“WAR FEVER”: THE AMERICAN PRESS AND THE WAR OF 1812

MARCO SIOLI (UNIVERSITY OF MILAN)

Using the recent acquisition of the digital archive Readex, American Historical Newspapers, by the University of Milan this essay will focus on the role of the American press to promote and support the War of 1812. Reading the newspapers before and during the War, up to the battle of New Orleans in 1815, that defined the United States as a military power with a dominant role in North America and the Caribbean, we will be able to understand the American politics toward Indian presence in trans-Appalachian frontier, as well as, the extension of slavery in the new territories.

The “War Fever”, as they wrote in many articles, erupted in the American newspapers early in 1812, and revealed the confidence that the journalists and the public were Americans, not subject of a foreign power, able to build an “Empire of liberty” in the West. Reading these articles, President James Madison well understood the need the country felt to prove itself and the rest of the world that the American experiment, a republican government in a world of monarchies, was permanently fixed in the family of nations.

We will follow on the American newspapers the outbreak of war, the American military disasters, President Madison fled to Virginia, the entering of the British into Washington and the burning of the city, the massacres on the frontier perpetrated by the Indians. All these episodes enrolled new volunteers “to repel the invasion” both from the South and the North, completely changing the sort of the War.

Finally, the American newspapers revealed that this war was really important to define the new leaders of the Republic, Henry Clay of Kentucky, and John Calhoun of South Carolina, but especially Andrew Jackson, the hero of the battle of New Orleans who defeated the British on January 8, 1815. The newspapers well depicted their future vision of the Republic that will be built on expansion, and slavery.