopt the popular Battle of New Orleans as a shining moment for their national vision was a means for them to gain political control and diminish the Federalists party, whose political agenda earned more merit after a war that did not go well for the United States overall. The ability to politically weaponized the battle came back to haunt them, however, when the victor himself entered the political stage as the new Democratic party presidential candidate in 1824 and won the presidency in 1828.

The duality of the battle's memory is perhaps most visible in Stoltz's analysis of the Civil War era. Popular Antebellum Democrats cast the battle as a proud moment in the nation's past in which common differences were overcome for the greater good. Once the Union collapsed, regional memories of the battle focused on the superiority of southern martial manhood and ability to overcome all odds. The British soldiers defeated by southern militias could easily be envisioned wearing the Union blue with the same outcome. The fall of New Orleans and its occupation in 1863 redefined the legacy of the battle. Union General Benjamin Butler oversaw the occupation and refocused the memory of the battle on Jackson's own staunch commitment to the Union, essentially cutting southerners out of their own story (45). This would not seriously change until southern women's groups in the post-Civil War worked to preserve the site of the battle. This allowed the defeated Confederate soldier to attach themselves to fond memories of martial victory earned by southern blood.

Two World Wars fought in the early twentieth century in which Great Britain was our closest ally forced a national shift in the Battle of New Orleans again. Instead of reveling in the defeat of the British, the battle became significant as the point in which hostilities ceased and friendship began. Growing social unrest and cultural changes crept into interpretations of the battle by the mid-twentieth century. Chapters 6-7 show how the dominant memory of the Kentucky long-rifleman began to share the stage with the swashbuckling Jean Laffite and his Baratarians, made iconic in 1938 & 1958 film, *The Buccaneer*. This film and Johnny Horton's billboard hit, "The Battle of New Orleans" shaped popular American memories of the battle for the decades to come and compelled preservation of the site itself.

The final chapters of the book explore the difficulties of preserving Chalmette as a national battlefield. The commercial appeal of the riverfront property, readily available access to nearby forms of entertainment, difficulty articulating the significance of a battle fought after the war had ended, and forced displacement of minority groups from their communities within the historic boundaries of the battlefield have all hampered visitation to the site. Recent efforts by the NPS to tell a more inclusive, and accurate, history of the battle, offer optimism for the site. Still, public interest is waning. Ultimately, the robust memory of the battle has become more important to our national story than the battle itself. Stoltz's work makes clear, however, that the memory of the Battle of New Orleans can take any turn. One wonders if, his research and writing for this work had been concluded by early 2017 when President Donald Trump made a pilgrimage to Jackson's tomb at the Hermitage to honor the predecessor he most related to himself, a president who in many ways ran the first modern campaign, capitalizing on the popularity of his most famous battle.

*A Bloodless Victory* is a worthwhile addition to the growing body of memory studies. Its specific focus on the often overlooked War of 1812, and to the chronically misunderstood Battle of New Orleans, makes it all the more needed. Stoltz provides an engaging and thorough analysis of how Americans have remembered the Battle of New Orleans for the past 200 years. It is easy, and disheartening, to see after reading this work how conditions were set over time for the average American's memory of the battle (if they have one at all), to be confined to the "little trip" that squirrel gun wielding Americans took with "Colonel Jackson down the Mighty Missip'" to comically rout the British at New Orleans as told by country music artist Johnny Horton in 1959.

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