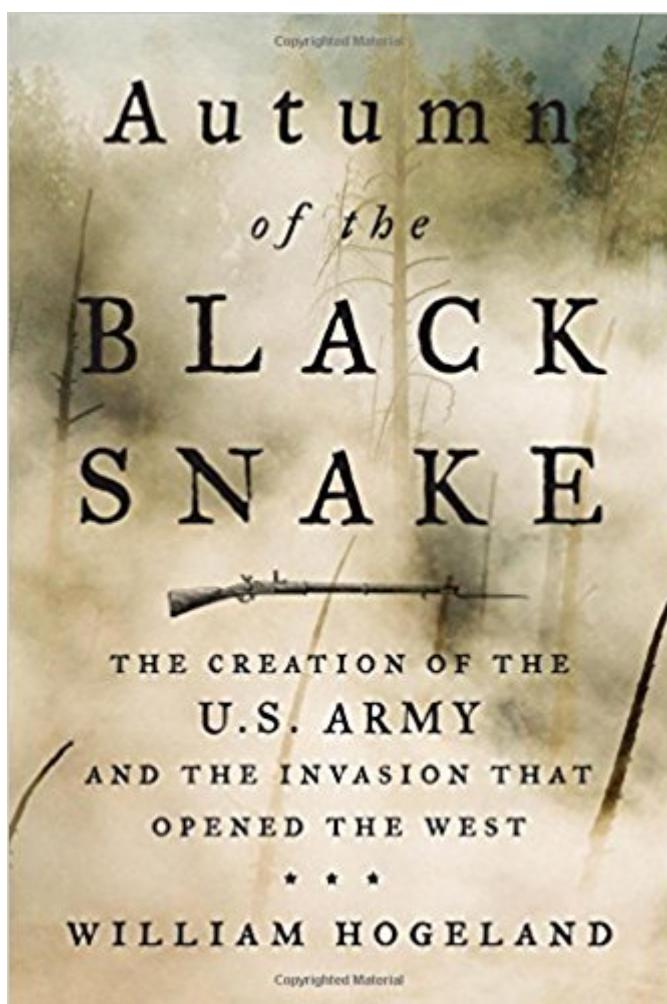


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Autumn Of The Black Snake: The Creation Of The U.S. Army And The Invasion That Opened The West



Synopsis

The forgotten story of how the U.S. Army was created to fight a crucial Indian warWhen the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the newly independent United States savored its victory and hoped for a great future. And yet the republic soon found itself losing an escalating military conflict on its borderlands. In 1791, years of skirmishes, raids, and quagmire climaxed in the grisly defeat of American militiamen by a brilliantly organized confederation of Shawnee, Miami, and Delaware Indians. With nearly one thousand U.S. casualties, this was the worst defeat the nation would ever suffer at native hands. Americans were shocked, perhaps none more so than their commander in chief, George Washington, who saw in the debacle an urgent lesson: the United States needed an army. Autumn of the Black Snake tells the overlooked story of how Washington achieved his aim. In evocative and absorbing prose, William Hogeland conjures up the woodland battles and the hardball politics that formed the Legion of the United States, our first true standing army. His memorable portraits of leaders on both sides—*from the daring war chiefs Blue Jacket and Little Turtle to the doomed commander Richard Butler and a steely, even ruthless Washington*—drive a tale of horrific violence, brilliant strategizing, stupendous blunders, and valorous deeds. This sweeping account, at once exciting and dark, builds to a crescendo as Washington and Alexander Hamilton, at enormous risk, outmaneuver Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other skeptics of standing armies—and Washington appoints the seemingly disreputable Anthony Wayne, known as Mad Anthony, to lead the legion. Wayne marches into the forests of the Old Northwest, where the very Indians he is charged with defeating will bestow on him, with grudging admiration, a new name: the Black Snake. Autumn of the Black Snake is a dramatic work of military and political history, told in a colorful, sometimes startling blow-by-blow narrative. It is also an original interpretation of how greed, honor, political beliefs, and vivid personalities converged on the killing fields of the Ohio valley, where the United States Army would win its first victory, and in so doing destroy the coalition of Indians who came closer than any, before or since, to halting the nation’s westward expansion.

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Customer Reviews

"Hogeland breathes new life into a transformative conflict unknown to most modern Americans but decisive in shaping the future trajectory of the United States . . . He paints vivid portraits of leaders such as Blue Jacket (Shawnee) and Little Turtle (Miami), who were among the most formidable indigenous adversaries that U.S. forces ever faced . . . [and] convincingly argues the significance of Washington's decisions during this episode . . . Indeed, Mr. Hogeland's work invites reflection on why some of the most important (and darker) legacies of Washington's presidency—establishing federal supremacy over the west and its native inhabitants in a war of unbridled conquest—have also been the most readily forgotten." —David Preston, *The Wall Street Journal* "In elegant, authoritative prose packed with lively characters and hard-won detail, Hogeland tells the strangely unknown story of the conquest of the American Midwest . . . Autumn of the Black Snake is a narrative history, often a gripping and even thrilling one . . . His finest and most disturbing book to date." —Richard Kreitner, *The Nation* "Autumn of the Black Snake is a thorough, informative and entertaining read . . . yet it is also a devastatingly accurate mirror into our own political souls . . . Hogeland deserves all the plaudits he can get for writing such an insightful book about the present by diving so deep into America's past . . . The best popular histories are the ones that take obscure subjects and make them not only compelling, but vitally relevant, for lay readers . . . What Hogeland does . . . is take the subject of America's post-Revolutionary frontier wars with Native Americans . . . and demonstrate how it is painfully relevant." —Matthew Rozsa, *Salon.com*

William Hogeland is the author of three books on founding U.S. history—*The Whiskey Rebellion, Declaration, and Founding Finance*—as well as a collection of essays, *Inventing American History*. Born in Virginia and raised in Brooklyn, he lives in New York City.

This is a book that gives the sense it was written over a long time as the first third made little sense

to the rest. In fact, it had nothing to do with creating an army and was largely a history lesson on the Indian problems. Almost like it started to be one thing then he decided to go a different direction. You never really understand the title as there was maybe one reference, late in the book, to Wayne as the black snake and the climatic "autumn" as the battle of fallen timbers takes ten pages out of four hundred. Often some flowery writing bordering on ridiculousness has to be endured before the author recovers direction. Be prepared to endure some barely disguised liberal editorializing on armies, indigenous peoples, the environment, etc. It's a decent read and does bring a subject almost no one is probably aware of anymore so for that, I'd recommend.

I learned things about our politics that I had only heard hints of before. For example, what the whiskey rebellion was all about. Nothing I have ever seen anywhere explained the background until I read this book!

Although this is a supremely well researched history (twenty-eight pages of endnotes and seven pages of bibliography), it reads like a dramatic page-turner as it builds up to the battle between Anthony Wayne's army and the forces of a huge confederation of Indian tribes. As Hogeland so vividly makes clear, this was a seminal event in American history, not just because it enabled the country's westward expansion but also because it was the result of George Washington's political struggles to create a standing army, something that many in Congress were opposed to. Hogeland doesn't just bring to life people like Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and "Mad" Anthony Wayne, he also vividly portrays the Indian leaders, especially the fascinating Blue Jacket and Little Turtle, and he makes it very clear that the motives of even revered figures like Washington were often self-serving. There's even a spy among Wayne's officers who tried to undermine Wayne's every action. I could go on, but I'll just say that I hope that Hogeland's book gets the acclaim that it deserves. It should even change the way that the first decades of our country's history are taught.

The first American war no one ever talks about - against the Native Americans! I had never heard this story before and it is told here in clear, fresh prose. This is the narrative of "Mad" Anthony Wayne, George Washington and the great Native American leaders Blue Jacket and Little Turtle. This is the first chapter of America's expansion and it is a riveting story. I will never look at a map of

the United States the same way again.

I like Hogeland's book on the Whiskey Rebellion, and don't mind seeing uncomplimentary portrayals of the Founding Fathers where such info is relevant to the subject being discussed. Here though, Hogeland seems overly preoccupied with the fact that G Washington owned lots of Western land and wanted to see it developed. The rather tabloidesque thesis here is that ol GW approved of a war against the Old NW Indian tribes because he wanted to see his investments prosper. Well, be that as it may, the burden on a historian advancing such a thesis is to show that some more objective Chief Executive would not have undertaken a similar policy were personal interest factored out. This is where Hogeland stumbles, as any President of the era would undoubtedly have approved the same policy that Washington did. Westward expansion and development was the zeitgeist of the day, and the rights of the natives were pretty much ignored as any sort of impediment. If Washington never existed or if he didn't own an acre of Western land, I think it's clear the exact same events would have played out. For the reader, the tragedy here is that the dozens of pages spent explaining Washington's land acquisition and development strategies are dull as paint drying. So a shaky thesis is supported by lots of tedious detail that does not necessarily prove a thing. The other issue for those seeking a lively exposition on the topic is that Hogeland is no military historian at all. His descriptions of battle and strategy are vague and brief, and those seeking blood and thunder need to look elsewhere. Hogeland portrays characters well, but when the generals take the field, the story gets disjointed quickly. Sword's book on the topic from 1985 is a lot more entertaining and lively. Hogeland's cynical and militarily vague take on Federalist history worked well when he dealt with the Whiskey Rebellion as the wheeling and dealing of Al Hamilton was both more apparently unscrupulous there and also had a lot more impact on events. The "perfidious" Washington here does not ring as true as even a disinterested President would probably have mobilized the troops to clear out the Northwest. And the Whiskey Rebellion also worked out better as a Hogeland topic as there was no actual campaign there, just a mobilization that cowed the tax evaders with no actual conflict. The Indian war that is theoretically the main subject of this later book is less well served by Hogeland's skill set. All in all, a well written and occasionally entertaining read, but the central thesis is flawed, and due to a mix of focus on land sales and development and a de-emphasis of battles and warfare, this is not a very engaging read.

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